

INTRODUCTION

Tibet till 1949 was a fully independent country. In 1950, the newly established Chinese Communist regime decided that Tibet must become a permanent part of the People's Republic of China and launched an invasion. The brutal occupation of Tibet by the Chinese has entirely changed the life and lifestyles of the Tibetans for the worse. During its invasion, the Chinese army imprisoned hundreds of Tibetans for their political and religious activities, while monks and nuns were tortured and killed for aligning with His Holiness the Dalai lama and for dreaming of an Independent Tibet. According to a UN report, "The Chinese occupation of Tibet has been characterised by acts of murder, rape and arbitrary imprisonment; torture and cruel, inhumane and degraded treatment of Tibetans on large scale".

The subsequent oppression and brutal colonisation of Tibet forced His Holiness the Dalai lama to flee Tibet and sought asylum in India in 1959 with eighty thousand Tibetan followers. In exile, the Dalai lama began to conceive a seed for future and ventured to lay firm foundation to reconstruct the lost identity of Tibet. But the repression continued unabated with executions, tortures, labour camps and ethnic cleansing purges. The truth of Chinese rule in Tibet is that, despite strong-arm twisting and economic and financial inducements, the Tibetan people remain unflinchingly loyal to His Holiness the Dalai lama. This is China's real dilemma in Tibet. China might physically rule Tibet but not the hearts of the Tibetan people. To wean away the Tibetan from their devotion to His Holiness the Dalai lama, China has waged campaigns that force the Tibetan people to denounce and demonise the spiritual leader. This strikes at the root of Tibetan values and is an immediate cause of the fire that is consuming the lives of so many young Tibetans.

Self-Immolation as a form of protest is a dramatic and a powerful statement. Despite facing oppression, dispossession, and policies that undermine Tibetan religion, culture and livelihoods over the past half-century, Tibetans have not resorted to any violent means. Most of the self-immolators share a common goal of bringing His Holiness back to Tibet and calling for freedom and independence in Tibet. The crisis grows out of China's political repression, cultural assimilation, economic marginalisation, social discrimination and environmental destruction in Tibet. The major location of self-immolation happened near government buildings and headquarters to symbolise the continuing occupation in Tibet and to challenge the Chinese government's legitimacy in Tibet. The people self-immolate to show solidarity with Tibet and to protest against the ongoing occupation by the Chinese government.

Self -immolation

The first self-immolation protest in Tibetan history was Thupten Ngodrup's sacrifice in 1998 during a hunger strike in New Delhi organised by the Tibetan Youth Congress.

In Tibet, the intensification of state control has taken form of a violent crackdown since the protests swept across the plateau in 2008. The first self-immolation in Tibet happened in Ngaba Prefecture when a 20 year old monk called Tapey of Kirti Monastery set himself on fire on 27th February 2009

— the third day of the Tibetan New Year when the Chinese authorities cancelled a Great Prayer Festival (Monlam) that was supposed to commemorate the victims of the government crackdown in 2008. This acted as the precursor to the continuing self-immolations to the other parts of the Tibet. Since the self-immolations began, the authorities have gone so far as to characterise their approach in Tibetan areas as “war against secessionist sabotage”.

The numbers grew unprecedentedly and in 2012 the numbers of self immolations reached as high as 86. The total numbers of self-immolation till date is 160 i.e. 150 inside Tibet and 10 in exile. The numbers include three monks of high rank lamas, along with forty five ordinary monks and eight nuns. But many were ordinary people.

Why are they self-immolating?

The major reason for self-immolation lies in China’s massive policy failure in Tibet over the course of more than 60 years of rule.

1. *Suppression of Language* : Tibetan Language is being systematically undermined by the Chinese government. The Chinese policy of “Chinese being the primary language and Tibetan a secondary language” were viewed by Tibetans as making Tibet: Chinese.
2. *Suppression of Religion* : The Tibetan belief system has been suppressed and religious scholarship has been subjected to political violence. Post 2008, a draconian “Patriotic Education Programme” was launched which forced monks to denounce His Holiness the Dalai lama openly and imposing limits on the number and origin of the monks.
3. *Population Transfer Policy by CCP* : Under the pretext of development, Chinese in the neighbouring provinces migrate to Tibet for better employment opportunities leading to an overwhelming fear among Tibetans who are increasingly marginalised from the economic boom in their homeland. The main beneficiaries are the migrant Chinese workers. By now, the Chinese have outnumbered Tibetans reducing them to an increasingly disenfranchised and marginalised minority in their own land.
4. *Environmental Destruction* : The ecosystem of the roof of the world is being systematically destroyed. The State has forced the Tibetans to leave their homes and are moved in and around the town centres. Moreover, there were seas of Chinese workers who’ve arrived from the mainland with bull-dozers, blueprints and dynamites in their hands and have immediately worked on the empty grassland and rivers and mines, building dams leading to the degradation of the environment.
5. *Intrusive Surveillance System* : There’s a presence of police and barricades everywhere in Tibet. The police and armies monitor the Tibetans especially the monks and nuns, former prisoners, former monks and nuns and Tibetans who’ve returned from exile and the people who've taken part in earlier protests. There’s an intrusive surveillance system installed to monitor the activities in the major towns and cities.

Since 2008, the Chinese authorities have moved from instilling an oppressive environment in monasteries, nunneries and civil society to one that can be more accurately termed as totalitarian- an approach in which the state recognises no limits to its authority and imposes a climate of fear and terror, and strives to regulate every aspect of private and life.

• **Timeline of the Self-immolations :**

The maximum number of self-immolations happened in the year 2012 with 86 people setting themselves on fire. We find that the single month with the most number of self-immolation was on November 2012 with a total of 28 people. The month with second highest number was on March 2012 when 11 Tibetans set their body alight. Looking at March 2012, March has long been a politically charged month in Tibet where a vast majority of protest are concentrated in this month. March 5, for example, marks the anniversary of the suppression of protests in Lhasa in 1989, when People’s Armed Police (PAP) soldiers opened fire on peaceful protesters who had been gathering for weeks on the streets of Lhasa. March 10 is Tibetan National Uprising Day, commemorating the uprising of 1959 following the Dalai Lama’s escape to India. March 16 is the anniversary of the state’s brutal crackdown on protesters in Ngaba in 2008.

As for November 2012, the peak in self-immolations at this point coincided with the eighteenth National Congress of the Communist Party, at which the new generation of the state leaders was to take control of the national policy. Five Tibetans have set themselves ablaze on 7th November 2012, the day before the CCP’s 18th National Congress. This marked the highest number of self-immolations in a day. The revealing pattern of self-immolation at this politically significant moment clearly suggests that protestors hoped to press the new generations of leaders to change their policy in Tibet and they viewed self-immolation as a means of pressing such change.

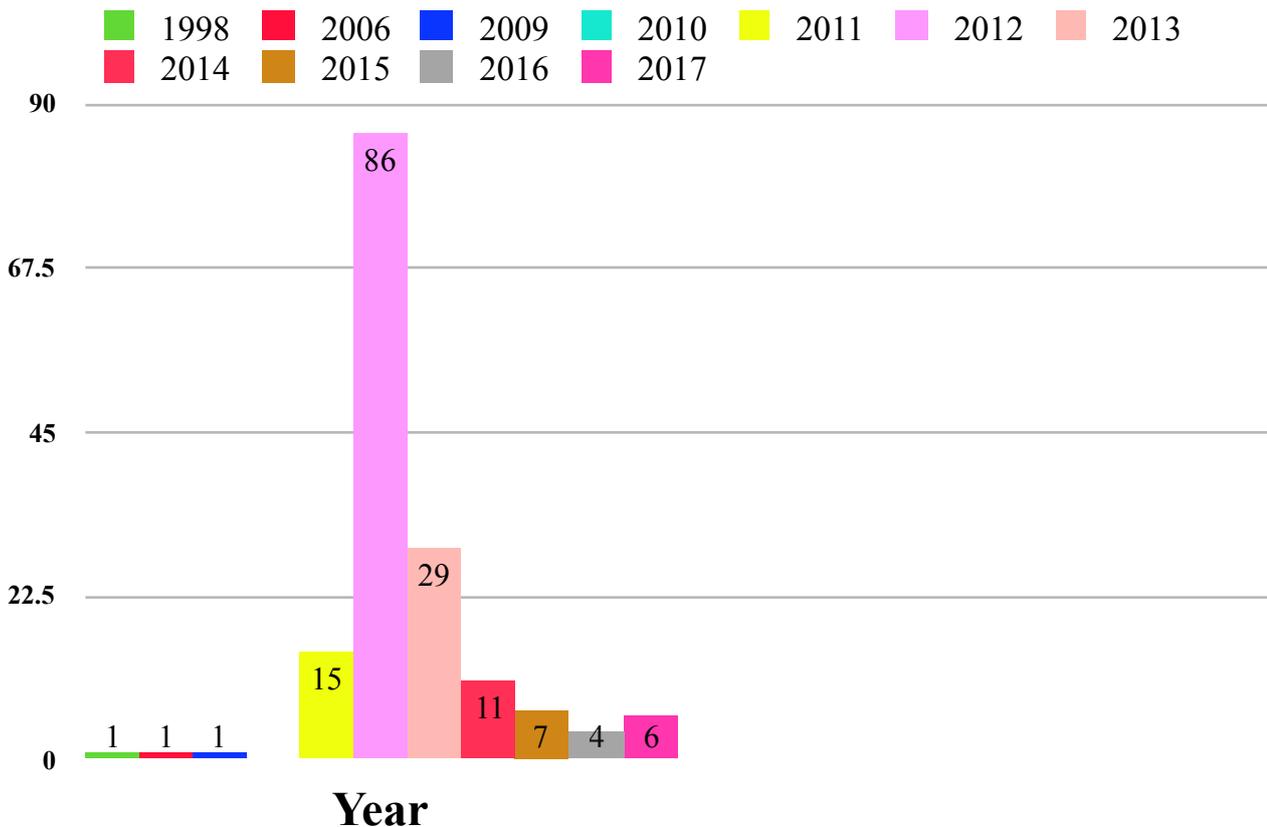


Figure 1 depicts the number of self-immolations that have happened till now. The first self-immolation happened in New Delhi, India on 27th April’1998 when Thupten Ngodrup, a 60 year old man set himself ablaze during a hunger strike organised by TYC.

- **Gender breakdown of the self-immolators :**

Out of the 160 self-immolations, 27 were female and 133 were male (123 in Tibet and 10 in exile). The first women who set herself from fire is a 20 year old nun named Tenzin Wangmo at Mamae Dechen Choekhorling nunnery in Ngaba, Amdo. Her slogan called for the return of His Holiness the Dalai Lama to Tibet and religious freedom in Tibet.

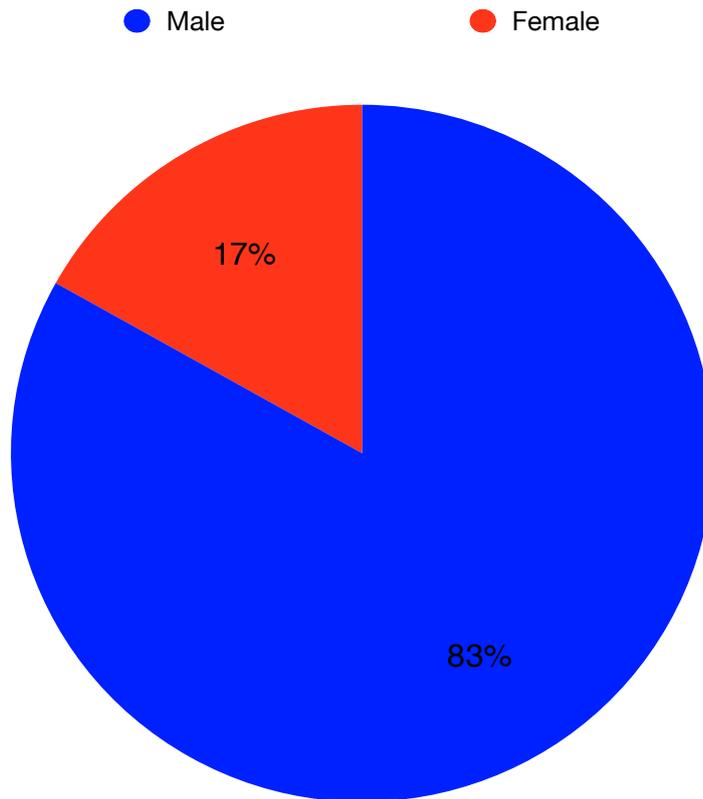


Figure 2 represents the gender breakdown of the self-immolators. 17% of the self-immolators are female while 83% of them were male.

• **AFFILIATION :**

The Tibetans inside Tibet are living under heavy repression. There is a total clampdown on any conventional means to express their grievances leading to unprecedented number of self-immolations inside Tibet. The monks were an integral part in leading the struggles and they've also taken the lead in initiating and developing self-immolation as a form of protest. The first thirteen cases of self-immolation were all carried out by monks or former monks who've been driven out of their monasteries by the authorities. It was only in December 2011 that a layperson first commit self-immolation, further expanding the scope of the protest movement.

Out of the 160 self-immolations, 48 were monks, 8 are nuns and 101 were ordinary people. There are 3 self-immolators whose profession are still unknown to us.

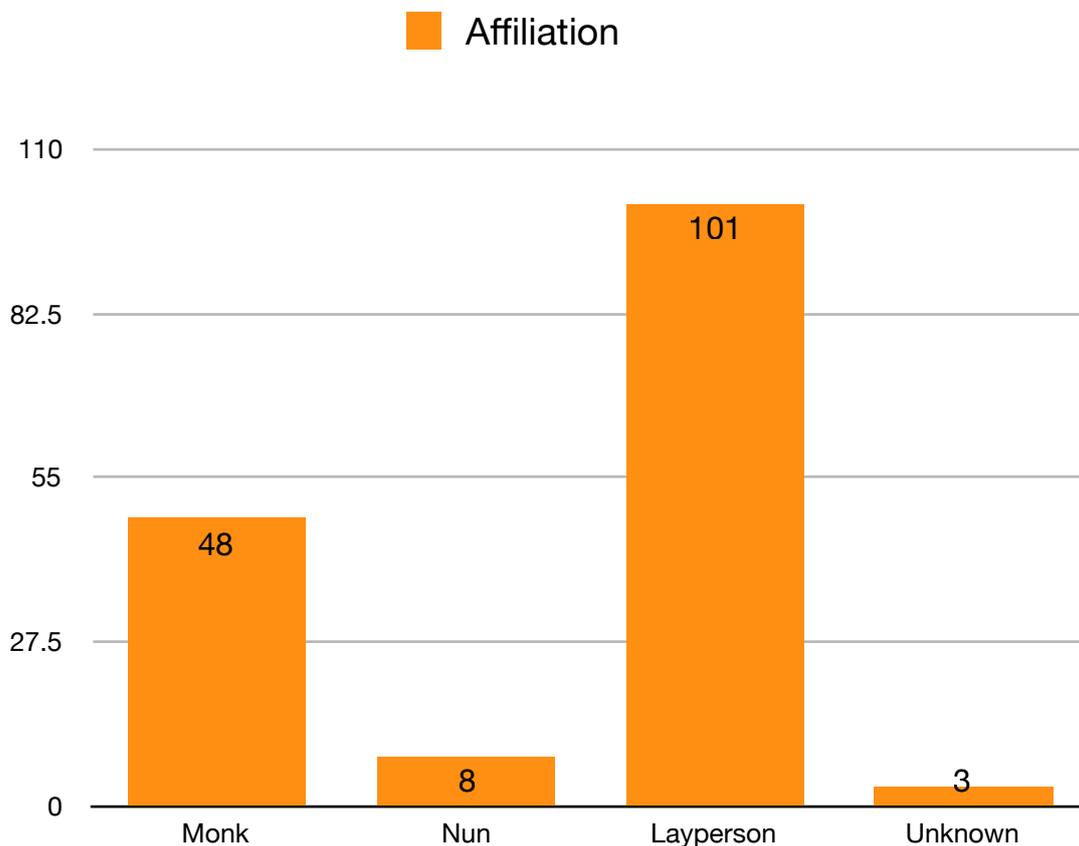


Figure 3 describes the profession of the self-immolators. There were about 101 layperson who were nomads or peasants; among the others were high school student, workers, vendors, a carpenter, a woodworker, a writer, a thangka painter, a taxi driver, a retired government cadre, a laundry owner, a park ranger and ten activists exiled abroad.

• **AGE GROUP :**

People belonging to different age groups have set themselves on fire with the youngest being a 15 year old boy named Dorji, a monk at Ngoshul monastery, Ngaba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Dorji died during a triple self-immolation with Samdrup,16 and Dorji Kyab,16 on 7th November 2012. The oldest was a 64 year old nomad named Tamdin Thar from Chentsa, Amdo.

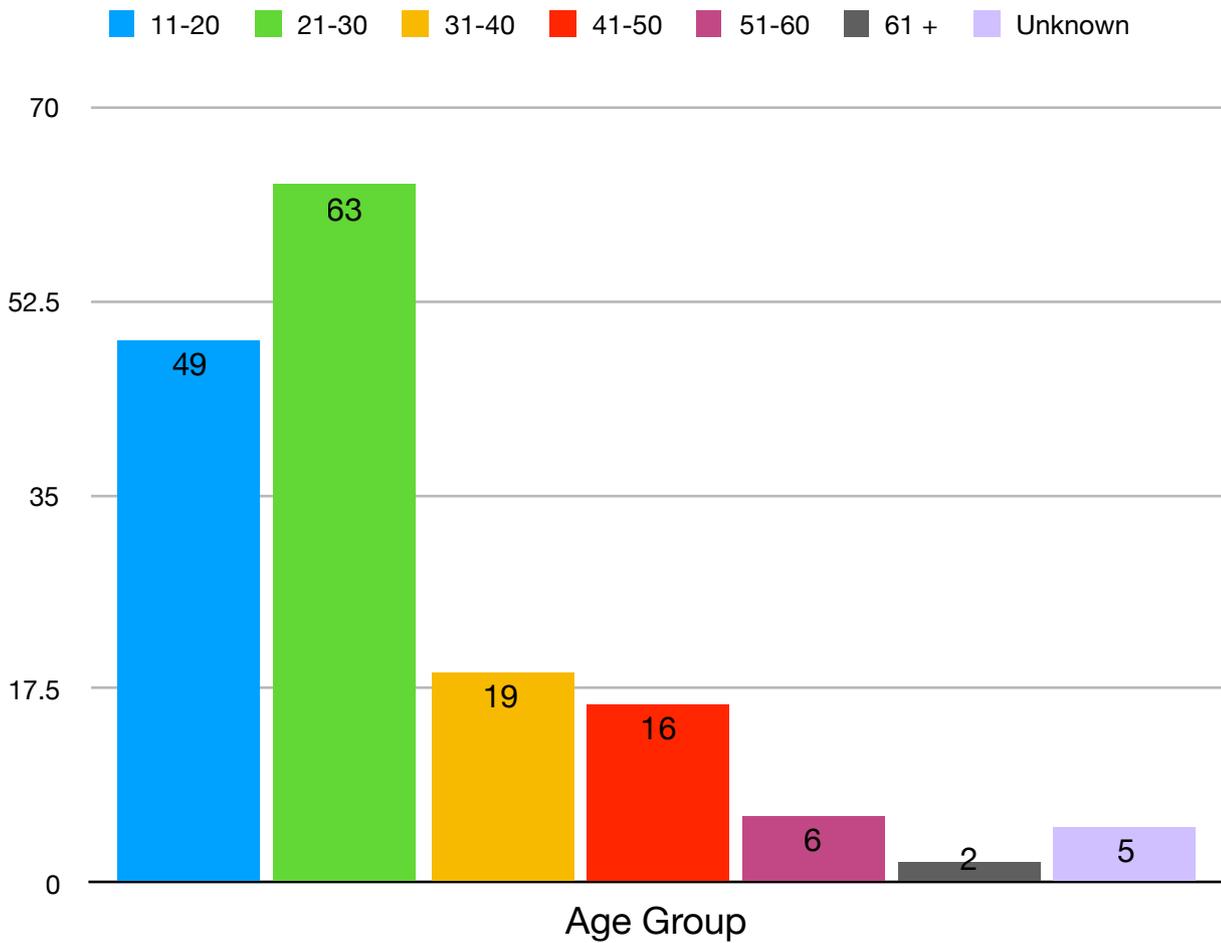


Figure 4 represents the age group of the self-immolators. The maximum number of self immolations were done by the people belonging to the age group of 21-30 years.

- **Whereabouts of the Self immolators :**

Out of the 160 self immolators, 135 are confirmed dead following their protests and 25 are alive. There are 17 who's whereabouts still remain unknown to us because of the intensified measures to prevent information reaching world about self-immolations.

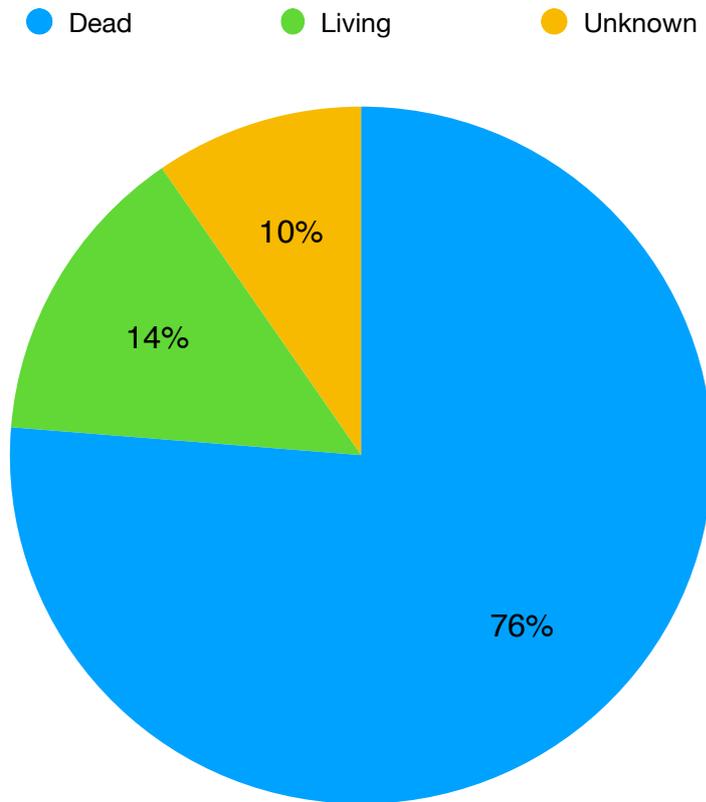


Figure 5 shows the current whereabouts of the self-immolators. 76% of the self-immolators have reported dead following their protests and 14% are still alive. There are 10% of them whose whereabouts are still unknown to us.

- **AREAS OF SELF-IMMOLATION :**

Majority of the self-immolation happened in the Ngaba County, Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (China's Sichuan Province) however there has been self-immolations in other counties as well. On March 16, 2008, 18 people were killed after the protests in Ngaba, involving many monks from Kirti, neighbouring monasteries and laypeople. Kirti Monastery in Ngaba County has been under intense surveillance and subjected to frequent repression and restrictions since 16th March 2008. The area surrounding Kirti Monastery has been strictly policed since March 2008, no journalists have been able to reach Kirti Monastery to verify independently the widely reported shootings.

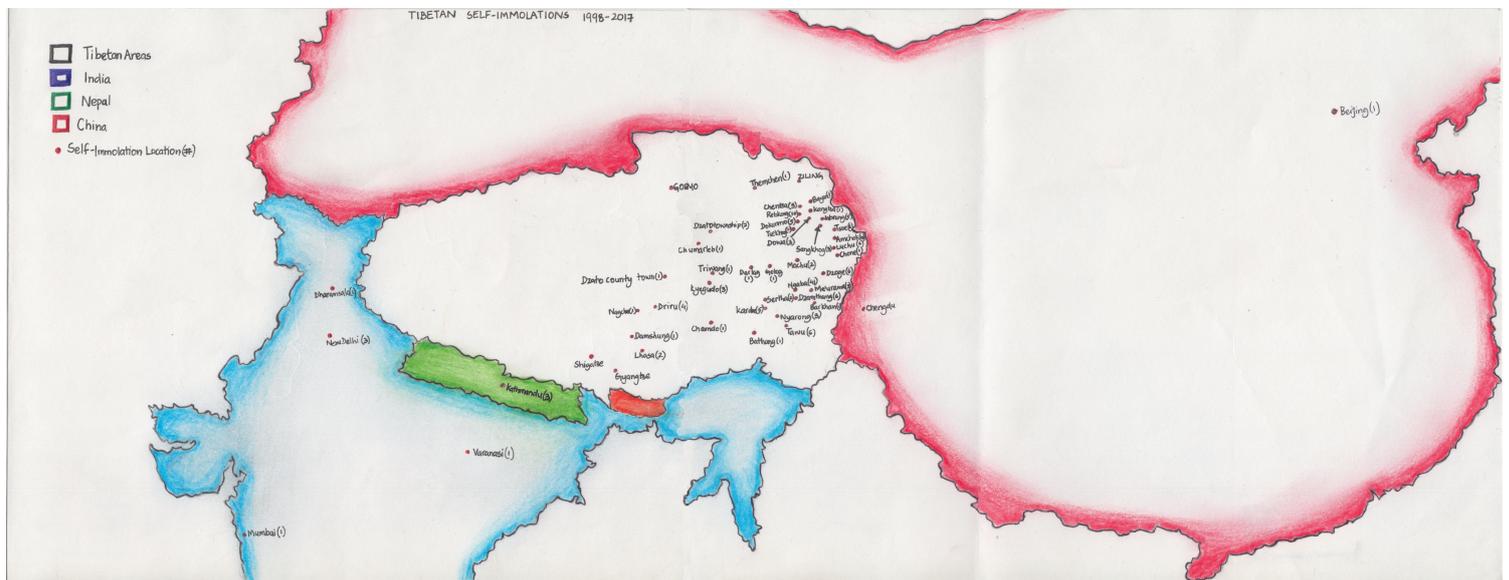


Figure 6 portrays the areas and the number of self-immolations in Tibet. 150 Tibetans have set themselves alight in Tibet and Ngaba County have witnessed the majority number of self-immolators. 10 Tibetans have self-immolated themselves outside Tibet i.e in India and Nepal with the latest one being a 49 year wood painter called Pasang Dhondup.

• **What are they demanding for?**

One can draw a conclusion after studying all the profiles of the self-immolators in Tibet that the most common demand made by the self-immolators are;

1. Return of His Holiness to Tibet
2. Called for Freedom or Independence for Tibet
3. Unity of Tibetans inside and outside Tibet.

Sangay Dolma, who set herself on fire in November 2012, left behind a self-portrait photo with the words “Tibet is an independent country” on her hand.

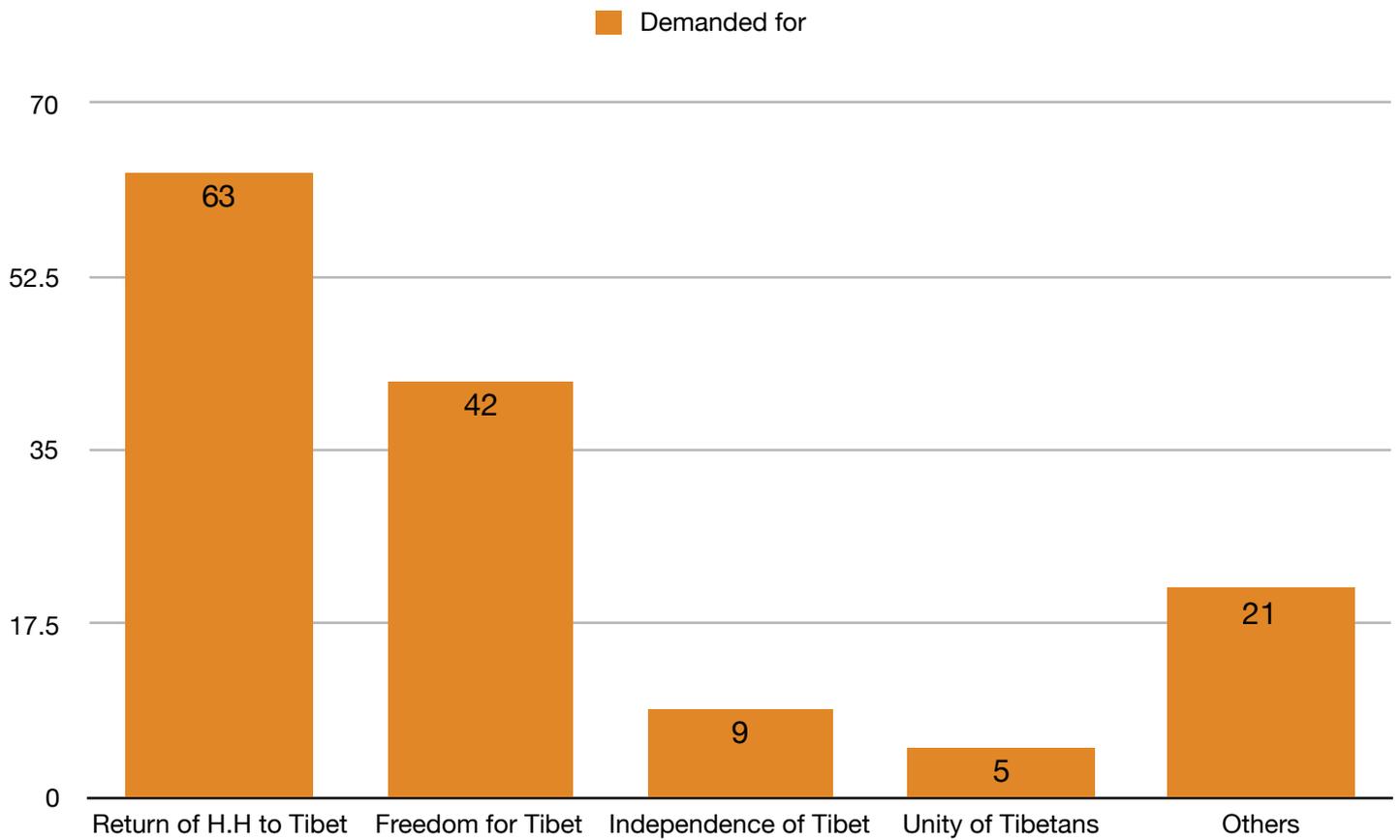


Figure 7 represents the demands of the self-immolators. Out of the 150 self-immolations in Tibet, 63 have demanded for the return of the Dalai lama, 42 have called for Freedom for Tibet, 9 have demanded for independence in Tibet, 5 have called on for Tibetans inside and outside Tibet to stay united. There are 21 who've protested against Chinese illegal occupation in Tibet. Slogans of several self-immolators are unreported because of strict censorship by the Chinese authorities.

Chinese Government response to Self-immolations

The Chinese government has responded to the self-immolations by intensifying the military buildup in Tibet and strengthening the very policies and approaches that are the root cause of such acts, such as aggressive campaign against loyalty to the Dalai lama. The feared erosion of their authorities also leads to retributive actions against families, relatives, or monasteries associated with the people who have self-immolated. Frequently protesters bodies are cremated by security forces to prevent families carrying out traditional funeral ceremonies. Local communities are threatened with punishments for holding prayer services or offering support to protesters family.

The Chinese authorities have sought to seal off Tibet and impose an information blackout. Penalties for even low level information sharing are among the worst in the world, and almost any expression of Tibetan identity can be tagged as ‘criminal’ or ‘splittist’. They’ve described self-immolation as “violent behaviour whose aim is to create an atmosphere of terror” and accused the Dalai Lama of instigating the protests.

The CCP continues to prioritise infrastructure construction and resource exploitation as key elements of its strategic objectives in Tibet, casting Tibetans support for Dalai Lama and protection of Tibetan national identity as obstacles to elaborate ambitions to re-shape the Tibetan plateau for its own purposes and ensure the domination of the party. Changes in Chinese laws and regulations have decreased protection of Tibetan language, culture and dramatically eroded space for expression of Tibetan identity.

There appears to be a direct correlation between the self-immolations and an intensified campaigns against the Dalai Lama in Tibet together with the aggressive expansion of legal measures tightening state control over Tibetan religion and culture. This has been particularly evident following the imposition of increasingly restrictive measures in eastern Tibetan areas of Amdo and Kham, where most of the self-immolations have occurred. From 1994 onwards, the Chinese authorities launched a particularly aggressive campaign against the Dalai Lama, including the prohibitions on the display of Dalai Lama photographs and requirements for monks and nuns to denounce the Dalai Lama. Many Tibetans who have self-immolated have sought to underline religious context of their acts. Some have died with their hands clasped in prayer, while many of those who have self-immolated have done so beside a stupa, monastery or nunnery.

A fundamentally new approach is warranted in Tibet. The Chinese government needs to take immediate steps to address the current emergency in Tibetan areas. The Chinese government must acknowledge the importance of the Dalai Lama to the Tibetan people and his critical role in Tibet’s future, and engage in a broader and more substantive dialogue with Tibetan representatives as a matter of urgency.

CONCLUSION

Self-immolation is a clear act of political protest against those Chinese officials who are constantly torturing Tibetans in the area. The unprecedented numbers of self-immolations tells that the international community must take notice of China's repressions in Tibet. These protests will only end when China addresses the grievances of Tibetan people. Other governments which considers themselves as China's friends or trading partners cannot keep ignoring the flagrant abuse of Human Rights in Tibet or for the fact that China's draconian policies are still driving the Tibetans to such an extreme form of protest.

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