

# Khampa, Western



## Population:

206,400 (2000)  
254,200 (2010)  
313,100 (2020)

**Countries:** China, India, probably Nepal

**Buddhism:** Tibetan

**Christians:** 10

## Overview of the Western Khampa

**Other Names:** Kham, Khamba

### Population Sources:

157,700 in China (1987, *Language Atlas of China*)

1,221 in India (1981 census)

Probably also in Nepal

**Language:** Sino-Tibetan, Tibeto-Burman, Himalayish, Tibeto-Kanauri, Tibetic, Tibetan, Northern

**Dialects:** 2 (Ger-rtse, Nagchu)

**Professing Buddhists:** 99%

**Practising Buddhists:** 75%

**Christians:** 0.01%

**Scripture:** Tibetan Bible 1948; New Testament 1885; Portions 1862

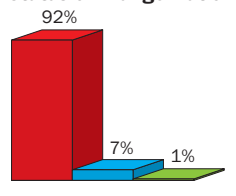
**Jesus film:** none

**Gospel Recordings:** none

**Christian Broadcasting:** none

**ROPAL code:** KHG03

## Status of Evangelization



**A** = Have never heard the gospel  
**B** = Have heard the gospel but have not become Christians  
**C** = Are adherents to some form of Christianity

Approximately 220,000 Tibetans living in the massive Nghari Prefecture in central and northern Tibet speak the Western Khampa language. They have 'a very sparse population in a band to the north-east and extending to the north of almost the entire central Tibetan area'.<sup>1</sup> The region is mostly

a high, desolate plateau. 'At 17,000 feet [5,180 metres], the rarefied atmosphere has only half as many oxygen particles as at sea level.

As early as AD 100 a Chinese official described the Tibetan Plateau as "Headache Mountains".<sup>2</sup>

Western Khampa is unintelligible with the Central Tibetan languages or Amdo Tibetan. Despite living in a huge area

approximately the size of England, only two dialects are reported within the Western Khampa language.

A small number of Western Khampa live across parts of northern India, predominantly in the states of Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh.<sup>3</sup> In the 1981 census of India they numbered 1,221 people. The Northern Khampa in India are the descendants of traders from Tibet who settled in India about one hundred years ago. There are probably hundreds more Northern Khampa refugees living in Nepal and India today, but identifying them as such is an impossible task due to their classification simply as Tibetans. There is strong social pressure from within the exiled Tibetan community not to divide the Tibetan peoples by ethnolinguistic classification, as they fear this will weaken their political cause.

The Khampa live in some of the harshest

conditions in the world, and they tie their traditional long-sleeved coats with a belt, which conceals a large knife or sword.

Many wear lucky charms, magical strings or amulet boxes around their necks. Khampa men, who often get around on horseback, are never without a weapon. Polyandry

(the practice of brothers sharing the same wife) still occurs in some places. Life expectancy for Khampa living on the bitter plateau averages only about 45 years.

The Khampa rely on demons, ghosts and the spirits of disembodied deities to guide their decisions. Many monks are able to call up fearsome demons, which sometimes visualize in

front of them. The most devout monks are reported to be able to transport themselves spiritually from one place to another, and they have been reputed to appear in different locations, great distances apart, on the same day. The Khampa also worship Yama, the god of death. They believe that he is the king of the underworld and that he controls all the events of their lives.

In the past, missionaries who were frustrated at not being allowed into Tibet loaded up dozens of yaks with Tibetan tracts and sent them randomly into the vast Tibetan frontiers.<sup>4</sup> In the 1920s one writer lamented, 'This region is not only without a resident missionary, but even the scouts of Christianity have barely touched it except at one or two points. . . . All these are realms to conquer in West China. Large areas are unknown absolutely, and still larger ones remain relatively unknown.'<sup>5</sup>



Julian Hawken