

History of the Beginning of Buddhism in Sikkim

Dr. Sunita Kharel

Associate Professor, Nar Bahadur Bhandari Government College

Abstract

The beginning of Buddhist faith in Sikkim may be traced back to the middle of the 17th century when Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the ruler of the land as Dharma raja with both temporal and spiritual powers. It is believed that in the middle of the 8th century, Padma Sambhava also known as Guru Rimpoche travelled to Tibet and Sikkim and blessed the land. The land is recognized as sacred ever since and also blessed by the great Buddhist saints and the lamas. Immediately after becoming the ruler of the land, the king set himself to the task of administrative and religious reforms.

Keywords: Buddhist faith, Dharma, Guru Rimpoche, Lamas

The form of Buddhist faith existing in Sikkim is Tibetan, known as Tibetan Lamaism. Of the four sects of Tibetan Lamaism i.e Nyingmapa, Kagyupa, Gelupa and Sakyapa sects, Sikkim is the stronghold of Nyingma sect. This sect represents the unreformed and old tradition of Lamaism and it is also largely associated with pre-Buddhist religious practices. Tibetan Lamaism falls within the category of Northern Buddhism or the Mahayana school. This form of Buddhism is current in countries like Mongolia, China, Japan, Nepal and Bhutan and Indian States of Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, West Bengal and Himachal Pradesh including Union Territory of Jammu and Kashmir (J&K) and Ladakh. Lamaism may be defined as a mixture of Buddhism with a preponderating amount of mythology, mysticism and magic.

Lamaism was introduced in Tibet by the wizard-priest Padma Sambhava during the time of the King Khri-srong Ideu-bTsan who reigned between 740 and 786 AD. King Khri-srong Ideu-bTsan, the son of a Chinese princess, inherited from his mother a strong prejudice in favour of Buddhism. Therefore, he sent to India for books and teachers and commenced a systematic translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan scripture and built the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, viz Samye (Sam-yas). It was in connection with the building of this monastery that Padma Sambhava came to Tibet. On the advice of the Indian Buddhist monk Shantarakshita, the Tibetan king sent invitation to Padma Sambhava, a wizard-priest of the Yogacharya School in India. Padma Sambhava or Padma Jungne i.e., 'the lotus born' is usually called by the Tibetans as Guru Rimpoche. Padma Sambhava, who was a native of

Udyana, promptly responded to the Tibetan king's request and arrived at Samye. He built a monastery in 749 A.D and established the first community of lamas (Risley, H.H, Calcutta, 1894).

The Northern Buddhists believe Sikkim to be the most sacred land in the entire Himalayan region. In the prophecies and apocalyptical books of the Bodhisattvas, several hidden sacred countries have been mentioned. Among these, Bayul-Demozong(hidden valley of rice) i.e., Sikkim is considered to be the epicenter (Dolma.Y & Namgyal T, 1908).

According to the texts of the renowned Tibetan Lamas of the 14th and 15th centuries namely Ratnalingpa, Godemchen, Sangay Lingpa and Pema Lingpa, Sikkim is the highest of all the sacred places visited and blessed since time immemorial by the great Buddhas and Bodhisattvas: Avaloketeshwara or 'Chenrezig' in Tibetan, Jetsun Dolma or Tara, Dro-nGer-Chen or the celestial King Indra, Chogyal Song-Chen Gompo, the incarnated Devis and Khen-Lob-Cho-Sum i.e. Guru Padma Sambhava. These tertons (treasure revealers) Lamas by translating several Buddhist texts from Sanskrit to Tibetan unfolded a vast treasure of knowledge of the Buddha. In all their texts one can find a 'Nay-yig' or 'guide' in the preface regarding the sacredness of Sikkim. Guru Padma Sambhava equated this land as sacred as his own copper-plated abode, Zangdopalri. According to the lamas, Lord Avalokeshvara descended from his heavenly abode and blessed Tibet for storing Buddha dharma in future and recognized the region in the southern direction of Tibet i.e., Sikkim as Bey-gNas or sacred hidden land. (Dokhampa, S.G, 2013)

It is believed that during his travels to Tibet, Padma Sambhava visited Sikkim and its western borderlands looking for the hidden lands to conceal his sacred spiritual treasures for the sake of future practitioners. Eventually, he selected four major Valleys namely: Tsari in Far East of Tibet, Demozong in southern border, Lachhi in far west and Noedjin Khangkirawa in northern frontier of Tibet and recognized them as 'sBas-yil-hNas-Chen-bzhi' or 'Four Great Hidden Lands'. Likewise, he also selected four smaller valleys situated in the four directions, viz: Khenpalung in the southeast, Drephulung in the southwest, Jagmalung in the northwest and Dromolung in the northeast of Tibet and recognized them as 'sBas-yul-gNas-Chung-bZhi' or 'Four Little Hidden Lands'. Similarly, he recognized twenty mountains at different locations as 'Drub-gNas' or 'sacred places of worship'. Among the 'Four Great Hidden Lands' the Demozong valley or present day Sikkim was recognized as the holiest hidden land as he found it topographically beautiful, rich in flora and fauna and climatically suitable for the sacred practitioners. (Dokhampa, S.G, 2013, Siliguri). This is well explained in 'Denjong Nay-Yig', an early 18th century Tibetan Religious Text.

According to Bras-ijongs-gNas-Yig, (a text having detail description about geographical position and significance of various holy places of the hidden land) Guru Padma Sambhava also sanctified four Takphu or caves located at four cardinal directions of Tashiding in the western portion of Sikkim as the abode of various protective deities of the Esoteric Buddhism. These caves are: Sharchog Bayphugor 'Secret cave' in the East direction, Lho Khando Sangphug or the 'cave of occult fairies', in the South direction, Nub Dechenphug or 'the cave of great happiness' in the West direction and Jhang Lharu Nyingphug or 'the old cave of God's hill' in the North direction (Risley.H.H, 1894). These caves have become the most important pilgrims' destination for the followers of Buddhism of Sikkim, Darjeeling, Bhutan, Tibet and Nepal.

It is mentioned in the journal 'Nature' that a large number of ter chos (Buddhist treasure teachings) were placed in Yuksaminand in the surrounding its landscape by Guru Padma Sambhava. Yuksam, is therefore considered as 'Lakhang' (altar) by the Sikkimese where offerings are made to protective deities. It is believed that this landscape and its surroundings should not be disturbed and any large-scale human induced perturbation in this holy land of Yuksam region would destroy the hidden sacred treasures. It is also believed that Guru Rinpoche lived and subjugated the demons with the help of his miraculous power in a rocky cave in the western part of Sikkim. This place is one of the most important places of pilgrimage for the followers of Tibetan Lamaism. Similarly, there is a huge stone in Chungthang in North Sikkim which marked the resting place of Guru Rinpoche. It is believed that Guru Rinpoche had a meal sitting on that stone. Known as Chungthang Naydo, the stone is considered sacred. The important lakes of Demozong viz., Khecheopalri, Guru Dongmar (Red Faced) and Tsomgo was also blessed. The Guru appointed the great Khangchendzonga as the supreme protector of this land, who would be responsible for protecting the dharma, environment, people and the land (Nature,1996).

That can be concluded from the above is that, since the time of the visit of Padma Sambhava to Sikkim, the land had been recognised as sacred and a place for dissemination of Buddha Dharma.

From the middle of the 17th century Buddhism became as established creed in Sikkim. Lha-tsun Namkha Jigme or Lhatsun Chenpo, Kathog Rikzin Kuntu Chenpo and Ngadak Sempa Rikzin referred to in the history of Sikkim as the 'three patron saints' were instrumental in consolidating and propagating Buddhism and for this purpose, creation of a theocratic Government was essential. This they did in 1642 A.D. These patron saints from Tibet were the lineage holders of the Nyingma sect. Following Guru Rinpoche's prophecy they entered 'the hidden land' from three cardinal directions i.e. north, south and west and met at Norbugang. These saints were to meet the fourth saint 'Phuntsog', whose blood connection lay with the Minyak dynasty of Tibet. Phuntsog was destined to appear from a

place called ‘Gang’ in the East. Acting upon the Guru’s prophecy, the lamas then commissioned a search to East Demozong to find for the destined person. After several adventures, the search party found Phuntsog milking a cow. The search-team accordingly conveyed him the message sent by the holy lamas, following which he agreed to proceed to his spiritually guided destination along with his attendants and followers (Dokhampa, S.G, 2013)

Risley in his Gazetteer traces the origin of the Namgyal dynasty to the MinYak house of Tibet. The rulers of this dynasty were descendents of Khri-srong Ideu-bTsan who was the most illustrious of all the rulers of Tibet (Risley,H.H,1894). Denzong-gyal-rab (History of Sikkim)talks of various sources and guide books ‘to the hidden stores’ of Padma Lingpa, Rigzin Godemchen and Ratna Lingpa all agreeing that, “if a descendent from the unbroken line of Khri-srong Ideu-bTsan be appointed ruler of this land, it will enjoy peace and prosperity for a while.” Another source according to Denzong-gyal rab is Gabpatsi-lung, an astrological revelation, which says, “a Buddhist avatar king will settle in Sikkim as his capital, and in the time of the 2nd or 3rd descent from him, the middle one of these sons will be an avatar of king Khri-srong Ideu-bTsan, his name will be shawo-che (big cap) who will be succeeded by seven Incarnate successors, during the middle one, in whose time the ‘Faith’ will shine as bright as the Sun, because he is an incarnate of Manjusri.”(Namgyal.T&Doma,Y,1908)

At Yuksam, the three lamas greeted Phuntsog and accordingly consecrated him as a patron king or Chogyal(Dharma Raja) in the water-horse year of the Tibetan calendar, which corresponds to 1642 A.D. He was given the power, conferring rites of the eight auspicious objects and the eight auspicious or royal emblems. (Namgyal.T&Doma,Y,1908). Phunstog Namgyal was thus installed as the first Dharma raja and Yuksam was established as the capital of Sikkim. The three lamas travelled extensively throughout the country of Sikkim, examined the characteristics of land and established gonpas (monastery) and Buddhist teaching centres.

Under the patronage of the Maharaja Phuntsog Namgyal, Lhatsun Chenpo built the famous Dubde monastery in 1647 A.D as his personal celestial chapel. The monastery is the oldest gonpa in Sikkim which is now the State’s heritage. The foundation of Sangachelling also commenced under Lhatsun Chenpo’s direction. According to Risley, (Risley,H.H,1894),the construction of Sangachoelling commenced under the direction of Lhatsun Chenpo during of reign of Phuntsog Namgyal and was completed at the time of Tensung Namgyal, the second king of Sikkim. Lama Lhatsun Chenpo also pointed out Pemayangtse as a proper site for a monastery. A small shrine; ‘Pemayangtse monastery’ was begun in 1651 by the lama and was reconstructed in 1705 by Chador Namgyal, the third ruler. The lamas also fixed upon Tashiding as being the central key, meaning the sacred spot of Sikkim because of the

religious significance attached to it since 8th century AD. A small Lhakhang known as ‘Jhampa Lhakhang’ was built by Ngadak Sempa at Tashiding in 1651 on the top of a heart shaped hill with the backdrop of the sacred Mount Khangchendzonga. It was later reconstructed by Pandi Wangmo, the step sister of king Chador Namgyal in 1716 AD and was named ‘Chogyal Lhakhang’. Tashiding is now famous for the most holy Choerten known as ‘Thong-Wa-Rang-Dol’, which literally means ‘savior by mere sight’ (Namgyal.T & Dolam,Y,1908). Lama Ngadak Sempa Chenpo introduced Bhumchu, a holy water ceremony in Sikkim in the 17th century with a gift of a precious vase that he had brought from Tibet. Throughout the period of the Namgyal rulers, all major gonpa of West Sikkim used to gather at Tashiding gonpa on Lhabab Dhuechen³⁷ to perform puja for five days (DESME, Government of Sikkim, 2014). The gonpa possesses old texts belonging to Ngadak Sempa and few ‘ter stones’ (sacred Stones) discovered by him. By the middle of the 18th century, Sikkim was adorned with the most prominent monasteries and choerten (stupa) of the country. The six premier ones being Pemayangtse, Tashiding, Phensang Sanghachoelling of the Nyingma Order and Ralong (1730), Rumtek gonpa (1734) and Phodong Karma Thupden Tashi Chokhorling gonpa (1734) of the Kagyu Order.

Conclusion

From the above study it comes out clear that Sikkim which was considered to be a sacred land blessed by the great saints and Bodhisattvas, saw the beginning of the Tibetan form of Buddhism since the middle of the 17th century. The sacredness of the place was considered important and therefore Phuntsog Namgyal, considered by many sources of Sikkim history to be related to the Minyak house of Tibet was made the king in 1642. The aim of three holy lamas was to propagate Tibetan form of Buddhism in Sikkim through the institution of monarchy. Soon after the first Maharaja assumed power, gonpa and choerten were built on every suitable and prominent hill tops. The process of establishment began from the western part of the country, more precisely from Yuksam which was considered as the ‘lakhang’. The lamas’ whole time services were put for preaching and establishment of monastic institutions. This trend was followed by subsequent Chogyals who set out missionaries to different parts of the country to establish shrines and propagate the dharma. Complexes were built on hill tops for purity and also for visual connection with other gonpa and this was most prominent in the monastic circuit of Yuksam area which covered the gonpa at Pemayangtse, Sanghachoelling, Dubde, Kechupalri and Tashiding. The ‘golden circuit’ went on to become the most important corridor in the country with the Pemayangtse-Sanghachoelling ridge as its centre as it was visually linked with other important gonpa at Risum, Rinchenpong, Dubdi, Hungri, Silnon and Ralong (Bulletin,2012).

References

1. H.H. Risley, The Gazetteer of Sikkim, Calcutta, 1894.
2. Gazetteer of Sikkim, 2013, (eds). Kharel, Sunita & Bhutia, Jigme Wangchuk, Gangtok, 2013
3. Dolma, Yeshey, Namgyal Thudop, History of Sikkim, (Mimeographed), Gangtok, 1908.
4. Dokhampa, S.G, Ecclesiastical Department of the Government of Sikkim, An Interview, (55Years). 29.11.2014.
5. Dokhampa, S.G, Pilgrimage to the Four Great Sacred Caves of Sikkim, 2013, Siliguri
6. Nature, Journal on Nature and Natural Resources, (UNESCO), Paris 1996
7. Interview with Acharya Tsultsem Gyatso, Senior Research Assistant, (Tibetan) Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok. 24.11.2014.
8. In the Footsteps of the Lotus Born, Published by the Department of Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, (DESME), Government of Sikkim, 2014
9. Bulletin of Tibetology, Vol.48, November 1, 2012.