

# Geleck Palsang's 'Amala': Chronicling a life of service

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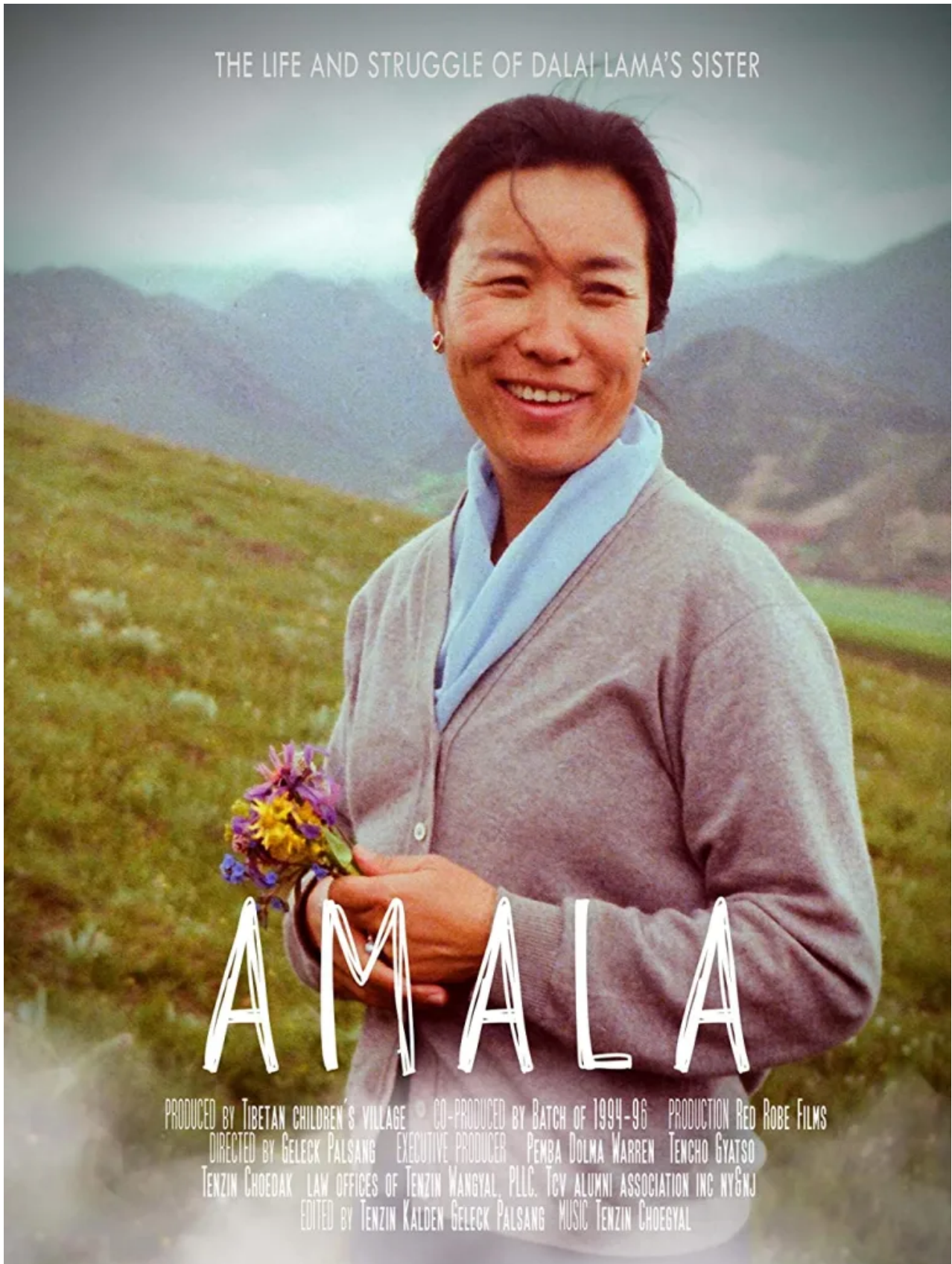
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### Dr Swati Chawla

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In the introduction to a recent edited volume, Prof Apoorvanand pointed out that universities in India have historically been among the only 'shelters [and] safe homes for social and cultural refugees.' They are spaces where new conceptions of citizenship and nation-making emerge, where 'new proximities' are created, and inclusive communities that transcend old social barriers are fostered among young men and women. Since these are elusive achievements — not 'countable and accountable' — 'universities need storytellers' (Apoorvanand 2018, 2–3).

In the early years of exile, TCV (Tibetan Children's Village) schools provided such a home and succor to Tibetans in India. In these spaces, new communities — birthed from physical proximity, political solidarity, and shared emotional loss — emerged among young Tibetans, many of whom had been sundered from families and communities customarily organized around kinship, region, and religious affiliation. In Geleck Palsang, an alumnus of the TCV, the organization has found a storyteller who sensitively chronicles the elusive virtues of a refuge, nation-building, and citizenship-making. *Amala* (2022) is that story.



*Amala Official Poster (Courtesy: Geleck Palsang)*

Jetsun Pema (b. 1940) is the first sibling born in the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's family after he was enthroned at the Potala Palace. He had chosen her name and subsequently guided her education. The film chronicles the final years of the family's life before exile through



recollections from her brother Gyalo Thondup about their home in Takster, and her own memories of visiting His Holiness at the Potala (and returning with pockets full of treats!).

Like many children from the Tibetan (and Bhutanese and Sikkimese) nobility, Jetsun Pema and her siblings were sent to prestigious colonial-era schools in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. She recounts a tense period at Loreto Convent when sporadic updates of political disturbances in Tibet came through a lone radio set in the common room, and did little to quell anxiety among pupils whose families navigated an uncertain future back home. One day, the Mother Superior summoned Jetsun Pema out of the classroom to relay the news: ‘Your family have fled from Tibet. No one knows where they are.’ She did not get word of His Holiness and others’ having arrived into safety for several weeks.



*Amala* Indian Premiere at TCV, Dharamsala (Photo: Swati Chawla)

Ama la came to the helm of the TCV administration (then called the Nursery for Tibetan Refugee Children) in 1964 upon the death of her older sister Tsering Dolma (1919-1964), who had founded the organization in 1960. The Nursery looked after orphaned children and those who had been separated from their families. The film includes heartrending scenes of children arriving from Tibet — orphaned, frostbitten, starving — and a small, under-resourced staff trying their best to keep them alive in cramped premises with few medical facilities. In one particularly painful episode, Jetsun Pema recounts a time in the 1960s when a large group of children arrived at once. Many of them were very ill, and despite the best efforts of the Red Cross doctors, a child died every three to four days.

For a community now widely considered the ‘most successful refugee community in the world,’ it is valuable to pause and appreciate the labor of the first generation of refugees—those who built — brick by brick — the material and social structures that made it possible for their children to thrive in exile, and eventually extended hospitality back to their hosts. From modest beginnings in makeshift buildings, the TCV now comprises a network of

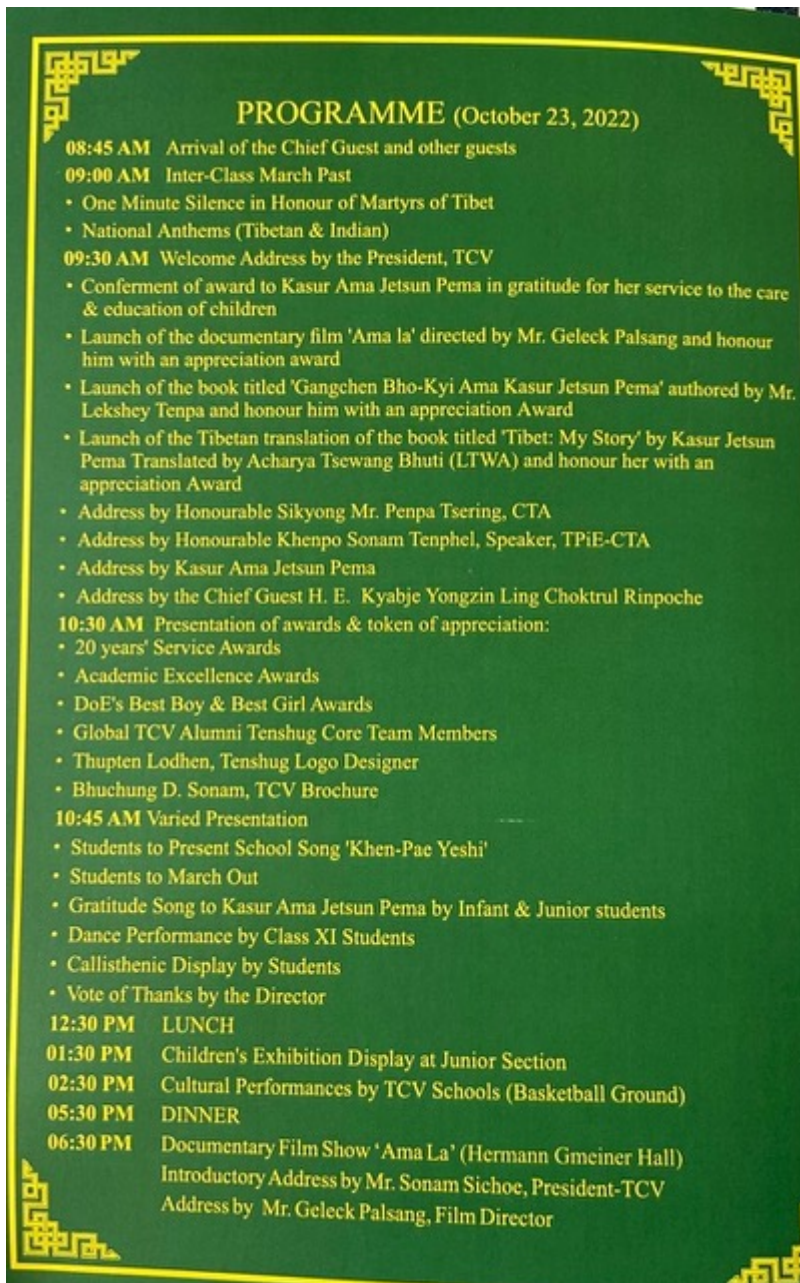
eight residential schools and four day schools across India, as well as youth hostels, colleges, and vocational centres. It serves 16,726 children, many of whom come from neighboring communities in India, particularly within the Himalayan states.



Jetsun Pema aka Amala (Photo Courtesy: [Kalsang Jigme](#))

In his first documentary film *Prayers Answered* (2009), Geleck Palsang had chronicled the inspiring story of a village in Baltistan, where, following a visit and personal encouragement by the Dalai Lama, a group of Indian students are enrolled in the neighboring TCV school. The students are culturally Tibetan and Muslim, and the school provides space and resources for both those parts of their identity to flourish.

I attended the Indian premier of *Amala* at the Upper TCV in Dharamsala on October 23. The screening was part of daylong celebrations for the 62nd anniversary of TCV schools, which recognized Jetsun Pema's long service in building and shepherding the organization from 1964 to 2006. She was in attendance at the premier and for other felicitations through the day, as was Geleck Palsang.



TCV's 62nd anniversary schedule (Photo: Swati Chawla)

The story is told in part through interviews with Ama la, her childhood friends, and members of her family, such as her elder brother Gyalo Thondup and her eldest daughter Tenchoe Gyatso. Most importantly, experiences of generations of TCV alumni are woven into every episode as testament to her contribution to the organisation. In a tight runtime of 50 minutes, the film (in Tibetan and English, with English subtitles) covers some of the numerous awards and felicitations in Jetsun Pema's storied life, includes glimpses from her work in schools and in negotiations with the Indian governmental bodies, offers valuable archival footage from the third fact-finding mission to Tibet, and, most briefly, affords a peek into some turning points in her personal life.





Geleck Palsang addressing the audience during the premiere (Photo: Swati Chawla)

Ama la's own faith and her commitment to serving the Tibetan community were the foundation upon which her intimate family life also rested; a solid bedrock that lent her equanimity in the face of immense loss and grief. While Geleck Palsang's narrative does not call attention to it — the right call, in my opinion — a perceptive viewer will not fail to notice that Jetsun Pema, identified throughout with the most feminine of epithets ('mother'), frequently eschewed traditional gender norms in her long career of public service. Thus, in introducing Lhendup Gyalpo, the man who would become her husband, the 'matchmaker' friends emphasize parts of his background that were likely to resonate with her work. Her daughter Tenchoe Gyatso recounts that she and her two siblings shared their mother with hundreds of Tibetan children; she was 'Amala' to them all. This meant that she was absent for long periods (and had no time to cook!). Despite the grief of losing her husband and her younger daughter, Amala remained steadfast in her work. She remarked to a friend that the life as a nun was not for her, as had been customary for widowed women. She remarried; her second husband Tempa Tsering, who is ten years her junior, shares her background of a lifetime of service in the exile administration.

Thus, identifying her as 'the Dalai Lama's sister,' as the film does in the title, had appeared jarring to me at first. Why couldn't her name stand on its own? But I realized that within the narrative arc of the film, the identification does not diminish her personal achievement; it integrates it within the struggles of ordinary Tibetans and the figure who has led them for six decades. Archival footage from her leadership of the third fact-finding mission to Tibet (1980), which documented deplorable standards of education and widespread human rights abuses, also shows how people flocked to her and confided in her as if they were meeting the Dalai Lama himself.



TCV children in “We Love Amala” formation (Courtesy: [Tibetan Rights Collective](#))

Scenes shot during the coronavirus pandemic, a decade and a half after her retirement, show Ama la — now called ‘Mo la’ (grandmother) — still doing the rounds, checking in on children and their families. And that’s how I saw her at the premiere — embraced in the loving company of those she had served. I didn’t even realize that she had been sitting merely two rows ahead of me. No fuss, no trappings.

Like many others in that packed auditorium on October 23, I wept through the film, but came out with a full heart. Few things are as uplifting as a child’s laughter, a mother’s love, and a life of service.

*Dr Swati Chawla is a historian of the Himalaya and an associate professor at O.P. Jindal Global University. She tweets [@ChawlaSwati](#).*

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