

TIBETAN AMERICANS IN MINNESOTA A COMMUNITY WITH A COMMITMENT

Known as the Roof of the World, Tibet is located at the heart of Asia surrounded by mountains on all sides. Until recently, its borders had barely been penetrated by any of the colonial powers of the West. In 1949 China became a communist country. The following year, the so called the Peoples Liberation Army, marched into Tibet committing naked aggression on a sovereign independent state. The international community reacted with shock but no aid came to ease the situation. Tibetans were left to themselves. Their attempts to resist the Chinese forces culminated in a popular National Uprising in March 1959. This resistance was brutally crushed. On the eve of March 10th, in the midst of this uprising, His Holiness the Dalai Lama followed by over 80,000 Tibetans, managed to escape to neighboring countries, mainly India and Nepal. Here they reconstituted into refugee camps and started a life in exile led by His Holiness the Dalai Lama.

The Minnesota Tibetan Community, an offshoot of the Tibetan refugee communities in India and Nepal, was formed in 1992. Tibetans started arriving in the United States in batches under the US Tibetan Resettlement Project, a program that became effective under the 1990 Immigration Act passed by Congress. Under this program, 1,000 Tibetans obtained visas and were sent to resettle in 22 cluster sites in the United States. Thanks to Mr. Thupten Dadak and a host of wonderful volunteers, the Twin City became the largest site with 160 Tibetans. These volunteers worked hard to arrange host families and jobs—two conditions without which a Tibetan would not be called for a visa interview at the respective US Embassy. Under this program, only one member in a family could apply and come to the United States. This was because Tibetans were accepted not as refugees but as immigrants with no federal or state aid. When the families were to arrive three or more years later, there would already be a member who had settled with a job ready to support the family. Today, there are over 1,300 Tibetans living in Minnesota.

Tibetans as a community are very distinct from other immigrant ethnic groups. They are bound together not only by a common religion and culture but also share a common responsibility. This responsibility calls upon every Tibetan to understand the fact that China had invaded and illegally occupied Tibet, their fatherland. This occupation has put Tibetan religion, language and culture in danger of total destruction under Chinese rule. This sense of responsibility urges every Tibetan to work hard, contribute to restoring freedom in Tibet, and to preserve and practice Tibetan culture and religion. Children grow up with this responsibility and accept it as a legacy from their parents.

A community center was the dream of the community leaders and members right from the beginning. This dream became real with the visit of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Minnesota in 2001. During the visit, the community raised enough money to purchase a property in St. Paul and founded the Tibetan Community Cultural Center. Today, all the community events, both spiritual and secular, are held at the center. Programs like Tibetan language classes, Tibetan performing arts, and a host of other activities. Hardly a single week goes by without a community event. It is indeed the heart of the Tibetan American community.

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