

Chapter VII

7. Bhutia Women In The Realm Of Buddhism:

Buddhism was founded in the 6th century B.C. in India by an Indian Prince called Siddhartha Gautam, who belonged to the Sakya royal family ruling at Kapilavastu situated on the foothills of Himalayas in Eastern India. It emerged as a reaction to Brahminism, which had over time degenerated due to the absorption of many meaningless and unnecessary rituals and practices. Infact a number of movements had started in India against this trend in this period besides Buddhism, such as the Nirgranthas (Jainism), the Agivaka Sect and so on. However out of all this it was only Buddhism, which managed to take firm roots not only in India but also abroad in other Asian countries such as Sri Lanka, Tibet, Burma, China, Korea, Japan etc. This was primarily due to great missionary zeal of the Buddhist Sangha, which was supported by some of the greatest rulers of India who became great followers of Buddhism such as Mauryan Emperor Ashoka, the Kushana Emperor Kanishka, and the Pushyapati Emperor Harsha Vardhana etc. It was due to this great missionary zeal that Buddhism even after its eventual decline in India continued to take great strides abroad.

7a. Spread of Buddhism In Bhot:

The precise period of spread of Buddhism in Bhot is not known and recorded. A humanistic form of religion called “BHYON” was practised in Bhot and Buddhism was opposed to “Bhyonism”, which professed sorcery, black magic and witch craft. According to the tales and legends that are narrated, Buddhism was opposed by the people and lay dormant for several years. Buddhism would not have taken root in Bhot if it was not encouraged by King Srongchen Gyampo who ruled Bhot in the 7th century (627 – 650 A.D). Srongchen Gyampo was the first known Bhutia King who unified the

nomadic barbaric tribes into one nation and established a kingdom, the boundaries of which extended far and wide and was bigger than present day Tibet. During his reign, he deputed sixteen Tibetan men to India to learn Sanskrit language. Among them one named, Thon-mi-Sambhota mastered 108 languages of India. When he went back the King took him as his Guru. Thon-mi-Sambhota invented the Tibetan Script and the first Tibetan book Mani-Kabum (100000 precious instructions text) was written. In order to popularize Buddhism and make it acceptable to the people he incorporated Bhyonist practices into Buddhism and vice versa. He patronized the new religion and declared it a state religion. Buddhism provided cohesion and uniformity among the people by inculcating worship of a common God.

The process of incorporation of Bhyonism into Buddhism or the synthesis of two faiths as one, set out by King Srongchen Gyampo culminated with the arrival of Guru Padmasambhava during the reign of King Ralpachen (755-797 AD). Later King Trisong Deutsan who was a devout Buddhist started devoting his time in the preservation of Buddhism. To construct a monastery called "Samye" near Lhasa he invited a famous scholar from Nalanda University called Shanta Rakshita. Tibet at that time was filled with evil spirits and what ever was constructed during day time was destroyed at night by these evil spirits. Shanta Rakshita did not have the power of controlling these evil spirits but he said that there was a Tantric master called Padmasambhava in India who could control these evil spirits. King Trisong Deutsan immediately dispatched a delegation to invite the Guru. Guru Rimpoche came through Nepal and subjugated all evil spirits. Before taking the construction work of the first monastery in Tibet, Guru Rimpoche advised the king to be friends with the Serpentine King of Manasarovar Lake, which in

Tibet is called Tso-Mapham. The Serpentine King blessed the land of Tibet with abundant Gold.

After Trisong Deutsan, King Tri-Ralpachen took over the reigns. He was a military genius but also a devout Buddhist. He pursued the vigorous policy of imposing Buddhism but the people resented this. As a result he was assassinated by his own brother named Langdarma. King Langdarma was a puppet in the hands of the “Bhyonists” and he made an effort to reverse the whole process of change brought about by his predecessors. Buddhist monasteries along with Vinaya part of Buddhism were destroyed. Later King Langdarma was also assassinated by a Buddhist Monk. The assassination of King Langdarma marks a turning point in the history of Bhot. As a result, Tibet disintegrated into petty kingdoms and remained under anarchism till Sakyapas became the actual ruler of Tibet in 1252.

Legend says that Guru Rimpoche visited Sikkim in the 8th century. It is said that he mentions 24 “Hidden Lands” known as “Beyul”[*s Bas-yul*] for the benefit of the future generation of Sikkim and regarded Sikkim as the most important and holiest of them all. The name ‘Beyul Demajong’ *sbas yul 'bras mo gshongs* was given by him to this land and it is also said that he hid five hidden chambers of treasure under the snowy peaks of Mt. Khangchendzonga[*Gangs-can mdzod-Inga*] which is known as house of five treasures. However, the actual foundation of Buddhism in Sikkim was laid by the three great Nyingmpa Lamas Gyalwa Lhatsumchenpo, Kathod Ridzin Sangpo, and Ngadak Sempa Gheno who while entering through three different directions according to the prophecy in religious books consecrated the first king of Sikkim Chogyal Phuntsong Namgyal at Yuksum Norbugang in 1642. Since then Buddhism has flourished in the Land of Sikkim.

Buddhism developed into two schools, Hinayana and Mahayana indicating separate approaches to the questions of Nirvana or Salvation. The Hinayana school believes in the teachings of Buddha in its original and pure form and refused to make changes. The Mahayana school on the other hand believed in synthesis and adjustment and hence incorporated other beliefs. The form of Buddhism, which is practiced in Sikkim, is the Mahayana Buddhism, also called Vajrayana.

Religion is an almost universal and pervasive institution in human society. Every religion involves certain ideas or belief and certain observances, which may be positive or negative. According to Durkheim (1954), "A religion is a unified system of belief and practices relative to sacred things that is things set apart and forbidden." Durkheim explains religion in terms of its social functions, which according to him has five aspects: these are experiential, ritualistic, ideological, intellectual and finally consequential. Experiential aspect takes care of the emotional side, ritualistic aspect deals with the specific practices expected or followed, ideological aspect is actual belief held, intellectual aspect covers the knowledge of basic tenets of faith and finally consequential aspect deals with secular aspects of religious belief.

Festivals and rituals are also an important aspect of religion. A ritual (*shapten, zhabs-brtan*) may be defined as a prescribed way of performing religious acts that is of praying, singing, dancing, making sacrifices or preparing offerings. Festivals and rituals may be divided into the following categories. First the religious festivals and the ceremonies - rituals which are associated with them. Second, there are rituals and ceremonies, which centre about individual life that mark such occasions as birth, naming, puberty, marriage, illness and death. These are often called 'rites of passage'. Third, there are 'rites of intensification', that is, rituals and ceremonies that mark occasions or crises

in the life of the community, such as need for rain, defense against an epidemic or pestilence, preparation for planting, harvest, and the initiation of communal hunting or fishing activities (Beals and Hojjer, 1971).

In Sikkim, the ritualistic aspect of religion is meticulously followed. Rituals may concern the individual, the couple, the household members or the patrilineage. All the rituals are attended by atleast one member of the family and some amounts of money, chang (a drink made from millets) or rice are offered. The amount of money and the name of the donors are inscribed in separate registers. Every household maintains two registers, one for weddings and other for funerals. These registers are referred to and a higher donations are given on similar occasions to other families. However, community Buddhist rituals over the time have diminished but household rituals held for marriage or funerals are attended by everyone. Even those who do not have a friendly relationship in normal course also make the prescribed contribution on such occasions. It is worth mentioning that these rituals are expensive and many would not be able to hold them if these contributions are not made. Thus the Bhutias keep meeting at the weddings and funerals and make contributions as much as possible. Besides, this also generates a sense of solidarity and equality among Bhutias. However, these rituals have undergone changes over the years. Some of the important rituals are as follows:

7b. Rituals:

7b (i) Birth

One or two weeks after birth, the Piakay (Bar-chad) is held to welcome the child. No special rituals are involved at Piakay, sometimes a lama may be invited to recite a purification prayer. Piakay means to give chicken and generally, a chicken is brought along with clothes and money for the new born.

7b (ii) Marriage

Marriage consists of four steps: Khachang, Nangchang, Nyen and Tonglen (details given in chapter III). Bhutia's believe that a person inherits his bones from his paternal side and flesh from the maternal side and people sharing the same bones cannot marry while it is possible to marry someone with same flesh (sha-Bones, ru-flesh). A man can marry his parallel cousin on his mother's side by a gap of seven generations separating them. However, these days marriage within three generations is accepted. The traditional form of marriage requires the groom to work in the house of the father –in-law for two years until the marriage is finalized. These days, people follow simple steps in marriage. The 'bride price' or Rinzo (details in chapter III) again varied in parts of Sikkim depending upon the economic conditions of the family. The most common form of marriage followed these days is to combine the second and third step into a single step, which is held at the girl's place followed by the last stage when the girl is received in the groom's house.

7b (iii) Rituals associated with constructing a new house:

Rituals for constructing a house are held in three stages. The first two stages are meant to help the family financially and the third is held after the house is completed. The lama performs a purification ceremony after the house is constructed.

7b (iv) Rituals performed while joining the monastery:

In Sikkim, there is a tradition that one son is to a monastery to sent to be a lama for purely religious reasons. Earlier the brightest son was sent to the monastery but these days generally the weaker one is sent. The initiation (*sgrugs beug*) is ideally done between fifteen and twenty years of age, although it may be done anytime. Before initiation, the head is shaved and a patch of hair is left on the head. The shaving is mixed

with rice and offered at the altar, chanting that the lama (child) is now joining the three jewels of Buddha, Dharma and the Sangha. The lama student is referred to as *chopo*, or a man of Dharma.

7b (v) Ritual performed during illness and death:

A number of rituals or *shapten* are performed when a person falls ill until he recovers or till he dies. On these occasions, the other households make financial contributions. These contributions are inscribed in the family register so that it may be reciprocated later. Rituals associated with a person's death are also very elaborate, as the death of a person is the most important rites de passage.

7c. Buddhist Festivals Of Sikkim:

Festivals also constitute another important aspect of religion. Since the Bhutias are Buddhist by faith, they observe the following Buddhist festivals:

7c (i) Losar:

Losar is the Tibetan New Year. It is observed on the 1st day of the 1st month of the Tibetan calendar. This year it is the Dog year (2006). This is also celebrated by many other communities belonging to Himalayan Buddhism as well. On the 29th day of the last month of the passing year people drink a special gruel called "Guthuk" and throw out an effigy called "Gulued" to ward off the misfortunes of the past. At the end of the New Year celebration on 3rd or the 5th day, people worship the local deities by erecting prayer flags to enhance their good luck and fortune in the coming year. In Sikkim the royal family, number of aristocratic families and a few other families also observe Losar.

7c (ii) Saga Dawa:

It is known as known as the Triple blessed festival. Saga Dawa is observed on the full Moon day of the 4th month of lunar calendar. It was on this day three of the most

important events of Lord Buddha's life occurred. On the day of Saga Dawa Buddha took birth at Lumbini, attained Buddhahood at Bodhgaya and attained Mahaparinirvana at Kusinagara. In Sikkim, this festival is observed with great pomp and show. A grand procession is taken out in the market by various Buddhist organizations in which students carry the holy pustaks of '*Kagyur*' or the Teachings of the Buddha that are translated and preserved in the Tibetan language.

7c (iii) Drukpa Tsheshi:

Drukpa Tsheshi means the 4th day of the 6th month of Tibetan calendar. It was on this day that the Buddha gave his first teaching on the Four Noble truths to his first five disciples at the Deer Park near Sarnath in Uttar Pradesh. This is also known as the 'turning of the first wheel' of Dharma by Buddha. In Sikkim people go to the Buddhist monasteries to offer fruits and butter lamps to the God and pray.

7c (iv) Guru Rimpoche's Trungkar Tshechu:

This is the birth anniversary of Guru Padmasambhava, the great Indian Pandit who established Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet in the 8th century and blessed Sikkim. Guru Rimpoche is the patron saint of Sikkim. He named this holy land as the "Hidden Land of Beyul Demojong". This festival falls on the 10th day of the 6th month of the Tibetan calendar. On this day a procession is made from Deorali Chorten to the Palace Tsuklakhang (Places in Gangtok, Sikkim) in which a statue of Guru Rimpoche is carried.

7c (v) Pang Lhabsol:

It is celebrated on the 15th day of the 7th month of the Lunar Calendar to worship the Guardian deities of the land headed by Lord Khangchendzonga [*Gangs-can mdzod-Inga*]. It is observed as a festival of unity to commemorate the oath of blood brotherhood between Thekong Tek, the Lepcha Chief, and Khye Bumsa the Minyak prince at Kabi

Longtsok, North Sikkim, in which the Guardian deity of Khangchendzonga was invited as the witness. This festival is observed with grand festivity in front of the statues of unity at Gangtok by all communities.

7c (vi) Lhabab Duechen:

This festival is celebrated on the 22nd day of the 9th month of Lunar Calendar. It is believed that after giving sermon to his mother, the Buddha descended down to the earth on this day from the heaven of the thirty-three gods.

7c (vii) Kagyed Dance:

This is a form of Lama Dance that is performed on the eve of the Sikkimese New Year or Losoong to ward off the misfortunes of the passing year. Kagyed dance is performed by the Lamas in the monasteries.

7c (viii) Losoong:

Losoong is the Sikkimese New Year, which falls in the 1st week of the 11th Lunar month. Bhutias call it as Losoong while the Lepchas call it as Namsoong both of which means the observance of the New Year. It is celebrated with great festivity. Archery competitions and grand cultural shows are organized every year at Gangtok. Lepchas make their special merriment by gathering at Sanklang in North Sikkim.

7c (x) Nyenpa Guzom:

Nyenpa Guzom means the accumulation of 9 bad lucks. It lasts for 12 hours between the 6th and 7th day of the 11th month. It is believed that no auspicious works should be done during this period.

(Source: *Ecclesiastical department of Sikkim*)

7d. Religious position of Women:

Man is in constant search for the purpose and meaning of his life, and this search for personal immortality has made religion a paramount force in most societies. Religion is therefore an essential part of social machinery. Its social function as well as its contribution in the formation and maintenance of social order is of great importance.

Majority of the Bhutias of Sikkim are Buddhists by faith, and some have been converted to Christianity. Religion is a regulating force in Bhutia society with many rituals. They are of extreme importance in the life of an individual and they are significant determinant of a person's religious position in society.

Religion has questioned the spiritual purity of women and has discouraged them from pursuing a religious life. Even where women have been accepted in the religious order like Christianity and Buddhism, the highest truths are reserved for men (Giele and Smock, 1977). The major exception of defining women as spiritually equal to that of men comes in the pagan religions of prehistoric Japan, pharaonic Egypt and pre-colonial Ghana. These religious systems are life affirming rather than world denying and have accepted the importance of sexual relation. They have elements of fertility worship and do not distinguish between spiritual worth of men and women. Women are not excluded from communal worship and often hold significant religious offices (Giele and Smock, 1977).

Women's place within Buddhism has proven to be a fertile area of investigation and there is some literature that discusses the position of women in Buddhism but just analysis confined to the literary sphere does not give us the exact position of women. The role of women in Buddhism can be studied from a multi dimensional perspective. What position did women occupy in religious and secular life, before and after establishment of

Buddhism in Sikkim? Does Buddha's teaching give women a place lower than men? What were the events that resulted in the establishment of Bhikkhunis order? Did they enjoy any high position in the religious realm?

A retrospection of these questions will give us an insight into the religious position of Bhutia women in Sikkim.

7d (i) Pre-Buddhist position of women:

The pre-Buddhist position of women was very low. Generally, women were looked as being inferior to men. Their freedom was extremely limited and they had to be under the care of their parents before marriage and under their husbands after marriage. The son was considered the hope of the family and the daughter a trouble, because the males had to take the responsibility of looking after her. Some idea of their position can be got from the Manu-Smriti, popularly known as the "Laws of Manu"; this work describes the duties of women as follows:

By a girl, by a young women or even by an aged one, no work must be done independently, even in her own house. In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband, when her lord is dead to her son, women must never be independent (Laws of Manu, V, 147-8). The women were prevented from performing religious rites and the knowledge of Vedas was kept away from her. Altekar,(1987) mentions that, in early history man is seen excluding women from religious services almost every where because he regarded her as unclean, mainly on account of her periodical menstruation. The principle of the vedic-upanishadic philosophy was 'purusha' and this justified the exclusion of women from social and spiritual activity. Although there was an idealization of motherhood and domestic duties were given to her so that she

would be occupied (Altekar, 1987). This low position of women continued till Buddhism came to the society in the 5th Century B.C.

7d (ii) Position of women at the time of Buddha:

Buddha did not campaign for the liberation of Indian womanhood, but he stressed upon individual effort for it. Buddha was a great social reformer, a believer in the equality of all human beings, a democrat and his efforts for the emancipation of women and lower castes created a sort of social revolution in society (Nehru, 1960).

According to Buddha, woman is an indispensable component of the society; she plays a constructive role both as a mother and wife. He did not consider the birth of a daughter as a sign of misfortune. This is apparent from one of the incidents, when King Pasenadi of Kosala lamented on the birth of his daughter, Buddha pacified him by saying good daughters are as good as good sons. During the Buddhist epoch, women came to enjoy more equality and greater respect. According to Horner (1975), "under Buddhism, more than ever before, she was an individual in command of her own life until the dissolution of the body and less of a chattel, to be respected if she lived through and on a man". The old complete dependence, in which the wives were in control of the husbands were gradually vanishing. In patriarchal societies, the desire for a male offspring was very strong because only a son could carry out the funeral rites and his presence was required for the continuance of patrilineage. Earlier, in Hinduism, even the law allowed a sonless wife to be superseded by a second one. However, in Buddhist society, the funeral ceremony was very simple and could be performed by a widow or daughter and a son's presence was not compulsory. Any one present at the spot could perform those rituals. Therefore, the need of having a son for these purposes were not felt and the birth of a daughter was not a cause of grief. The egalitarian ideals of Buddhism were against the

universal ideology of masculine superiority (Nakai, 2003). The doctrines of Karma and Rebirth, one of the fundamental tenets of Buddhism, has been reinterpreted to prove the inherent superiority of the male. The Law of Karma supports the birth of a 'male' as one's good Karma and that of a 'female' as bad in previous birth. Thus, the subordination of women is given a religious sanction.

Buddha's injunctions about the marriage were bilateral. He believed that the marital relationship is about reciprocation to each other with similar rights and obligations. Therefore, ideally in Buddhism marriage is contract between equals. Even matters like divorce, inheritance of property were entirely regulated by social processes. In the Sigalovada Sutra which deals with domestic duties, Buddha did not lay code of domestic jurisprudence but emphasized the principle of reciprocity, just as wife has duties prescribed towards the husband so has the husband towards wife.

Buddha did not restrict educational opportunities of women. He gave Dharma to both men and women. In the beginning, Buddha was not in favour of admitting women as Nuns, not because he was against women, but he thought women while performing their household duties itself can attain salvation. Buddhist doctrine of rebirth asserts that gender can change over successive transmigrations. Thus in the samsaric sense there is no male or female, but only a single Karmic stream. He believed Salvation had nothing to do with gender, because Dharma is non-gendered, and sex did not make the path easy or difficult. Buddha used the generic term 'manussa' rather than 'purisha' because his spiritual message was a universal one.

7d (iii) The Order of Bhikkhunis:

The position of women in Buddhism is very ambiguous. Narasu (1948) mentions that, “man and women are placed by Buddha on the same footing of equality”. Buddha at first denied the entry of women into the Sangha, but this does not show his view against women. He believed that women have the same capacity of enlightenment as men and she can achieve salvation by performing her household duties. The order of Bhikkhunis is often regarded as a crucial parameter for the evaluation of the position of women in Buddhism. Every religion guards its innermost sanctum and the doors of this sanctum are barred to women. In Buddhism also the Sangha is considered as a core of the sanctum. Buddha established the order for Bhikkhus (monks) a few months after his enlightenment and the order for Bhikkhuni (nuns) was established only after five years. Buddha agreed to admit the nuns after repeated requests from his mother Mahaprayapali Gautami. Horner (1975) mentions that Gautam never said that women cannot attain Nirvana. He said, “And be it women, be it man for whom such chariot doth wait, by the same ear into Nirvan’s presence shall they come”.

The establishment of Bhikkhu order is considered as something revolutionary in religious history. It is the first time we see that a body of men coming under a strict discipline not discharging a priestly function, all earnestly engaged in seeking a way of release. The extension of the monastic principle to women was even more revolutionary. Involvement of women in the religious life has mostly been either non-existent or dubious. However, Buddhist order being a monastic order took an unfavourable attitude towards women. Buddha’s decision to sanction the establishment of an order for women was marred by special rules, which were imposed on the Bhikkhunis. These rules, which were later incorporated in the Bhikkhuni Vinaya, can be summarized as follows:-

1. Bhikkus are always to have precedence over Bhikkhunis in matters of salutation etc., irrespective of any other consideration.
2. Bhikkhunis could not observe the annual retreat in a district where there are no Bhikkhus.
3. Bhikkhus had to set the dates for Bhikkhunis uposatha ceremonies.
4. Confessing transgression by Bhikkhunis had to be done before assembly of both the Bhikkhus and Bhikkhunis.
5. Certain judicial processes in the case of Bhikkhunis had to be undertaken by both the Sanghas.
6. Uposampada initiation of Bhikkhunis should be given by the Bhikkhu Sangha as well.
7. A Bhikkhuni should never abuse a Bhikkhus.
8. Bhikkhus can officially admonish but not vice-versa.

(Source, Silva de, 2003)

These rules were misinterpreted by various scholars. Some of these rules were framed from the point of view of the security of the nuns (eg. Rule No.-2). In the starting it appeared that Buddha made the nuns dependent on the monk. But it may be possible to rationalize why he did so, because Buddha had already delivered teachings to the monks, and in place of repeating it again, he preferred women to consult and get knowledge from monks. (eg. Rule 3 and 6). However Rules 7 and 8 cannot be justified on any ground and were very humiliating. The seniority in the Sangha is on the basis of number of years a person has spent there, but a Bhikkhuni had always to pay respect to any Bhikkhu who was junior to her. The Bhikkhuni could rank lower in formal position but she could be more spiritually advanced than the Bhikkhus (monk). Therefore, according to Falk (1984)

“At the root, the major problem of the women’s order probably rested in the Buddhist tradition’s inability to affirm completely the idea of women pursuing the renunciant’s role”. Since the order of Bhikkhuni is the factor which determines the religious position of women, it is also studied in context with the Bhutia women in Sikkim .For this the Taktse Ani Tshamkhang was studied.

7d (iv) Taktse Ani Tshamkhang:

Taktse ani tshamkhang and Ani Tshamkhang also known as Ugyen Choekhorling are one of the nunneries of Sikkim. In the present study, Taktse ani tshamkhang was selected to observe the position of Bikkhuni in the nunnery that may give a picture of religious position of Bhutia women.

It is said that on the ruins of a Tshamkhang belonging to a nun named Ani Bhumo there existed a six roomed Tshamkhang There came the present small Tshamkhang (according to a record dated 08.08.80). The same record says that once there existed a two-roomed Tshankhang belonging to a meditator named Rongnek Tshampa Chopel, which later on was taken care of by a nun named Ani Bhumo after his death. Then in 1959 (the Earth hog year), it was given to Ani Dhanchoe Dolma. Near this Tshamkhang, there once existed the ruin of a hermitage belonging to a meditator named Taktse Ajo.

According to another report submitted by Ani Dhamchoe Dolma to the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department on 16.01.80, her late Father named Shangda Palchen Rimpoche was born in Ladakh and went to Tibet in 1956. In 1957 he along with 10 nuns came to Sikkim and as per the wishes of the Queen mother of Sikkim they constructed a Tshamkhang nearby the Tshamkhang of Lingthok Ajo (a famous hermit of Sikkim). In 1966, they shifted from upper Taktse to lower Taktse. This Tshamkhang originally belonged to Rongnek Tshampa Chopel and later it was renovated by Ani Bhumo by

selling her own ornaments in which all the public of Rongnek rendered their assistance by transporting construction materials like timber. Ani Bhumo continuously meditated in the same Tshamkhang for 10 years. Before she shifted to Rongnek Nyamo Lhakhang she offered the Tshamkhang to Lingthok Ajo, with permission from Ani Bhumo Lingthok Ajo who donated the same to the present nunnery.

Routine:

There are 30 nuns in residence here, the majority being between 20 and 70 years of age and one under 12 years. They hail from different parts of Sikkim and some are from Bhutan. The task of administration is taken by the senior nuns and rest assumes responsibility turn wise for functioning of the nunnery. The day begins at 3 A.M. with prayers being offered to protective deity Tara. These prayers last till 6 A.M., after which there is break for one hour to eat something. From 8 A.M. to 11.30 A.M. there is a time for meditation. After lunch there is again further recitation of Tara prayers till 4 P.M. 6 P.M., to 7 P.M. is again reserved for meditation. This is the routine of senior nuns. The other nuns rise at 4 A.M. and participate on a rotating schedule of kitchen and maintenance. Since there is no formal study programme, the senior nuns serve as teachers to younger ones and teachings are also received from visiting Lamas. Most of the studies revolve around the basic philosophical texts. Each nun takes a certain number of lines for memorization and recitation. Although the daily schedule is adhered to, there are occasions for prayers, rituals and recitation of texts. Some of the nuns here specialize in rituals to Tara and other dedicational deities. They are requested by the members of the community to perform these rites and donations are made for this. There are plans for enlarging the nunnery and long range goals include establishing a study programme

which would help to achieve a healthy balance of Buddhist studies and actual meditation experience.

In daily practice, the Anis concentrate on Dharma practice consisting of study, chanting and meditation. Emphasis is placed on the memorization of text, with little attention given to mastering the philosophical topics. As a result, very few Anis become qualified as instructors and are devoted to the meditation and liturgical practices. On this aspect of the nuns, Paul (1979) stated that “the nuns seem not to have been a significant part of the students body of the great Buddhist universities which were the central gem in the crown of the monk’s order, an order which was extensive, prosperous, and productive of extraordinary thought and art”.

With a few minor variations, the gazetteer of Sikkim (1894) recorded the same hierarchy of the nuns as that of the monks

<u>SL.NO.</u>	<u>RANK</u>
1.	Dorjee-Lopen
2.	Dor-chung (officiating head)
3.	Geydol (Chief Manager)
4.	Omze-Tipa (Manager)
5.	Chutempa (In charge of nuns)
6.	Ochumpa (officiating nun)
7.	Chenzipa (officiating nun)
8.	Nyepo
9.	Chinyel (Kitchen In charge)
10.	Kunyel (Lamp Caretaker)
11.	Tongpa (Conch Shell Blower)

The Taktse ani Tshamkhang does not have a Dorjee Lopen and the Omze-Tipa is the highest rank here. The rank of the Dorjee Lopen is reserved for a lama (monk). However, here there is an Ani -gyambo who teaches how to fast and the Karpochhagye which is the course of Mani Mantras invoking the deity chen-re-zig. The Taktse ani tshamkhang has also started with its meditational centre a year back and the Ani- gyambo is in retreat here.

7e. Bhutia Women and Buddhism:

Religion, even though an amorphous variable is an important source that shapes the position and status of women and gives them an identity in the society.

Religious life is open to Bhutia women but there is very little information about the circumstances under which they opt for monastic life. During the interview sessions, it was observed that most of the women, with a few exceptions who have become Bhikkhusni (Ani) were not driven by faith and religious aspirations as frequently cited, but they were often driven by personal tragedies, illness, loss of parents or even economic problems. However, after they joined the nunnery they followed Dharma. In theory, enlightenment is available to men and women without discrimination in the Buddhist text but there are Bhuddist prayers, which give an impression that a male birth is preferable to that of a women. The path of spiritual enlightenment in Buddhism is very arduous and lengthy and with limited disciplinary opportunities. Women's progress and efforts are truncated. The opportunities, meditational forms and institutional structures which are available to laymen and monks are however not available to the Anis. There is also unevenness in institutional governance and the disciplinary rules, which govern the monastic order treat nuns as second-class citizens (The eight special rules). When asked a

very senior Ani in the Taktse Monastery whether these rules could be changed or modified, she replied, “There is no way these rules can be changed”, She said, “we are women and we are subordinate to the monks, just saying OM MANE PADME HUN is enough for me”. It is accepted that the eight disciplinary rules which were laid down by Gautama Buddha at the time of admission of first group of women as nuns are still operating as a normative guide in the Buddhist world. The nuns have to pay homage to a monk, regardless of how senior or junior he is. They are instructed by a monk and they cannot reprimand a monk, but he always can.

Feminists have pointed out that in the biological difference of the women lies her spiritual potential. There is connectivity between women and nature because women’s cycle of menstruation, birth, menopause, and the cycle of life and death are related. Religion fulfills deep psychic needs and enables women to bear life’s sufferings and cope up with them. Therefore, at a personal level the spiritual phenomenon helps to create conditions for the religious phenomena at social level. Women like their male colleagues are capable of receiving titles and status, which signifies their spiritual enlightenment but these are often withheld for the women. During interviews, Anis at Taktse were asked that why are there no venerated nuns in Sikkim whereas in Tibetan Anis like the Abbottess of Sam-ding (bsam-ding) and Ani Lochen hold a good position equal to a venerated monk. They answered that women could never reach the level of a monk because of the menstrual cycle.

The biased attitude can also be observed in the case of donations that are made to the nunnery. There is a general feeling that merit accruing from a donation to the Sangha of a monk is more than that occurring from a donation to the Sangha of Anis. The female renunciants do not get material support the way the male renunciants receive.

Leslie (1983) gathered that women are not given more prestige and importance in religious roles because of the tension between asceticism and eroticism in religion. Asceticism is possible for men because they can give up the world after being involved in procreative purposes. A man can practise seminal retention while a woman cannot control her bodily secretion. Thus, men have greater spiritual religious potential.

Religious position of common Bhutia Women

In early times, women participated in religious rituals and rites as passive partners. Women tried to fill up the vacuum created by men by taking up rituals because men were withdrawing from ritual performance under the influence of modernization. Bhutia women believe in God as all powerful and divine, one who controls the destiny of man and they follow the traditional concept of religion like performance of rituals. This can be interpreted as a quest for equality by women in the religious sphere besides equality in other spheres. However, there is an element of tradition and modernity co-existing in Bhutia society of Sikkim. Even though majority of them believe in God, some of them question the traditional ideas, which are perpetuated by men and result in the subordination of women. For example, why is a nun inferior to a monk? Why is menstruation impure? However, these discussions just remained confined to the four walls of the house. For Bhutia women, aspects of religion like festivals are of significance because these bring a new element in their home and their main sphere of activity. Women seem to have more knowledge about the festivals than men because they are the tradition bearers of the family and society. Festivals are also an occasion for them to interact with other women and they use this opportunity for self-expression.

A common Bhutia woman is not aware of the religious disabilities faced by the Nuns (Anis). A modern Bhutia woman feels no grievance for being deprived of the right

to become a nun. Women feel that they have nothing to gain by becoming re-eligible to attain spiritual salvation. They feel that in modern day's education, acquisition of economic rights and independence are more important so they feel no initiation for the restoration of religious rights and privileges.

On the basis of the questions asked to find out the religious position of common Bhutia women it was observed that Bhutia women had a low religious position. Even during performance of the last rites, the funeral pyre of the women was eight layered as compared to the men that was seven-layered (Mondal, 1998\1999). The reason to this was they believe that women requires an extra step to reach heaven because they are considered impure. However, common Bhutia women as such did not seem to have any interest in knowing about these facts and did not consider themselves as inferior.

7f. Case Study:

1. Thubten Lhatso age 42 is from Tibet. She joined the Nunnery when she was 12 years old. Her parents were very poor so they left her at the nunnery. At that time she was not educated and did not even know the reason why her parents had left her here. Recounting her experience, what disturbed her the most was the day her head was shaved. She had her monastic education in the nunnery and the daily schedule. Was to be adhered to, punctuated by special teachings and other occasions including prayers, rituals and recitation of texts.

She feels the society does not give the Ani (Nun) the same respect they give to a monk. Her dharma is just for herself and she feels comfortable with it. She wants that Nunnery should develop into study centre, so that nuns can evolve a programme of their own which would be of their interest.

2. Pema Lhamu age 59 is from West Sikkim. She joined the Nunnery when she became a widow at 30. It was this personal tragedy which was responsible for leading her into the monastic order. In the Nunnery she found a home and a meaning for her life. She follows the schedule of the nunnery and also fasts. She however, never thinks about her religious position. She feels Dharma is an individual affair and everyone should find their own path of spiritualism. One thing which does affect her is that Anis (Nuns) are generally not called for performing any of the prayers by people and they always want a monk. She wants to become proficient in funeral rites because that will give her the ultimate renunciation.

* Names of the respondents have been changed

7g. Summary:

Religion continues to be understood in rather narrow terms related closely to the existence of a divine being. In conclusion, apart from spiritual attainments, the Sikkimese Buddhist Nunneries serve as a place where women practise religion. These Nunneries also fulfil several other important needs in the lives of these Sikkimese women who have become nuns. Hence the order of nuns (Ani's) is not particularly influential in Sikkimese society.

Traditions are passed on and they are concerned with the social and cultural milieu. Although Buddhism is a tolerant and non-gendered religion, yet the values of prevailing social patriarchal system works negatively against women. They have accepted their subordination not only with their heart, but also their mind. As long as they continue to pray for male rebirth and accept menstruation as unclean, these unfortunate social views will be a hindrance in the path of their religious growth. Bhutia women do not think

about reshaping the present form of religion but accept the way it is. They have done great service to religion by preserving the old religious tradition, moral flavour and spiritual vein and these constitute a priceless heritage and men should be grateful to them for it.

However, if religion is merely internalized and lived ritualistically it becomes oppressive whereas, if religion is experienced for developing consciousness and power of mind, it leads to liberation.

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