

CHAPTER - 5

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THE RELIGION (BUDDHISM)-ORIENTED SOCIETY OF SIKKIM

5.1. Structure :

The social structure of Sikkim was invariably framed on the Buddhist pattern prevailing in the Tibetan society. This structure was rightly preserved and strictly maintained till the emergence of the New Sikkim in 1975, inspite of the large number of hinduite Nepali immigration. It will not be exaggeration to say that the hinduite Nepali immigrants, who started forming the majority of the population since the beginning of this century, were not able to break this strong Buddhist structure of the Society of Sikkim and they rather compromised with it and were very much influenced by the customs and rituals of this religion. Religion lies deep in the hearts of the people and a very narrow dividing line can be observed among Buddhism and Hinduism in Sikkim.

5.2. Geography and Religion : Topography of Sikkim :

Sikkim occupies a very strategic position in view of its geographical boundaries. "Contained within the Tista basin, and isolated from India by forest clad mountains, and from Tibet by the Great Himalayan ranges, Sikkim has a distinct geographical personality, which forms the basis for recognizing it as a separate region."¹ This geographical personality must be considered as one of the important

factors for shaping the political, religious and cultural history of Sikkim. It is land-locked by Bhutan and Chumbi valley in the east, Nepal in the west, Tibet in the north and the rest of India in the south. It has an area of 7,300 square kilometres and is somewhat rectangular in shape, 113 K.M. long and 64 K.M. wide.² Though Sikkim is surrounded by some of the world's lofty mountain ranges, there are a number of passes which connected it to the neighbouring countries like Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the east and Nepal in the west.

In the north, the state stretches upto the great Himalayan range which is the watershed between Tibet and Sikkim, with four main passes - Sese-la or Dachi-la about 5,255 metres, Kangra-la (Ghongra-la) about 4,877 metres, Naku-la about 5,270 metres and Chorten Nyima-la about 5,791 metres. 'La' is the Tibetan word for a pass. In the east, the Dong-Kya range separates Sikkim and the Chumbi valley of Tibet. This range has a number of passes, most notable of which are Nathu-la and Jelep-la, just about 4,367 metres high. In the west, the Singali-la range is the boundary between Sikkim and Nepal. The 'Khang-Chen-dzonga' or the Kanchanjunga, the third highest peak in the world, is to be found in this range.³ Chia-Bhanjan pass is situated in the Singali-la range in the west.⁴

The earlier size of the kingdom of Sikkim was extended from the Arun river in the west to Taigong-la range including Chumbi valley in the east and from Thangka-la (Tibet) in the north to Kissengange of Purnea district in the south including whole of Darjeeling district.⁵

This important geographical position may be regarded as one of the reasons for making Sikkim a base for Tibetan Mahayan Buddhism by the

Tibetan Lamas. Tibet, the Lamaist Polity, was a forbidden land for the outside world. "It seems that the policy of Tibet in closing her borders to foreigners is to keep Dharma pure and free of pollution by the different religions and cultures of outsiders that could erode Dharma and bring about its complete disappearance."⁶ So it might have been thought very wisely that by expanding Mahayana Buddhism in the bordering countries like Sikkim and Bhutan, both the objects could be fulfilled. In Sikkim, then inhabited only by innocent simple Lepchas, it was easier to establish a Buddhist Kingdom as a prototype of Tibetan Lamaist polity and also to convert these aboriginal people into that religion. Hence, Sikkim would stand, as it did, as a safeguard to the Tibetan frontier, specially against the Hindu kingdom of Nepal. It should be pointed out here that the three pioneer Lamas, who first came and established Sikkim kingdom, met in a place called "Yoksum" in the west Sikkim, near the border of Nepal. The first palace of Chogyal Phunt-so was also built in Yoksum and later it was shifted to Rab-den-tse,- a little far from Yoksum, during the reign of Chogyal Ten-Sung, the second king of Sikkim.⁷ The famous monastery of Pema-Yangshi, which was strictly restricted to the Lamas of pure Tibetan descent only, was also erected a few miles away from Rab-den-tse.⁸ No doubt, the State of Sikkim, as Geoffrey Gorer has stated, "acts as an, as it were, buffer state to Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan."⁹ He has also noticed that "the State of Sikkim is well and paternally administered; the extremely precipitous nature of the whole country has rendered road-building extremely difficult, but the main mule roads into Tibet are kept up in a good state, and solid bridges have been built on these

roads."¹⁰ From this observation it can be concluded that with deliberate intention these passages between Sikkim and Tibet were maintained properly while other parts of the State of Sikkim were sealed even for the traders.

From the legendary accounts also it has been found that Sikkim was the venue of passage to some of the Buddhist scholars carrying message of Lord Buddha from India to Tibet, and also for the Tibetan monks who came to India to learn Buddhism from time to time. Guru Padma Sambhava, the founder of Buddhism in Tibet, was said to have passed through Sikkim and was regarded as the first discoverer of this hidden land.¹¹ So it will not be wrong to say that the physical feature had an important impact on establishing the religious bond between Tibet and Sikkim, which soars from the tropical jungles at the foot of the Himalayas to misty alpine valleys and where white line of prayer flags flutter beside the monasteries on the mountain ridges to mark its religious character even to-day.

5.3. People and Religion : Buddhism as the Central Axis of the Social Life :

The total population of Sikkim, according to Census of India, 1981, is 31,638 persons of different communities.¹² But the main stream of the population of Sikkim comprises three ethnic groups, viz., the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese. Besides these, there are certain other tribes who have lived in Sikkim over centuries and claim to be the local people, such as Rai, Gurung, Monger, Tamang, Sharpa, Limbu or Tsong etc.¹³ "There is a sprinkling of plains folk, who had settled in Sikkim generations ago. They form part of the business

community who live in perfect harmony and mutual understanding with the rest of the people in the state."¹⁴ But these plainsfolk have not been recognized yet as the local people of Sikkim or as Sikkimese. According to the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974, various sections of the population were divided into two principal groups - "Sikkimese of Lepcha-Bhutia origin" and "Sikkimese of Nepali origin".¹⁵ The system of this division followed the Proclamation of Maharaja of Sikkim of 1953 which for the first time introduced a State Council for the State of Sikkim and which declared that the State Council had to be constituted of "Twelve elected members, of whom six shall be either Sikkim Bhutia or Lepcha and the remaining six shall be Sikkim Nepalese."¹⁶ No doubt, the basic factor of this division was based on religions, i.e. Buddhism and Hinduism.

The large majority of the Bhutias, who came from Tibet to Sikkim are Buddhist and barring a very few Christians, the large majority of the Lepchas are also Buddhist by religion, while the majority of the Nepalese are Hindus. The Bhutias and the Lepchas are considered as belonging to the same ethnic group as they have had centuries-old contacts and brotherhood made out of marital and religious relations.¹⁷ Other tribes like Rai, Gurung, Manger, Sharpa, Tamang, etc. are included in either of these two religious groups according to the religions they profess. The Limbus or Tsongs, as the Tibetans called them, constitute the fourth major ethnic group of Sikkim and seem to have lived in Sikkim for several centuries.¹⁸ There are two different blood groups among the Limbus, known as the Kashi gotra and the Lhasa gotra.¹⁹ The batch, who came from India or Kashi several centuries

ago, are still continuing their identity as Kashi gotra and following Hinduism as their religion. The other batch, said to have come from eastern Tibet, is known as Lhasa gotra and belongs to Buddhist group. It is said that the Lepchas and the Limbus, settled in Sikkim, were the oldest inhabitants of this state.²⁰ It can evidently be proved from the name of this state, 'Sikkim'. The word Sikkim has been derived from two Limbu words 'Su' means new and 'Khim' means house of peace.²¹ As it is guessed, this name "Sikkim" might have been given to this place when the Tibetan King Phuntso was consecrated and established the new kingdom. "Curiously enough in an old map in Hamilton the place where Rab-den-tse stands is marked 'Sikhim', and it may be noted that Kirkpatrick, writing in 1793, speaks of the Town and district of 'Sookhim', and of a place Sikhem in the itinerary from Bijapore to Daling, and this place would fall somewhere near the Rungeet."²² Another opinion of the local people describes that the word 'Sikkim' was a reformed version of a Limbu bride's exclamation "Su-Him", meaning the house of happiness, while entering the house of her husband.²³ Anyhow, it has been accepted in general, that the word 'Sikkim' has originated from Limbu language which also proves the existence of the Limbus in this country from long ago.

As it has already been discussed, the next race to enter Sikkim, were the Bhutias and along with them Tibetan Mahayan Buddhism of Nying-ma sect also entered in and brought together the original inhabitants of this place under the fold of Lamaism. "Indeed, religious influences have always played a great part in the life of these people, and even to-day the Bhutias, almost without exception, are strongly

motivated by religious considerations in their daily life."²⁴

After the formation of the Buddhism-oriented kingdom in Sikkim by the Lamas, these Bhutias became the ruling class. So it was natural that the custom, language, art and culture of the ruling class would have great influence and would dominate over the whole society. To the orthodox Tibetans as well as the Bhutias, "the Buddhism is a way of functioning his life, directly or indirectly whatsoever he does he transforms it as a religious practice."²⁵ Thus the customs and rituals, festivals and ceremonies, education and cultures of the Bhutia-dominated society of Sikkim also was encircled by and with the Buddhist practice following the Tibetan pattern. Till recently Sikkim had very nominal contact with Indian plains and one would not have been surprised if many people in India had not even heard of it. "Its proximity to Tibet and the attachment of its aristocracy to Lamaist Buddhism has enabled it to develop a culture and genius which is unique even for a country of imposing diversity like India."²⁶ In the beginning the Sikkimese culture was purely Tibetan and was exclusive expression of Bhutia aristocracy influenced by the Chogyals of Tibetan origin. The language was the Tibetan, so also the manners and customs. "Religion had always been a cardinal point in the life and culture of the Sikkimese people. Under the Chogyals, Lamaist Buddhism was the most powerful force in the country which pervaded all the activities of the people."²⁷ Naturally, Lepchas and other ethnic groups who came to be incorporated into the larger Sikkim State came under its influence.

5.4. Buddhist Influence in Building Up the Character of the People :

Of course, this Buddhist structure of the society had a great impact in shaping the character of its people. Honesty, truthfulness,

fellowfeeling, hospitality etc., which constituted the basic characters of the people of Sikkim must be regarded as the outcome of their religious faith. John Claud White, the first British Political Officer in Sikkim, has written his experiences about the people of Sikkim with high appreciation : "This constant intercourse with the people gave me an insight into their character which otherwise I should never have acquired. Their hospitality is proverbial, no Sikkim man or woman ever comes before you without bringing a small offering of rice, eggs, milk or fruit, and on my tours at every village I found a little shelter of branches and green leaves erected, in which such offerings were placed along with chungas or bamboo mugs of marwa, the native beer, and I could show no more severe displeasure with the villagers than by refusing to accept their hospitality ----- unlike natives of the plains of India, with ideas on most subjects more nearly approaching our own, these hillmen in reply to inquiries told you the truth, and made no attempt to find out first what answer was likely to please you, and consequently it was possible to make friends and companions of them in a way not often feasible in the case of natives."²⁸ Even to-day, if some one travels into different parts of Sikkim, he will have the same impression as that of Claud White and must be overwhelmed by the simple, honest, religious, peace-loving people of Sikkim. To-day, when other parts of India are suffering with religious fanaticism, racialism, communalism or provincialism,- there is not a single evidence of ethnic violence or riots or mass killing or destroying the public property or so, in this nature-gifted magnificent state of Sikkim dwelt by the Buddha-minded people. "When the Buddha-mind enters deeply

enough into our hearts and is accepted with gratitude, its warmth has wondrous effect. The hard core is gradually softened by the warmth, just as the hard-frozen ice of winter melts away in spring in warm sunshine."²⁹ And the people of Sikkim, who are used to live together with several thousands monks, with humming noise of chanting prayers from several hundred Monasteries resounding in the sky, and sanctified prayer flags purifying the wind in each and every corner, a Buddha-mindedness must have its reflection on the structure of the society. What is this Buddha-mind? A story narrated by N.C. Sinha, from his personal experience, may give us an example of this Buddha-mindedness,- "I had noticed an illiterate turning incessantly the prayer wheel in her hand. I asked her what was the inscription inside and what was the meaning of the inscription. This is what the rustic woman confided : 'I cannot tell what Mantra is inscribed on the roll inside. I cannot read the Mantra as I do not even know the alphabets. I simply utter Om Mani Padme Hum : O the Jewel in the Lotus. I don't know full meaning of Om Mani Padme Hum. In this life I am born with every low abilities and I thus concentrate on this Mantra to earn merits for higher abilities in the next life. In the next life I may be able to read and apprehend this Mantra better. In the life after next, I hope to do even better and study Transcendental wisdom. In the last life before liberation I shall do away with these books and prayer wheels and even the deities and Mantras --- I shall drop all lower disciplines - then realize the Absolute. The way is long. My abilities in the present life are small but I must do the best with these abilities. I know this Mani in my hand is not the last stage into

void."³⁰ This faith, this concentration and the process of mind signify the Buddha-mind. Whoever has spent sometime among the people of Sikkim, specially dwelling in the villages, must have had the experience of this Buddha-mind flowing with pristine purity even to-day. As the Chief Minister of Sikkim, N.B. Bhandari has observed,--- "when- ever we go to villages our religious minded people only demand for making a monastery or temple in their locality."³¹

5.5. The Settlement Pattern of the New Nepali Immigrants :

The Nepalese, whom Claude White has mentioned as "Paharias", started to migrate from the neighbouring densely populated State of Nepal only from the last two decades of the last century. There was a great political encouragement of the British Government behind the settlement of the Nepalese in Sikkim. As Risley had mentioned, the policy of the British Government was that "the influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism, and the praying-wheel of the Lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman."³² But if Risley would have come to Sikkim to-day, he would have realized that his anticipation did not materialise and the 'surest guarantee' could not cast out Buddhism from this state yet. Buddhism had penetrated its long roots in the virgin soil of Sikkim over three centuries. It had great patronage from the Buddhist rulers themselves and as we have seen, all things took their colour from the faith of the rulers. So in this regard

Waddell was more correct in saying that, "Its Lamaism is so deeply rooted that, in the absence of any actively anti-Buddhist policy such as has operated in Nepal, it is unlikely to be much affected by the recent political changes, at least for many years to come."³³

Many years have passed since Waddell made this comment about British-Sikkim in 1895. In 1980 the Parishad Government of Sikkim has published its statement of achievements, which has observed that "the period under review was marked by a high standard of harmony among the ethnic groups of people, Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepalese who have developed strong bonds of friendship and fraternity over the centuries. This augurs well for the future of the state."³⁴

The Nepali settlement pattern in Sikkim, which was essentially inter-religious, inter-tribal and inter-clanish, also paved the way for a wider intercourse among them. They do not follow religion, caste and tribes to keep in a distinct air-tight compartment. "The Nepalese practised a healthy form of Hinduism which, while free from orthodoxy and bigotry of plainsmen, was freely laced with animism."³⁵ Caste system and social distances grown out of that, are not found so rigid in them. Thus the hinduite Nepali settlers did not prove themselves as anti-Buddhist as it was expected by the British ruler. Rather they adjusted themselves in the traditional pattern which was predominant in the society of Sikkim.

5.6. The Position of Buddhism Among The Nepalese :

The majority of the Nepalese, who have settled in Sikkim for over a century, are no doubt, Hindu by religion. Some tribes, who came from

north-east Nepal, such as Sharpa, Tamang, Tsongs of Lhasa gotra etc., profess Buddhism. But these Hindu Nepalese too did not prove themselves as anti-Buddhist, as was expected by the British rulers, in the long history of Sikkim since last century. Rather the perfect religious harmony among Hindus and Buddhists of Sikkim would set an example to the rest of India. His Holiness Dalai Lama, during his visit of Sikkim in 1981, also appreciated this religious harmony. Said he, "Basically all major religions of the world carry the same message, so therefore, the harmony between different religions is very important and very necessary. Fortunately, here in Sikkim, it seems you have good relations and harmony between different faiths which is very good and must be continued."³⁶

Buddhism was not unknown or new to the people of Nepal. "About 7th/8th centuries A.D. the ruling dynasties became interested in the religion, made substantial donations for erecting stupas and monasteries, but both the rulers and the common people did not give up their earlier faith in Saivism. They found in both Hinduism and Buddhism some common features, and tried to place Siva and Buddha on the same level."³⁷ The early population of Nepal consisted of many tribes like Kiratas, Licchavis, Newars etc. and many of the tribes intermingled and became Newars. The Newars are the original inhabitants of central Nepal in the valley of Kathmandu. They are a composite race of Indo-Mongoloid origin. But among other races of Nepal, specially in the North-East, the Tibeto-Burman elements are found predominant in their features, physiques and languages. "In the Nepal valley and in the city of Kathmandu one can see both the Hindu and the Buddhist

temples. To the east there is a preponderance of Buddhist monasteries and to the west of Hindu temples."³⁸ Buddhism and Hinduism had been co-existing in Nepal prior to the emergence of Sikkim as a Buddhist kingdom. As history reveals, Buddhism went to Nepal not only from India but also from the neighbour state, Tibet. "It seems that the Nepalese maintained a balance between the two religions e.g. there is a Svayambhu Purana along with a Pasupati Purana. There is also another Purana with the title Buddha Purana in which Buddha has been made an incarnation of Visnu. There were two magnificent temples, one of Svayambhunath dedicated to Adi Buddha and the other of Pasupati-nath enshrining Siva."³⁹ Mr. Fergusson, who worked on the History of Indian and Eastern Architecture, also has observed that "Vaishnava, Saiva and Buddhist religions existing side by side at the present day, and flourishing with a rank luxuriance unknown in the plains of Bengal."⁴⁰ The Newars of Nepal are divided accordingly into two groups, the Hindus are known as Sivamargi and their Buddhist fellow countrymen are called Buddhamargi.⁴¹ Thus the Nepalese, who had accommodated Buddhism in their religion from long ago, could not be hostile against it just after coming to Sikkim. Secondly, due to inter-marriage among the different communities, the religious distinction is fading away, giving birth to an admixture of Buddhist-Hindu religion in Sikkim. On survey of religions among the local people of Sikkim, one may be amused with a common answer --- "Buddhapani manchu, Hindupani manchu, i.e. I follow both Buddhism and Hinduism."

And yes, they do so. It is not a rare scene in Sikkim that the Lamas are performing some ritualistic pujas in a house of Nepali Hindu,

when there is any sickness or sufferings. "Even the Brahaman joins the other peasants, both Hindu and Buddhists in making regular contribution to the Buddhist monasteries in order that the Lamas may protect his crops from hail."⁴² Before any function or ceremony to be held in the rainy season, the organisers, whether Hindu or Buddhist, private or public, go to the weather Lama with a 'Khada' and request him to stop the rain on the particular day. Townfolks with modern education are no exception in having this habit or practice. It is very often seen that the Hindu Nepalese of high status, are going to the monasteries to take blessings from the high Lamas or to find out an auspicious day for them or to know about their future. These Buddhist Lamas are holding a very high and respected position not only among the Lepcha-Bhutia Buddhist Community but in the Hindu Nepali Community too. And an outsider in Sikkim will be thrilled to witness the colourful procession of 'Saga Dawa', i.e., Buddha Jayanti celebration, which takes place every year in Sikkim, - the procession is led by the Lamas with their traditional music played in traditional high sounding huge pipes, and drums, with multicolour prayer flags, and prayer wheels and thousands of Buddhist scriptures wrapped in silken clothes carried on the heads of the lay people both Lepcha-Bhutias and Nepalese, passing through the roads and thousands of passers-by whether Buddhist or Hindus bowing to those scriptures and offering water or snacks to the participants of that holy procession. It is, indeed, an unique occasion of integrity and harmony, displayed among the people of Sikkim, who believe, "Buddhism is one of the many religions which teaches us to be less selfish and more compassionate.

It teaches us to be humans, altruistic and to think of others in the way we think for ourselves."⁴³

5.7. Buddhist Education System in Sikkim :

The education system of Sikkim consists of two important branches, viz., Religious education and Modern English education. Modern English education was introduced in Sikkim after she became the Protectorate of the British Government in India. "In the year 1906, the first modern type of school was started at Gangtok. Education apart from religious instruction at the monasteries, was unknown before then."⁴⁴

Religious education is intended for the benefit of those who are preparing for the priesthood under the supervision of high Lamas in the monastic order. "In Sikkim, as in Tibet, the priests are made, not born. It is after severe tests in religious education in the Buddhistic scriptures that a young seeker after knowledge is admitted into the Order."⁴⁵ Even after the introduction of Modern Public Instruction System, the imparting of Buddhistic Religious Instruction had also a significant role in the administration of the Government of Sikkim. A separate chapter on this Buddhistic Religious Instruction had been assigned in the Administrative Reports of the Sikkim State for the years 1930-31, 1933-34, 1934-35 and 1935-36. The important monasteries like Pemayangshi, Ralong, Rumtek, Phodong and Phensang were endowed by the State with the Land Revenues of the Elakhas leased to them for the upkeep of the institutions in their charge.⁴⁶ There was also a "Board of Education" consisting of the distinguished people, the Chief Lama of Sikkim State and the Head Lamas of important monasteries. The

function of the Board being of an advisory nature, it would assist the Secretary-in-Charge of the Department in making decision on all important matters concerning both religious and secular education in the State.⁴⁷ It was mentioned as an outstanding event in the Administration Report of 1933-34 that the Second Maharaj Kumar was recognised as the Head Lama of Phodong monastery during the year under report.⁴⁸ Out of the State Schools, the Enchay Monastery School was solely reserved for imparting religious education. Young monks from the different monasteries in Sikkim were given religious education in Tibetan scriptures in that school.⁴⁹

The general education for the lay people was imparted according to the curriculum followed in the neighbouring Province of Bengal. The Tashi Namgyal High School was the first High School in Sikkim established in 1925 and sent its first batch for Matriculation in 1931.⁵⁰ There was no College for higher education in Sikkim till its merger in 1975. The first College, the Government Degree College, was established in Sikkim in the year 1977 affiliated to the University of North Bengal. The students from the Kazi or high status families had to have higher studies in different Colleges and Universities in India according to the specific seat quota. The system of religious education is continuing side by side the modern standard of education.

It was an unwritten law in Sikkim that every Lepcha-Bhutia family must send at least one child for Buddhist Religious education as well as to accept Monkhood in the monasteries since the reign of the 3rd Chogyal Chagdar Namgyal.⁵¹ The Buddhist parents feel blessed and

fortunate to have one of their children as a devout monk. Though this convention is not followed very rigidly at present, it is still to a great extent continuing almost unchanged. The present position of the Religious education as continuing in Sikkim, collected from the Department of Education, is mentioned below :-

- (1) There are 66 monasteries which serve as study centres for Lamas in Sikkim.
- (2) Total number of Lamas and Novices (trainees) in those Lamasaries undergoing studies is about 5,000.
- (3) 52 big and small monasteries get nominal maintenance subsidies. Grants for repair/renovation are given by the Government from time to time.
- (4) Provision for giving grant for monastic studies, which is the oldest form of education in Sikkim, has been made in the Education Sector from the year 1985-86.⁵²

For higher Buddhistic studies in Nying-ma Sect, the "Nying-ma Sheda", now converted into Sikkim Institute of Higher Nying-ma Studies at Dotapu Chorten in Deorali, already affiliated to the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University of Varanasi, is being maintained by the Government of Sikkim. Provision to give grant from the Education Department has been made from the year 1985-86. The S.I.H.N.S. runs under the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department and 50% of the inmates get stipend.⁵³

5.8. Scholarship for the Scheduled Tribe Students :

Besides the direct help to Buddhist religious education, the Government of Sikkim is providing scholarships and other facilities

to the Scheduled Tribe students most of whom belong to Buddhist Community. The rates of scholarships are as below :-

- (1) Pre-Matric Scholarships : During 1984-85, 664 Scholarships were renewed and disbursement was also completed. Fresh scholarships for 193 Scheduled Tribe students have also been sanctioned by the Government. A sum of Rs.850/- per student per year is given. The total expenditure was Rs.7,28,450/-.
- (2) Post-Matric Scholarships : This is a 100 p.c. centrally sponsored scheme. 66 scholarships were renewed during the end of 1984-85 and disbursement was also completed. Fresh scholarships to 124 students were also sanctioned and disbursement completed.⁵⁴

The rate and percentage of education, specially higher education, are also not very encouraging among upper class Hindu Nepalese. But there are no scholarships granted by the Government except scholarships of Rs.500/- per head for those students going for further studies outside the State. Education upto school level is free for all upto twelveth standard and Text Books are also supplied free of cost.⁵⁵

5.9. Custom, Culture, Festivals and Festivities :
Buddhism in the Centre of Social Activities :

The social life of a religion oriented feudal state runs within the traditional pattern. Sikkim, till 1975, was such a State, where life went on according to the rhythm of the season and was governed by the system of land cultivation and rearing of the animals. Modern scientific life-style had hardly peeped into its old feudalistic social structure till the recent past. Hence, as in other feudal societies,

religion had always been a cardinal point in the life and culture of the people in Sikkim. As the ruling class and the ruling family were devout Buddhist of Tibetan stock, the culture, custom and festivals of Sikkim grew out of that Tibetan heritage. "Those who have lived in Sikkim long enough will testify that life here is, in a sense, an ongoing festivals. In one way or the other there are festivals and festivities throughout the year. This is the reflection of the rich cultural heritage of Sikkim. A cultural heritage which combines the flamboyant aspects of Vajrayana Buddhism and equally splendid features of Hinduism with the original animist traditions of the Lepchas."⁵⁶

The equally splendid features of Hinduism and the original animist traditions of the Lepchas are, no doubt, the new additions to that deep rooted Tibetan Buddhist culture, which is still dominating as the Sikkimese culture. Thus, the booklet published by the Government also gives emphasis on this Buddhist culture above other religion, as the basis of the culture of Sikkim. It reads, "Life in Sikkim, like in the rest of India, is rooted firmly in religion. Everything a person does is related to his faith and his daily life is governed by the patterns and customs of his religion. Even nature finds itself incorporated in this belief. The Majestic Mount Khanchendzonga - earth's third highest mountain - serene, proud and burnished in the splendour of its mythology, plays a dominant role in the Sikkimese life."⁵⁷

This mountain, for the Sikkimese, is not just an example of the awe-inspiring grandeur of nature. Rather it represents the birth place of the Lepchas and is the presiding deity of Sikkim responsible for the peace and prosperity of the Mount 'Khang-Chen-dzo-nga (as it is spelt

in Tibetan), is said to be treasuries (Khang = snow range, Chen = great, dzo = treasure, nga = five) of the great snowy range. "These comprise the wealth, prosperity and destiny of Sikkim and are watched over eternally by the Snow Lion with his emerald green mane."⁵⁸ Every year a festival known as 'Pang Lhabsol' is celebrated to offer thanks and to show gratitude to Mount Kanchendzogna, the guardian deity of Sikkim, with fantastic Lama dance performed by the Lamas of Pemayangtse Monastery. It is staged in front of the Tsuk-La-Khang monastery, adjacent to the palace of the early rulers. This dance drama was initiated by Chag-dor Namgyal, the third consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim. The occasion also commemorates the signing of the blood-brotherhood between the Lepchas and Bhutias. This dance-drama is performed on the 15th day of the 7th month of the Tibetan calendar (around September).⁵⁹

The religious dance-drama performed by the Lamas are called 'Chaam'. This Chaam has become an integral part of Sikkim's culture. It is not a dance or drama in the secular sense, but should be classified as a form of worship. It might have had its origin in the Pre-Buddhist religious culture of Tibet, but it has now become an essential part of the Lamaist Buddhism. Even the lay people also take part in the Chaam. "These dramas are like mystery plays endowed with liturgical significance. Devotion to it is considered a virtue. Those who see it acquire merit as also those who encourage it in any way."⁶⁰ And "The dramas always have a Buddhist theme and sometimes taken from the Jataka tales."⁶¹

"The festivals in Sikkim are governed by a lunar calendar and as such the dates, according to the English calendar, may vary from year

to year."⁶² The Calendar of Sikkim is also adopted from Tibetan Buddhist Calendar. "The Tibetan Calendar is based on a cycle of twelve years, distinguished not by numbers but by the names of animals; the mouse, the ox, the tiger, the hare, the dragon, the snake, the horse, the sheep, the monkey, the bird, the dog and the pig. Each of the five elements, e.g., wood, fire, earth, iron and water also applies to two successive years, and in this way we arrive at a cycle of sixty years in all, called a 'Rab-Jung', in the course of which each animal is combined with each element."⁶³ The Tibetans as well as Sikkimese Bhotias mention the names of the years as Iron-Monkey year, Fire-Bird year or Water-Tiger year and so on.

All the Buddhist Festivals are declared as government holidays by the Government of Sikkim, though important festivals of other religions too are declared as holidays. The calendar of events published by the Government of Sikkim will prove the emphasis on Buddhist Festivals and the dates given below are all according to the Tibetan Buddhist Calendar with approximate months corresponding to the English Calendar.⁶⁴

Table No.1

"TOURIST FESTIVAL	:	Month of May, every year.
SAGA DAWA	:	Full Moon of the 4th month - Around early June.
DRUKPA TSESHI	:	4th day of the 6th Month - Around August.
PANG LHABSOL	:	15th day of the 7th month - Around end of August-September.
KAGYAT DANCE	:	28th & 29th days of the 10th month - Around December.
LOSOONG	:	Sikkimese New Year - Last week of November-December.
LOSAR	:	Tibetan New Year - Around February.
DASAIN	:	Month of Aswin - September-October.
ENCHEY CHAAM	:	18th & 19th days of the 11th month - Around December-January.
RUMTEK CHAAMS	:	
TSE-CHU CHAAM	:	10th day of the 5th month - Around June.
GUTHOR CHAAM	:	2 days prior to LOSAR"
Source	:	Department of Tourism, Government of Sikkim.

In the above mentioned list except Tourist Festival and Dasain of the Nepali Hindu Festival all are Buddhist Festivals, still dominating as Sikkimese Festivals. "The major monasteries like Pema-Yangtse (in West Sikkim), Enchay (near Gangtok) and Rumtek (23 Kms. from Gangtok) are the venues for the important Buddhist festivals in Sikkim. The Lama dances complete with the fierce masks, the gorgeous brocade costumes, the exotic music and chants, may seem to the casual visitor a little bizarre. But to the participants and to the faithfuls these dances have their own symbolism and meaning. Most of these dances recreate legends and myths connected with the eternal battle between the good and the evil and the eventual triumph of the virtuous."⁶⁵

5.10. Buddhist Motif in Arts and Crafts :

The mysticism of Sikkim, though evoked partly by the grandeur of its natural beauty, is mostly evolved from the Tibetan Buddhist Pantheon prevailing all over the State. The art, architecture, craft and skill, all embody the traditional Buddhist culture inherited from Tibet. Not only in the Fresco, Murals, images of the deities inside the monasteries but the popular products of art and craft made by the local people also depict the symbolic Buddhist stories, or Eight Auspicious signs or portraits of deities in their designs and colours. The 'Thanka' i.e. the religious scroll painting is regarded as a sacred object. The central figure in a Thanka is always a Buddha, or any other deity, or Bodhisattva of Mahayana Buddhism having their mystical significance. The carpets, wood-carvings, jewelleries or other

handicrafts which are produced in Sikkim, represent and support this dominant faith. The Government Institute of Cottage Industry at Gangtok is a centre for the preservation and development of the traditional arts and crafts of Sikkim.⁶⁶ "The Sikkimese art draws its inspiration from Buddhism."⁶⁷ They are very proud to say that "For motifs and design we do not seek inspiration from other cultures, for Sikkim is resplendent with ideas and designs from her age old culture."⁶⁸ And their culture "and the motif is invariably the predominance of the (Mahayana) Buddhism over other forms of lower religions."⁶⁹ Many of the Lamas are good painters and artists. The Lamas have great contributions in the traditional Thanka paintings or wood carvings of Sikkim. A special mention may be made about "Sangthok-Palri", a heavenly structure made in wood carving and installed on the top floor of Pema-Yangtse monastery. It is carved by Ven.Donzing Rimpoche, elder brother of the Head Lama of that monastery, single handed. The architecture of the buildings, specially government office buildings including the "Tashilling", the Secretariat, display this cultural traditions - "a concrete building, with light, airy rooms and every up-to-date convenience, but designed in traditional style. The windows were large and oblong, each with its wide border of brightly painted floral or dragon motifs, the pillars elaborately carved, the facade gaily decked with eight lucky symbols of Buddhism, and, to crown all, a pagoda roof of turquoise blue."⁷¹ This is the accepted design for government buildings and even now the tradition is well preserved. "In this process, the older values, religion and culture of the people have been given their rightful place at the fountainhead of the Government - the Secretariat at

Gangtok. Here, within the precincts of the seat of the Government, stands prominently a beautiful shrine with an image of the Buddha in 'Dharma Chakra Mudra'. At the feet of the Lord is inscribed in golden letters a stanza from the writings of the venerated Buddhist scholar-saint, Shanti Deva."⁷² This new building of "Tashilling" i.e. the Secretariat, was inaugurated by the then Prime Minister of India Sri Morarji Desai in 1979, the foundation stone of which was laid by the late Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi in 1975.

In every cultural programme staged in any place in Sikkim, there must be three compulsory items - a Bhutia dance, a Lepcha dance, a Nepali dance. And though easily pickable Nepali language has taken the place of Linguafranca in Sikkim, many Tibetan customs, on the other hand, have been adopted as Sikkimese custom by all. Offering of 'Khada' i.e., white scarf, the ceremonial custom of Tibet, has been Sikkimized being used by all communities; Eight Religious symbols of Tibetan Buddhism are used as government crest in official publications and elsewhere;⁷³ Tibetan drink 'Chang', drunk in a bamboo glass with a bamboo pipe and Tibetan delicacies like 'Momo', 'Thuppa' and 'Gyako' etc. are the special attractions of Sikkim. Sikkim still welcomes the outsider by saying "Tashidele" which means "let be good", and shows her gratitude by the word 'Thuche'.

5.11. Institute of Tibetology :

The Research Institute of Tibetology and other Buddhist studies is the centre of knowledge, situated at Gangtok, with all its pride. In 1956 (July-August) sabshang (preparation of the earth for new

construction) was performed in the presence of the late Maharaja Tashi Namgyal, who had donated these lands for the proposed Institute. On 10th February, 1957, His Holiness Dalai Lama laid down the Cornerstone (foundation stone) of the main premises of the Institute, and on 1st October, 1958 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the Institute.⁷⁴ In the Charter of this Institute it is mentioned that, "In our belief and in defence to the teachings of all the sangrgyes (Buddhas) and Chang-shub Sempas (Bodhhisattvas) Chhos is eternal and all embracing."⁷⁵ The old name of the Institute e.g. 'Namgyal Institute of Tibetology' was changed to 'Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology' by an Amendment Act of 1976, and again the name was changed to 'Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology and Other Buddhist Studies' in the year 1982.

The main object of the Institute at the time of its establishment was "to work actively for the development of knowledge of Chhos, the culture and all arts and sciences associated with the origins and development of Chhos and to set high standard of Research, both orthodox and modern, in the subjects mentioned."⁷⁶ 'Chhos' in Tibetan is equivalent to Dharma in Sanskrit.⁷⁷ The twelveth and the last Chogyal, Palden Thondup was very anxious to preserve, protect and develop the old culture of Sikkim. As Rustamji, the previous Dewan of Sikkim, said that "The Weight of Nepalese settlement had already had its impact on the ancient Bhutia-Lepcha pattern of culture. With the influx of Indian exports for implementation of Sikkim's Plan, there was apprehension of yet another phase of cultural erosion. If any thing was to survive of the old Sikkim, this was the time to take initiative."⁷⁸ The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was one of the outcomes of that

initiation. The first line of the Charter of this Institute reads, "whereas our high trusted and well beloved Maharaj Kumar Palden Thondup Namgyal, Heir Apparent, An Incarnate of Pal Phung monastery and President of Maha Bodhi Society of India, ably advised and assisted by a number of our learned subjects and monks as well as officers and other friends from India, has been engaged for the last two years in planning and building up a Research Institute of Tibetology."⁷⁹ Only future can prove whether the conscious efforts and sincere devotions of Chogyal Palden Thondup and other Buddhist people of Sikkim to preserve their old Buddhist culture will continue for ever or not.

5.12. Buddhist Science and Medicine : Its Applicability in Sikkim :

The Buddhist account of the origin of Medicine says that the third Buddha 'Kasyapa' taught Medicine in a past aeon according to Kalpa the Buddha Sakyamuni who taught the medical text called 'Vimalagotra' during his first sermon at Sarnath.⁸⁰ In the medicine chapter of 'Vinay' also, it is mentioned that a sick Bhikkhu should consult a doctor and take the medicine given to him.⁸¹

In the history of Tibetan Buddhist medicine, it is found that Chinese Queen of King Sron-btsan-SGam-po first brought a medical text called 'Sman-dpyad-chen-mo' (Great Analytical Treatise on Medicine) from China. This text was translated into Tibetan by Ha-Shang Mahadeva and Dharmakosa.⁸² The King invited three great doctors from China, India and Persia in his Court in Tibet and also encouraged some young boys of Tibet to learn the medicine. They were awarded two doctor titles as hTs'o-byed or sman-pa.⁸³

During the reign of King Khri-Sron-ide-btsan, the great great grandson of King Sron-btsan-sGam-po, the medical system developed to a large extent. He collected all the medical texts which had not been translated into Tibetan and sent messengers to bring doctors from different countries. This time also several doctors came from India, China, Nepal, Persia etc. and translated medical texts from their own language into Tibetan. They also trained many Tibetan boys in medicine.⁸⁴

The history of Tibetan medicine started flourishing thereafter stage by stage finally establishing a medical college and hospital during the reign of Fifth Dalai Lama. And under the thirteenth Dalai Lama a new medical college called "sMan-rtsis-Khan" (House of Medicine and Astronomy) was established at Lhasa.⁸⁵

The Tibetan Buddhist medical system also followed from Tibet to Sikkim along with other cultural heritage. There are some Lamas who still practice this treatment in Sikkim. The Health Department, Government of Sikkim, has very recently introduced a separate wing in the S.T.N.M. Hospital at Gangtok, for this old Tibetan treatment.⁸⁶

Thus language, dress, architecture, religion, social customs, music, paintings - in all these were centred the spirit of Sikkim's culture. Even though much had been lost to Sikkim from a series of external cultural onslaught, but this had not yet decayed. It is not wrong to say that the socio-cultural life of Sikkim is moving round their faith, namely, the Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism which has designed the political life too.

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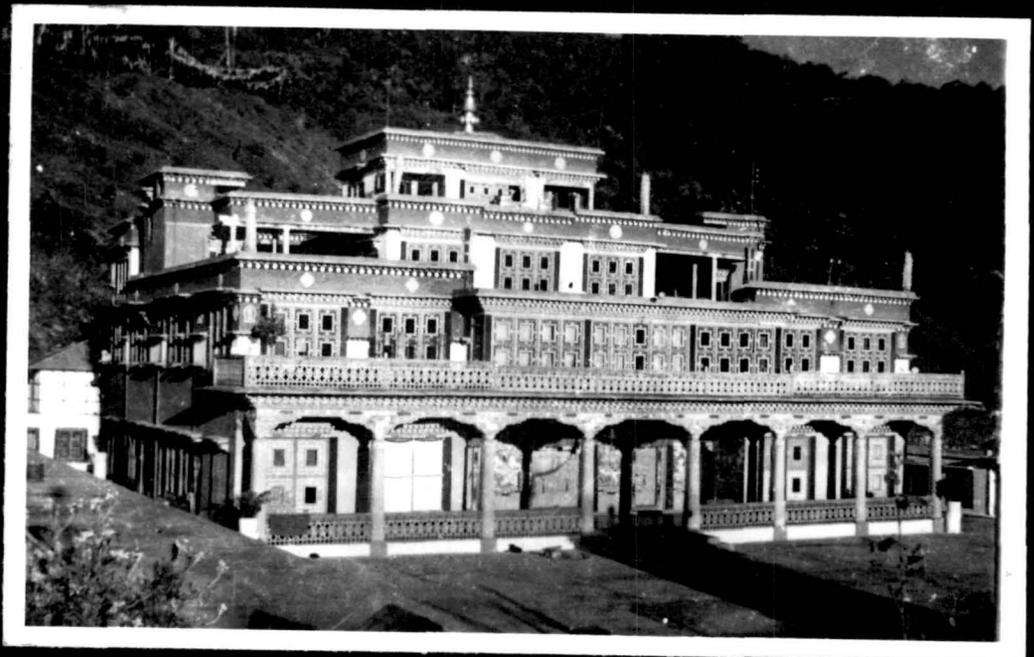
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Rumten Monastery Of Kagyat-pa Sect.



Children Nuns with the Head Lama.