

World Tibet Day is a good example of the solidarity of international community: Sethu Das on Friends of Tibet and his journey - Tibet Rights Collective

Tibet Rights Collective



After graduating from the Maharaja Sayajirao University, Vadodara, Sethu Das went to Srinagar for an assignment and accidentally reached Dharamshala, the seat of the Tibetan Government-in-Exile. And found his calling in life. Moved by the stories of Chinese atrocities in Tibet related to him by the former Tibetan political prisoners, he founded the Friends of Tibet, a pressure group in 1999 with one member — an organization he never registered! In 2003, Sethu Das co-founded Design & People with the slogan — 'Design For People In Need'. In 2019, he

formed the Friends of Tibet [Research] to conduct and publish research on the heritage, legacy, and history of Tibet in collaboration with scholars, academicians, sociologists, and holistic health educationists.

Excerpts from our conversation with Sethu Das:

1: Can you tell us the story behind the formation of Friends of Tibet and the journey so far?

A: My only connection with Tibet was a book gifted to me by a friend, and an old documentary in which I saw His Holiness the Dalai Lama repairing a mechanical watch. But, nothing happens without a reason. Years later, an accidental trip to Dharamshala brought me closer to the Tibetan community, and their spiritual leader in exile.

Friends of Tibet was officially formed on March 9, 1999, at an informal gathering in Dharamshala after all my attempts to join a Tibet Support Group in India failed. I am not an organizational man, and I have no experience in running organizations. So I felt that it was better to join an existing organization to show my support and contribute my skills instead of starting a new one. The initial experiences I had with some of the leading Tibet Support Groups were disappointing. Instead of complaining, I decided to start a platform/organization in Bombay, where I used to live. With activists like Tenzin Tsundue playing an important role in the organization, it was convenient for us to look at the Tibetan dilemma through the eyes of the exile community.

Friends of Tibet was founded on three fundamental principles:

1) We will never register the organization, as we do not want to last a minute than longer, once the Tibet issue is resolved 2) The organization will own no assets and have no salaried activist, but will welcome anyone (irrespective of background) to join freely, to contribute their skills and knowledge for the cause of Tibet 3) The organization will stand in solidarity with Tibetan people (inside Tibet and in exile) but will remain committed to the ongoing Tibetan struggle for independence.

We hope that our humble efforts will bring greater spiritual benefits and results for this cause in the long run.

2: Tibetans in exile have worked tirelessly to preserve, protect and promote the Tibetan identity. How would you describe the Tibetan Resilience and Spirit?

A: There is no doubt that Tibetans are one of the most successful refugee communities, and the Tibetan Government-in-Exile, legitimate and one of the most effective exile governments in the world. The community is blessed to have a fatherly figure like His Holiness the Dalai Lama who has continued to inspire the community and lead their struggle for freedom for the last several decades. The Dalai Lama and the first generation of Tibetans in exile have done an unimaginable job of preserving and protecting the Tibetan identity, at a time when China was working vigorously to destroy and eradicate the culture and identity of native Tibetans.

There are so many good things about the community in exile, of which we are proud. But this is only one side of the struggle. The real struggle of freeing an occupied nation while being in exile, with the help and support of the international community remains forgotten. No community can afford to live in complacency without being aware of the dangers around them. The Tibetans have a very strong case and all the reasons to regain their lost independence. And at no cost should the Tibetan community reduce their fight based on truth and justice against a mighty empire, to an information war or an academic battle with China. The community should realize its potential and focus on real issues to actively take part in the ongoing struggle, as they have a moral responsibility towards Tibetans who continue to suffer under the occupying forces. That was the very purpose of taking refuge in free nations like India.

3: One of the aspects we have been working on is the idea of including Compassion in the modern school syllabus and teaching children Compassion. This is a vision often shared by HH the 14th Dalai Lama himself. How have the values of Compassion and Peace – values that we desperately need as a society today – and Dalai Lama’s messages on the same influenced you? Do you believe in the power of Compassion to change the world?

A: I would avoid answering this question because of my own ignorance and lack of understanding of the subject.

4: It is exciting to see the popularity of the Tibet Pavilion at the Kochi Biennale venue which has the Shadow Circus exhibition by Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam. Could you tell us more about the exhibition?

A: Friends of Tibet first collaborated with Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam sometime in 1999 to discuss their participation in the 'Festival of Tibet' we organized in Bombay a year later. By then, Lhamo Tsering, father of Tenzing Sonam, had already passed away, but the filmmaker couple managed to travel all the way to Bombay to be an integral part of the month-long festival inaugurated by the Dalai Lama.

When the invitation to participate in the fifth edition of the Kochi Muziris Biennale came to Ritu Sarin and Tenzing Sonam, they discussed the possibilities of a collaboration with Friends of Tibet. After a couple of discussions, we decided to collaborate with the "Shadow Circus: A Personal Archive of Tibetan Resistance" project in order to reach out to the maximum number of supporters from all over the world. We had a number of logistical nightmares and practical difficulties in hosting such an event for a period of four months, but it gave us tremendous satisfaction when we realized that the exhibition attracted more than four lakh visitors in four months, something that is usually unheard of, and unimaginable for Tibet events. The Shadow Circus was an eyeopener not only for beginners and supporters but also for academicians and researchers, as many of them were clueless about the armed struggle of the peace-loving Tibetans who courageously fought the occupying forces from 1957 to 1974 with the help of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA).

5: Why do you think Tibet and Tibet issues should be discussed more by the world? Doesn't the issue deserve more attention? Shouldn't us all be friends with Tibet? 😊 How can we increase awareness about Tibet? The observance of World Tibet Day, for instance, is an attempt to highlight the Tibet cause.

A: I would like to put this in a slightly different perspective. I do not believe that the world community has ignored the Tibet issue. Thanks to His Holiness and his unquestionable leadership, the world continues to stand in solidarity with the Tibetan community. Even inside China, we can see a large number of people sympathetic to the Tibetan situation. Tibet is suffering not due to a lack of world support or attention, but because of a lack of direction and clarity. Unless there is a soul search to find the real purpose of one's existence in exile, true results won't emerge.

World Tibet Day is a good example of the solidarity of the international community. The event was founded by Richard Rosenkranz (1942-2014), a Jewish Pulitzer Prize nominee in history and former correspondent for the US Senate, whom I consider a mentor. After our initial meeting in Berlin in 2003, I worked with him his Foundation until the end of his life. Richard, a victim of polio, wanted Friends of Tibet Foundation to take over the World Tibet Day-related activities when he started developing health complications. He was an extremely charismatic leader on a walking stick who rubbed shoulders with the rich, famous, and powerful. Started in 1997 at an informal meeting between Tendzin Choegyal, the Dalai Lama's younger brother, Richard was instrumental in making World Tibet Day an important event in the Tibetan calendar. In 2021, World Tibet Day, the birthday of His Holiness was observed in more than 78 countries globally. We are proud to be one of the principal organizers of the event worldwide.

6: Could you tell us more about your association with Tushar Gandhi, author and great-grandson of Mahatma and Kasturba Gandhi.

A: We first met while working on an Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) Bombay project. He is a close associate and advisor to Friends of Tibet. He also shared a wonderful relationship with my father, who happened to be a political cartoonist and a mentor to our organization.

I find both Tushar Gandhi and his father, Arun Manilal Gandhi, who passed away recently, to be genuine supporters of the Tibet cause. In 2015, Arun Gandhi ji was denied a visa by the Chinese Embassy after they found a photo of him with the Dalai Lama and Martin Luther King III taken in Washington, DC, in 2011. Yet, Arun Gandhi refused to apologize and denounce His Holiness the Dalai Lama for the sake of getting his visa, and he chose to stand for the truth! During a Friends of Tibet audience with the Dalai Lama in 2018, I narrated the Chinese visa incident to His Holiness the Dalai Lama. He was quite apologetic for what happened to Arun Gandhi ji. This remains the last and one of the most memorable meetings Arun Gandhi ji had with the Dalai Lama.

7: A lot of discussion is happening regarding the Chinese interference in the reincarnation process of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet. What is your take on the issue?

A: China is a nation of contradictions and paradoxes. You will find the best and the worst emerging from China. It is capable of producing disease-causing agents

meant for state-sponsored biowarfare programmes and also capable of deploying the entire task force to contain the very same diseases. China produces some of the best and worst consumer products in the world.

Contradictions result in a balance struggle. Modern China struggles to balance Marxism and capitalism; atheism, and religious beliefs. Look at China's own economy. China is trying to open its economy while keeping its society closed without realizing that the nation will ultimately end up sacrificing either its economy or its society. We see this struggle even with the process of choosing the next Dalai Lama. It is ironic that an atheist nation is more enthusiastic in 'appointing' the next Dalai Lama based on Buddhist reincarnation principles than the Tibetan Buddhists themselves. The military dictatorship of China is capable of appointing anyone, even the next Pope!

8: How important do you think is the need to discuss Tibet climate crisis? In what way, do you think, we can hold CCP accountable for the greenwashing and their environmental crimes in the Third Pole?

A: I was rereading the book "Collapse: How Societies Choose to Fail or Succeed" by Jared Diamond. The book is more of a collection of studies on how political, economic, and social factors led to the collapse of some of the most powerful societies and great civilizations in isolation. One of the chapters is on China, the 'factory of the world'.

Today, neighboring countries, including India, are suffering from the serious consequences of China's illegal activities inside occupied Tibet. China is struggling with self-inflicted environmental problems that consequently affect the rest of the world and lead to global climate crisis. Stopping climate change is an easier task than holding the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) accountable for its crimes against humanity and the environment.

9: The Spreading Masks campaign by The Mask Lab and Friends of Tibet Foundation was a noble cause on your part. Could you tell us more about the campaign?

A: 'Spreading Masks' campaign was launched in 2020 by The Mask Lab (India) in association with Friends of Tibet Foundation, the philanthropic wing of Friends of Tibet. It started with few boxes of medical-quality facemasks being distributed free of charge during the peak of the Covid-19 pandemic. Except for China, now accused of knowingly developing COVID as a bioweapon, no country had the

adequate technology and resources to produce disposable medical masks at the beginning of the pandemic. The Mask Lab's Himachal Pradesh plant was producing high-quality medical masks at a time when rich nations were teaching their populations how to make masks using two rubber bands and a handkerchief.

Soon, Friends of Tibet Foundation undertook the Spreading Masks campaign by partnering with The Mask Lab. By extending the collaboration with the Men-Tsee-Khang, the Tibetan Medical and Astro-Science Institute of HH the Dalai Lama, we were able to distribute a good number of N95 masks free of cost, in some of the remotest corners of India, where people had no access to export quality masks. By March 2022, over 19,00,000 free masks worth ₹3.3 crore had been distributed in India, according to Control Print.

(<https://www.friendsoftibet.org/spreadingmasks/>)

10: If there is one thing you want the world to do for Tibet, what would it be?

A: I would only remind the world of a famous quote by Albert Camus — “In a world of conflicts, a world of victims and executioners, it is the job of thinking people not to be on the side of the executioners!”