

Chapter 7

Role of the State

Sikkim, an erstwhile Himalayan kingdom, a land inhabited by different ethnic groups, Bhutia Lepcha and Nepali, became the twenty- second state of Indian republic in 1975. It is situated in the western part of the eastern Himalayas and because of its geographical position; the state enjoys a political and strategic importance. It is encircled by three international boundaries, Nepal in the West, Bhutan in the East and China in the North. This location along the Himalayan crossroads has been, historically, both a blessing and a curse for Sikkim and its people. Due to its location, the history of Sikkim is not peaceful one. Like most states, the history of Sikkim is intertwined with the histories of its neighbours (Mullard Saul: 2011, 1).

In Sikkim during monarchial regime Tibetan Buddhism was made a state religion. Three lamas from Tibet anointed Phuntsok Namgyal as the Chogyal or king of Sikkim in 1642 and conferred the title of Chogyal meaning Dharma raja or spiritual king. During their visit one of the Nyigma Lama Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigmee while trying to convert the Animist Lepcha into Buddhist, their deity Kangchen Dzonga was added into Buddhist pantheon in order to bring the indigenous Lepchas under the Budddhist fold. Khangchen Dzonga, considered wild and untamed which was worshipped by the native Lepchas was brought under the Buddhist fold by taming the deity (Balikci, 2008:23). Further, Chakdor Namgyal the third Chogyal or king of Sikkim advocated a policy of sending each son from each family to Buddhist monastery for compulsory monastic education. Tibetan Buddhism gradually infiltrated into remote parts of Sikkim.

In the seventeenth century in the neighbouring country Tibet, Clerical Buddhism (is associated with scholarship, philosophical, analysis and monastic discipline (Balikci: 2008, 21) (Samuel: 1993) as mentioned by Samuel was not strong. In the peripheral areas of centralized Tibet, *bon* shaman along with the lamas played a pivotal role, in fact majority of the population was influenced by bonism in Tibet. Even, in Sikkim though Tibetan Buddhism became the state religion in seventeenth century, monarchy was not wealthy and strong enough to establish its influence in all parts of Sikkim. Rumtek Monastery, Phodong Monastery, Pemayangtse Monastery were the important Buddhist centre's during the Chogyal regime. Though Machong Gumpa

which falls under Barapathing during monarchical regime was the branch of Pema Yangtse Monastery, the Gumpa (monastery) did not have a direct and strong influence of the Chogyals and the monks. It was later, after the advent of higher lamas like 16th Karmapa in Sikkim and Pathing Rimponche or commonly named as Phulchung Tulku in Chochen and its surrounding areas, whose intervention affected the growth of *bon* shamanic practices in Sikkim and its adjoining areas.

Other factors like the British occupation of Sikkim which was after the conflict of 1888-89, the British imperial government of India established its direct authority over Sikkim impaired the progress of *bon* shamanic institution. When Claude White (first political officer) took up his position, Sikkim was lacking in most of the structures of modern government. Therefore, he began financing modernization initiatives such as the education of Sikkimese youths in British India and the introduction of allopathic or what is popularly known as western medicine. Missionaries and the British government of India contributed to the early development of western medicine as well as western education in Sikkim (Mckay, 25). The advent of British Indian government and an introduction of western medicine and western education, significantly changed the social outlook of the Sikkimese society. Different courses of action, an amalgamation of culture of modern western society experienced and exposed by the British imperials to the Primitive feudal Sikkimese society had a major impact on the social life of the Sikkimese people. Altogether, the diffusion of culture of modern western society, adversely affected the attitude of Lhopo people towards primitive religious institutions.

However, the major alteration in the Lhopo *bon* shamanic rites started with the visit of higher Buddhist lamas, the intervention of monarchical state of Sikkim and the policies adopted by the British imperial government in consolidating their power in Sikkim. Introduction of western medicine and setting up of dispensaries and allowing missionaries to advocate western education to the Sikkimese youth impinged on the socio-religious life of the Sikkimese people.

The influence of higher Tibetan lamas in Sikkim had a major influence in the religious belief system of the people of Sikkim. Due to its porous border as well as a strong political as well as religious connection of the Chogyals with Tibet brought many changes in the socio-political life of the people of Sikkim were brought in. Advent of Guru Rimponche, Lhatsun Chempo and later Karmapa in Sikkim had a huge

influence of Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim and it was believed by the locals that these higher lamas have either subdued or tamed the ambivalent deities residing in different parts of Sikkim and it needs to be noted that most of these ambivalent deities were the deities propitiated by the *bon* shamans of Sikkim. These deities were considered as the worldly deities who are not enlightened and some of the Buddhist lamas and the villagers said that propitiation of these deities is the main reason why illness is caused in the villages.

After the regime of the British imperial India and merger of Sikkim with mainstream India, there were major developments in Sikkim. Different parts of rural Sikkim were connected and exposed to the modern global culture. The acceptance and adaptation of the modern western culture as well as new Indian policies made Sikkim more approachable and accessible to the global world. The primitive folk culture became more vulnerable and exposed to the modern developments.

Post-merger there were religious as well as economic developments in the state of Sikkim. Coming of his Holiness Dalai lama to Sikkim and Bhutia Lhopo being conferred as the Schedule tribe of Sikkim also instigated other ethnic groups to follow Buddhist rituals. Further developments like the construction of hydel power project in Sikkim in the sacred places of Sikkim highly enraged the Sikkimese Bhutia Lhopo (Balikci: 2008, 340). Introduction of new governmental policies of providing Bhatta to the shamans. The state govt. of Sikkim now provides Bhatta (allowances) to the ritual practitioner of Sikkim in order to preserve the primitive folk culture. Though it encourages the locals to carry forward their age-old traditions but notwithstanding these policies the number of Lhopo *bon* shamans is comparatively less than the other shamans belonging to different ethnic groups in Sikkim. And it is sad to say that, only handful of Lhopo *bon* shamans are found in the few rural areas of Sikkim.

The Bhatta (allowances) is provided to the *bon* shamans of Chochen by the social welfare department of Sikkim annually. The Bhatta is given by the state to enhance and preserve and encourage the *bon* shamans to continue the folk tradition which is fading away. Contrary to the practices of the west, in the east the privilege of recognizing shamans as a psychotherapist is not there. Shamanic knowledge and their practices are not treated at par with the psycho-therapist as in the west. Infact, in east especially in India, in the tribal belt a different politics is brewing around shamans and their shamanic practices. As in India, at least in the tribal belt the main determinant of

being considered as the native or autochthonous is centered on worshipping of nature, its land and space.

7.1 Conclusion

Sikkim had always been a favorable arena for Buddhist religion to flourish. Though Sikkim after merger had tried to preserve its culture but traditional *bon* religion which is rooted in the Bhutia Lhopo community might not be able to sustain its traditional rites and rituals in days to come. Though few local protective deities propitiated by the *bon* shamans might be added in the Buddhist pantheon appeased by the local lamas of respective areas but all the deities which are propitiated by the *bon* shamans are not included in the Buddhist rendition. Hence, the essence of *bon* shamans and their practices in their community loses its meaning.