

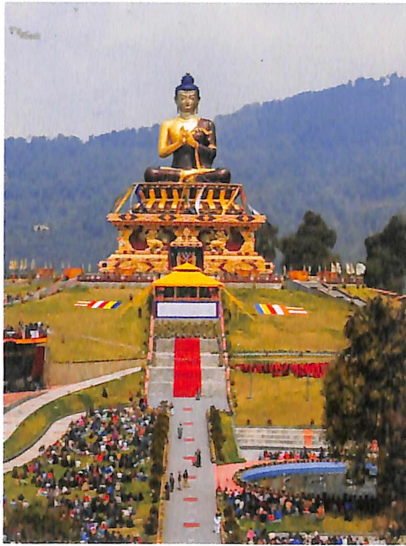
TATHAGATA TSAL

RABONG, SOUTH SIKKIM



SIK/T

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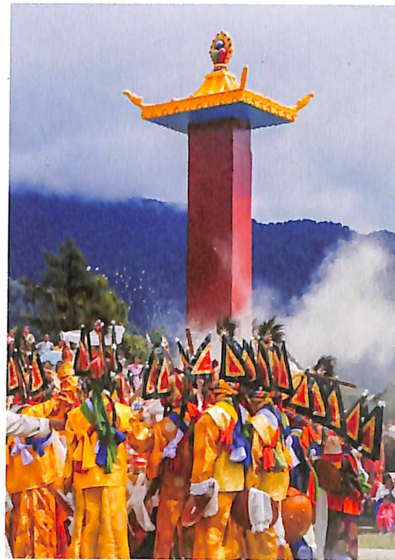
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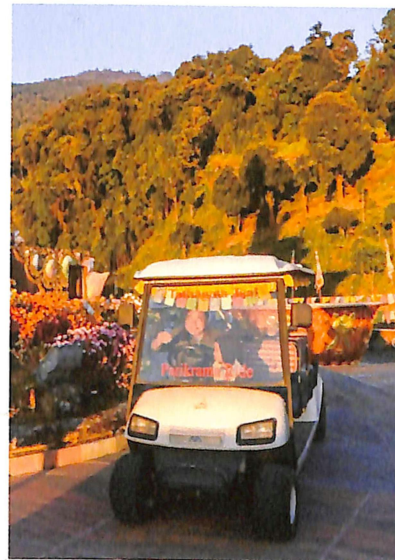
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Tathagata Tsal: Making Sikkim Holy



In Sikkim, every monastery and all Buddhist households have a special prayer chamber, which is used for religious rituals. This room will always include an altar displaying Cho-long-trulsum – a set of three principal divinities – comprising Buddha in the centre, flanked by Chenrezig on his right and Guru Padmasambhava on his left.

Two decades ago, Chief Minister Pawan Chamling had the sublime vision of transforming Sikkim into a geographical altar by installing a Cho-long-trulsum spread across the State. He began by installing a gigantic Guru Padmasambhava statue at Samdruptse in South Sikkim.

Guru Padmasambhava's statue, the largest of its kind in the world, was consecrated and opened for worship in 2004.



The year 2006 marked Buddha's 2550th birth anniversary, and it was the perfect time to begin constructing the statue of Lord Buddha at Rabong in South Sikkim. To mark the anniversary, the Government had also declared a year-long celebration throughout the State. The Buddha statue was consecrated and opened to the public in 2013. The statue of Chenrezig near Sangag Choling Monastery, Pelling, in West Sikkim is nearing completion.

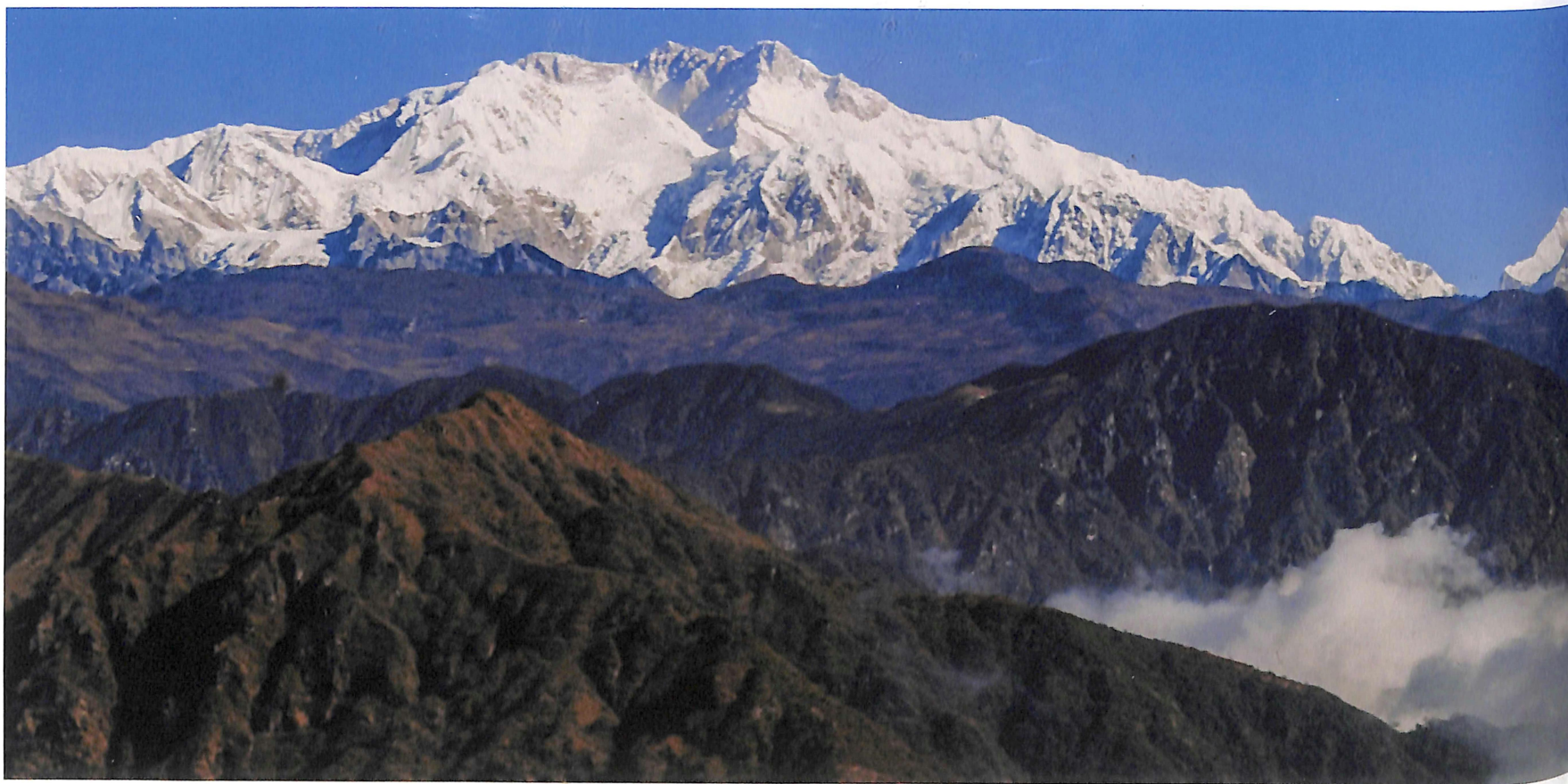
Rabong, where the Buddha statue has been installed, is close to Tashiding, which Sikkimese Buddhists believe is the centre-point of Sikkim. Samdruptse lies to its east and Pelling to its west. The choice of locations for the three statues reflects how the divinities are placed in the Cho-long-trulsum, with the Buddha in



the centre, the Guru on his left and Chenrezig on his right. By constructing these three larger-than-life statues, Chamling believes Sikkim has been purified into what the Buddhists call *dewachen ki shingkhram*, or paradise.

In Denjong Neyig (the Prediction Guide to the Sacred Hidden Land), a Buddhist treasure text, Guru Padmasambhava has said: "If one can construct and install monasteries, stupas, statues, in this holy land of Sikkim, this land will enjoy peace and prosperity for hundred years to come." In essence, what Guru Padmasambhava had advised thousands of years ago has been realised and executed in this generation by Chief Minister Chamling.

facng page: Chief Minister Pawan Chamling during the consecration ceremony of Tathagata Tsal at Rabong on 25 March 2013. **above:** The Cholong-trulsum – a set of three principal divinities – comprising Buddha in the centre, flanked by Chenrezig on his right and Guru Padmasambhava on his left, which are found enshrined inside the sanctum of Nimachen Mani Lhakhang in East Sikkim.



Amalgamation of religion, history and culture has helped Sikkim move forward and become a prominent destination in India for pilgrimage tourism. By creating distinctive aesthetics, such as the world's highest statue of Guru Padmasambhava, a uniquely different aspect of Lord Buddha in the statue at Rabong, and Char Dham in one place in Namchi – all envisioned by the State's creative Chief Minister – Sikkim has shown that faith and beliefs when linked with tourism would make an economically viable proposition that can benefit all communities and boost the economy.

Chamling's strategy for pilgrimage tourism was two-pronged: First, restoration and preservation of heritage sites and, second, creating a number of pilgrimage centres, including man-made attractions, based on diverse faiths and beliefs. Soon after he came to power in 1994, his farsightedness and keen interest in safeguarding Sikkim's spiritual and cultural heritage came into play. All sacred

places of worship, which were older than hundred years, were notified for preservation, as were the sacred rocks, lakes, caves and hot springs.

In 1998, he imposed a ban on the use of *serbang* – a ceremonial reception of the highest order – for lay dignitaries other than high-ranking priests and spiritual leaders, cheering many who were hurt by the erroneous practice being followed.

Perhaps the most significant achievement, greeted with tremendous appreciation by the citizens, is the ban imposed in 2001 on scaling Mount Khangchendzonga, which the Sikkimese worship as their guardian protector deity. This gained fillip when Khangchendzonga National Park was listed as India's first Mixed World Heritage Site by UNESCO in July 2016. Khangchendzonga National Park is culturally significant primarily because it is considered the *beyul*, the core, of the sacred hidden land blessed by



Guru Padmasambhava. During his visit to the UNESCO office in March 2006, Chief Minister Chamling personally initiated the move to also include Dubdi Monastery, Lake Khechoepalri, Namchi Barista Madhyamik Vidyalaya, Kabi Longtsok and Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in the list of UNESCO world heritage sites.

In the world of the Sikkimese, there is respect for all religions, where temples and monasteries, churches and mosques, stupas and devithans together paint colours in this beautiful land of the gods. In no other State of India will you find a unique, exclusive department – the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department – to cater to the functioning of hundreds of religious institutions. The department takes care of approximately 360 Hindu Mandirs including Manav Utthan Sewa Ashram and Sarva Dharma Sai Mandirs, 19 Manghims (temple of the Limboo community) and Mangkhims (temple of the Rai community); 342 Buddhist monasteries, which comprises

Gompa, (full-fledged monastery), Mani Lhakhang (sub monastery), Lhakhang/Gyalkhang or smaller shrines, and Tshamkhang/Dubkhang (retreat or meditation centres); 35 chortens or stupas, nine hot springs with curative powers, 30 sacred caves and 29 sacred lakes.

In 1994, when Chamling came to power, the number of religious institutions recorded by the Ecclesiastical Affairs Department was just 489.

Under the aegis of Chief Minister Chamling, the State Government has made serious efforts towards promoting education in various monasteries. Starting with just 15 monastic schools, there are 99 monastic schools and 11 Sanskrit pathshalas, including one Sanskrit Mahavidyalaya, in Sikkim today. They are all located in rural areas, are recognised on par and enjoy the same facilities as regular Government schools at the primary and secondary level.

above: The snowy peaks of Mt. Khangchendzonga, to which the Sikkimese worship as their guardian deity. **page 10 - 11:** An aerial view of Tathagata Tsal.