

A STUDY OF BUDDHISM IN SIKKIM

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Buddhism spread to countries outside its homeland in India and became specially deeply rooted in Tibet. As the time passed, it was classified into many sects. The Bhotiyas of Sikkim are said to have migrated to Sikkim from Tibet sometime in the seventeenth century. They are the followers of Nyingma sect. They established themselves as a ruling class dominating the indigenous Lepcha. With them, Mahayana Buddhism entered Sikkim and developed as the state religion. In this paper, there is an humble attempt to throw light on the introduction of Buddhism in Sikkim.

It is believed that Guru Padmasambhava had personally visited both Bhutan and Sikkim during his travels in Tibet in the eight century A.D. Although he left no converts and erected no buildings, he is said to have hid away in caves many holy books for the use of posterity and to have personally consecrated every sacred spot in Sikkim. According to the legendary accounts, Guru Padmasambhava entered Sikkim by the "Lordly Pass" Jo-la and he is said to have returned to Tibet by way of Je-lep Pass, resting en-route on the Ku-phu and creating the Tuko-La by 'tearing' up the rock to crush an obnoxious demon.¹

Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim by Lhatsun Chenpo, who was a resident of Kongbo in the lower valley of the Tsangpo. His name means "The Great Reverened God." His religious name is Kun-zang name-gye (Skt. Samantabhadra) He is also known by the little of Lhatsun nam-kha-Jig-med (Skt. Abhijñāksadeva) with reference to his alleged power of flying. He is also sometimes called Kusho Dzog-chen Chhenpo (Skt. Mahāyogakshema)²

Besides constructing a number of monasteries and shrines, he selected the sites for other monasteries. The oldest monastery founded by Lhatsun Chenpo is Dub-de, which was constructed soon after the consecration of Phuntsog Namgyal. Soon afterwards, shrines seem to have been erected at Tashiding, Pemayangtse, Sang-nga-cho-ling, over spots consecrated by Guru Rimpoche and these ultimately became the nucleus of the monasteries. It is also said that Lhatsun Chenpo selected the site for the Pemayangtse monastery.³

Waddell, in his book Lamaism in Sikkim, has recorded a miraculous appearance of Lhatsun Chenpo in Sikkim and meeting with other two lamas. These three lamas convened a council and despatched two messengers in the east for the search of Phuntshog, as it was prophesied by Guru Rimpoche. Phuntsog was brought and crowned as Chogyal (Skt. Dharmaraja) or religious king. He was at that time aged thirty eight years and he became a lama in the same year which is said to have been 1641 A.D.⁴ It is also recorded that Dalai Lama sent a congratulatory note bearing his seal the mitre of Guru Rimpoche, the Phurba (dagger) and the most precious sand image of the Guru as presents. This gesture bound the new king to the Tibetan government and in times of crisis he looked to the Tibetan government for protection and aid. Sikkimese records known as Bras-ljongs-Rgyal-rabs state that Phuntsog Namgyal, had assistance guaranteed to him, if ever it was needed by the Fifth Dalai Lama.⁵

Subsequent to Lhatsun Chanpo's death in the latter end of the seventeenth century, Buddhism steadily progressed in Sikkim till latterly monks and monasteries filled the country. With the passage of time, the monasteries grew in size and number. At present, there are 67 monasteries. In addition, there are 132 Manilhakhang and 22 Lhakhang and Tsamkhang

Bulletin of Tibetology

(hermitage or place of meditation). Among these six Tashiding is considered the most important. Pemayangtse and Phensang monasteries belong to the Nyingmapa sect. These were either constructed by Lhatsun Chenpo or the sites were selected by him. The monasteries of Ralang, Rumtek and Phodang belong to Kargyudpa (bka' -brgyud-pa) sect. They were constructed during the time of fourth Chogyal, Gyurmed Namgyal, in pursuance of a promise made to Gyalwa Karmapa, the then Hierarch of Karma-Kargyudpa sect at the Tsur-phu monastery in Tibet, during the former's visit there.⁶

There was a rapid and remarkable growth in the number of Buddhist gompas in Sikkim between 1840 and 1860. The first gumpa built in the nineteenth century was Namchi, in the south-west in 1836. In between 1840-1860, fourteen new gompas came up. All but two of these at Dalling and Yangong, were in the east or the north of the country. According to Waddell, by the year 1788, there were fourteen lamas in Sikkim, including Khechupalri, which was founded in the very same year.⁷ In 1814, the capital of Sikkim, which had been at Rabdentse, was moved to the east, to Tumlong. Moreover, it was in this area, around Tumlong (within a radius of ten miles) that six new gompas were constructed in the next five decades, gompas which had a total capacity for over two hundred lamas. New gompas continued to be founded, in the east mostly but also in the north, in the areas of upper Tista valley, near to the line to the trade route northwards through the Kangra La into Tibet.⁸

Upto 1950, the monastic education was related to that of Tibet. The monastic education was however esoteric in higher stage and in general education was the preliminary knowledge of Logic, handicrafts and primary knowledge of health cure were included together with ritualistic motivation. A Nyingmapa monk therefore becomes high in various ritualistic performances and higher esoteric practices. The monks have the customary right of performing all the religious functions of the royalty. The head lama of the monastery of Pemayangtse alone has the power to consecrate the Chogyal of Sikkim. In spite of the high spiritual status accorded to these lamas, they were also concerned with the state affairs. An educated monk like Dorje lupon is worshipped by urban people and his seat is usually regarded high in the monastic order. But his associate monks had a usual access in rural areas with the consent and directive of the Dorje-lpon.

The religious and ethnological profile of Sikkim is composite by the existence of the Lepchas, who are the original inhabitants of the state and the Bhotiyas belonging to the Tibeto-Burman stock. Buddhism in Sikkim while retaining the basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism has assumed a different characteristic distinct from that of Tibet by its amalgamation with the Bon religion practised by the Lepcha in the pre-Buddhist period. A religion, moving from one country to other, undergoes considerable change in order to mould itself suitable to the changing circumstances of the land of its adoption. Buddhism, therefore, accommodated the principles of Bonism and assumed a particular form among the Lepchas.

The interpretation of Buddhist ritual and local religious practice found expression in the seasonal dance festivals held in the royal temple of Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Some of the performances are comparable to the ritual dances enacted by Bon priests in the south eastern Tibetan borderlands. The masked priests represent fierce Bon deities and their attendants, and the dances are staged for the suppression of evil. Similar dances form an important part of the annual worship of the mountain god personifying Khanchenjunga of Sikkim. On some occasions of great ritual importance, a Lepcha Shaman, who may be male or female,

become possessed by the spirit of a semi-legendary Lepcha chieftain believed to have ruled the Lepcha country when the first Tibetan settlers arrived in Sikkim."

Until 1975 there was a sense in which Sikkim was still a Buddhist state, although its links with Tibet had been snapped from about 1950 when the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese invasion took place. However, cut off now from its original religious base in Tibet and incorporated into the secular state of India, it is assumed that the Buddhism in Sikkim will continue and flourish retaining its basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism.

References :

1. A. Waddell. Buddhism and Lamaism of Tibet, Educational Enterprise (Pvt) Ltd. Nepal, 1978, p.46.
2. Dzog-chhen (rDzos-chen) literally means "The Great End" or "Perfection" being the technical name for the system of mystical insight of the Nyingmpa and Kusho means "the honourable."
3. Waddell, Lamaism in Sikkim, Oriental Publishers, Delhi, 1973, p. 18.
4. Ibid., pp. 8-9.
5. T. W. D. Shakabpa. Tibet : A Political History, New Haven & London, Yale University Press, 1967, p. 112
6. 'A Socio-Economic Study of Pemayangtse Monastery in Sikkim by Ranju R. Dhamala in the Region and Society of the Himalayas (Ed.) Tanka B. Subba & Karubaki Datta, Gian Publishing House, 1991, pp. 58-59.
7. Waddell, Lamaism in Sikkim, p. 17f.
8. 'Sikkimese Buddhism in the Nineteenth Century' by Trevor Ling in the Religion and Society in Himalayas (Ed.) Tankas B. Subba and Karubaki Datta, p. 52.
9. The Encyclopedia of Religion (Ed.) Mircea Elicade, Vol. 6, Macmillan Publishing House, New York, 1987, p.327.