

MONASTERIES IN SIKKIM*

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The hidden valley of rice called 'sBas-yul-hBras-Mo-lJongs' discovered by the Great saint Herukapa LhabTsun Nam-mkhah hjigs-'med' or popularly known as rGyalwa Lhabtsun Chhenpo in the early 17th century was the land blessed and graced by Maha Guru Padmasambhava or known as the second Buddha as a Paradise on earth or a heavenly shelter for the grieved ones in the cruel world of the future is the same that we now call 'Sikkim', the youngest state of the Indian Union. rGyalwa Lha-bTsun Chhenpo's entry into Himalayas from Tibet and his great discovery of Sikkim, as per the Maha Guru Padmasambhava's prophecy, marks the beginning and spread of Mahayana Buddhism, particularly known as 'hDyays-lJongs rZogs-Chhen rNyingma', in Sikkim and also the establishment of Buddhist monasteries in Sikkim.

rGyalwa Lha-bTsun Chhenpo, along with two other lamas, namely mNga-bDag Sems-pa Chhenpo and Kathog Rig'hZin Chhenpo, built many monasteries and lhakhangs (small shrines) in Sikkim after the consecration of the first Dharma king of Sikkim, Chogyal Phuntsok Namgyal at Yuksam, by the above three lamas in 1604. The first monasteries established by rGyalwa-Lha-bTsun Chhenpo were the sDrup-sThe monastery, gSang-sNgags Chhos-gLing monastery and Padma Yangs-rTse monastery in the West Sikkim. The monasteries first built by mNga-bDag pa and Kathog pa were bTra-Shi lDing monastery in the west and Kathog monastery in the east respectively. Further, in the course of time many more monasteries were added, including the monasteries of Karma Kagyutpa sect. Thus, now, one will see a monastery or a small shrine almost on every top of a hill, particularly in the western part of the state. The present number of monasteries and lhakhangs in Sikkim exceeds 160, besides an almost equal number of mandirs and a few other religious institutions.

Among the oldest monasteries established by rGyalwa Lha-bTsun Chhenpo, Pedma Yang-rTse monastery was further developed and reconstructed during the reign of Chogyal Chhyak-Dor Namgyal, the third Dharma king of Sikkim and skyabs-mGon hJigs-med-dPaw, the third reincarnation of the Great rGyalwa Lha-bTsun Chhenpo and since then it has become the principle monastery of sikkim. Almost all the other rNyingma monasteries were once the branches of the monastery and the Head Lama of each subsidiary monastery deputed from Padma Yang-rTse monastery.

Besides, Pedma Yang-rTse monastery, the other big and important monasteries of Sikkim are bTra-Shi-lThing monastery in the west, Ralang monastery in the south, RumsTegs monastery in the east, Pho-dang monastery and Phen-bZang monastery in the north. The present position of the above six monasteries may be described as below for the benefit of those interested :

Pemayongtse monastery is located on the hill top of Gyalshing town, the present west District Head Quarter, and near the recently built Tourist Lodge of Sikkim. The monastery has undergone various repairs and renovations from time to time and present building was

* Reprint 'SHUNYATA' Vol. 1. No. 1. 1977, Sikkim Buddhist Accociation, Gangtok.

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thoroughly repaired and renovated during 1960-70. A special mention may be made of a heavenly structure called 'Zangdok-dPal-ri', a wooden structure built and installed on the top floor of the monastery. It is a wonderful and artistic work worth seeing and is a masterpiece of Rev. Duzgzin Rinpoche of Pemayangtse who solely worked on it for a period of 5 years. The total strength of lamas in this monastery is 108 and the main ceremonial grand puja of the monastery is held in the last week of the 12th month, according to Tibetan calendar, with lama dances for two days every year.

bFra-Shi lThing monastery is located in between the hills of Pema yongtse and Ralong. This place is believed to be the centre of Sikkim from the religious point of view. On this heart shaped wonderful hill top, there are two main buildings called Chogyal lhakhang and Guru lhakhang. Chogyal Lakhang is the main monastery of Tashiding built originally in the 17th century. This is the monastery in which the famous Holy Water is opened for public audience once in year on the 15th of 1st Tibetan month, which usually corresponds to March. The Chorten Tongwarangdrol, the most famous Chorten of Sikkim, renovated about three years ago is also located at this holy place.

Ralang monastery located near Rabangla Tea Estate in the South District, originally, was the first monastery of Kargyutpa sect established in Sikkim, during the reign of the 4th Chogyal of Sikkim, Chogyal hGyurmed Namgyal. The existing building of the monastery was recently dismantled and the Government have already started its reconstruction.

Rumtek monastery was originally built during the reign of Chogyal Gyurmed Namgyal and follows the same sect as that of Ralang monastery, Karma Kargyut. This monastery, situated just below the now famous Rumtek monastery 'Dharma Chakra Centre' of H.H. the Gyalwa Karmapa, the Supreme Head of Kargyutpa sect of Buddhism, was reconstructed a few years ago.

Phodang monastery located in the North-District, about 40 Km. away from Gangtok as old as Ralong and Rumtek monasteries. This monastery also belongs to Kargyutpa sect of Buddhism. The present monastery building is in delapidated condition and is under the process of reconstruction.

Phensang monastery was originally built in 1721. This monastery is situated in the North District near Phodang monastery, about 30 Km. away from Gangtok town. This monastery was gutted by fire in 1947 and the present building is a recently reconstructed one. This monastery follows red sect of Buddhism 'rNyingma'.

To sum up, the monastic establishments in Sikkim have played, and to some extent still play, an important part in the welfare of the Sikkimese Buddhist people. Till the recent popularity of modern education in Sikkim the monasteries were the only institutions imparting education and lamas the only teachers. At present, however, the monasteries fulfil the religious and spiritual needs of the people as modern education has taken over the function of vocational preparation. In future the monasteries in Sikkim might attract Buddhist scholars from out-side and thus acquire a new significance.