

SONS OF SIKKIM

The Rise and Fall of the
Namgyal Dynasty of Sikkim



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Chapter 1

Buddhism in Tibet

UNIFICATION OF TIBET

The Shakya Dynasty

According to Vedic mythology, the original inhabitants of this world descended from the heavens in the form of human beings in the Golden Era known as Sat Yuga, the first and foremost age. During this period, there lived in India a king who was believed to have been elected by the people. He was the first king, and people had great respect for him. His name was Mangkur Gyalpo (Sanskrit - Mahajanasammata, meaning the “one approved of by the great multitude.”)¹

After a number of successors had succeeded his throne, there lived a king in the country of Gru-Dzin (Sanskrit - Kannauj) along the river Ganges in northern India – presently in the State of Uttar Pradesh – named Nawa-Chan (Sanskrit - Karna). He had two sons. The eldest was called Gautama and the youngest, Bharadwaja.

Gautama became an ardent disciple of the Rishi Dog-Nag (Sanskrit - Rishi Krishnadvaipayana)² while Bharadwaja became the king. At this time, a terrible thing happened to the two brothers. There lived a rogue called Pad-Mai-Tsa-Lag (Sanskrit - Mrinala), who, because of his jealousy, killed the prostitute, Zangmo (Sanskrit - Bhadra). After murdering Zangmo, he left the bloody sword in the vicinity of Gautama’s hut. When this was discovered, Gautama was dragged into the presence of the king who was his own brother. Bharadwaja, not knowing the truth of the matter, killed Gautama.

When Gautama was about to die, his Rishi Guru caused a shower of rain to descend through supernatural means just at the point of his death. This having revived, Gautama, by mental effort, emitted two drops of his seminal fluid and blood, as per the commands of his Guru the Rishi. These two drops turned into two eggs in a sugarcane bush and were hatched with the help of the sun’s rays. Thus, they produced two sons, whose names were Nyima-Nyen (Sanskrit

- Surja-Bansha *suryagotra* or “Relative of the Sun” or solar clan) and Buram-Shingpa (“Sugarcane Born.”) Since they were taken from a sugar plantation (*ikshuvata*), they were known as *ikshvakas*.³

Bharadwaja died without any male heir. As Gautama’s elder son, who was appointed king, died without a son, the youngest son, Buram-Shingpa, became the king after Bharadwaja’s death, and his dynasty came to be called the Buram-Shingpa (or King Ikshvaku – Ikshvakuraja) dynasty. The law relating to the king’s eldest son’s right to inheritance was carefully observed and followed down the years. The hundredth king of that dynasty was called Phags-Skyesbu.

Phags-Skyesbu had three sons and two daughters born on the bank of the river Skal-Idan-Shing-Tra (Sanskrit - Bhagirathi), a tributary of Ganga located in northern India, now in the State of Uttarakhand. In Hindu mythology and culture, the Bhagirathi is considered a holy river of Hinduism and the source stream of the Ganges. These brothers and sisters had offspring through sexual union among themselves. Their children were called Shakyas. Later, the people who descended from this line came to be known as Shakyas.

The fiftieth king in descent from the Shakya dynasty was called Shing-Tra-Chu-Pa (Sanskrit - Dasaratha), who ruled the kingdom of Kosala in northern India.⁴ The capital of the kingdom was Ayodhya.

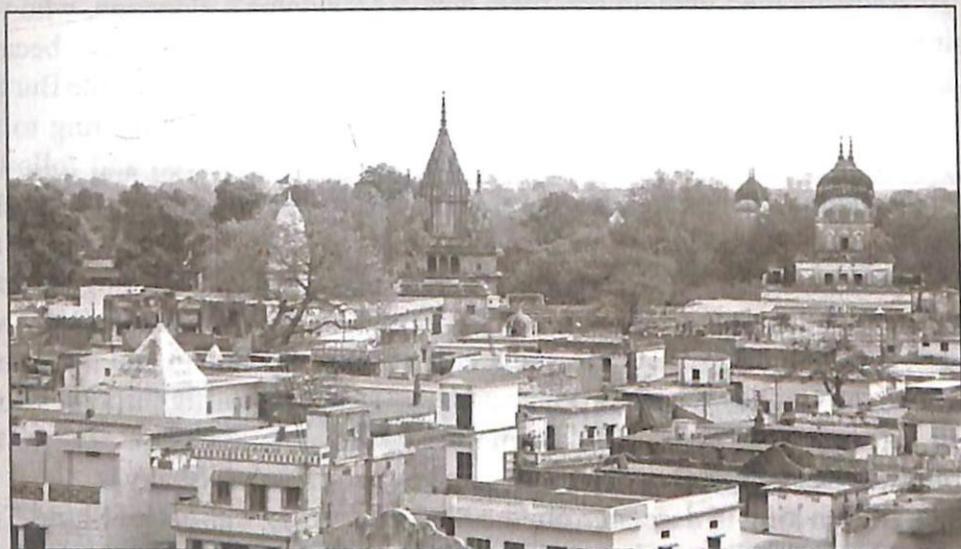
According to the Hindu epic, Ramayana, King Dasaratha was a descendant of the Ikshvaku dynasty (also known as Suryavamsha or Raghuvamsa dynasty). He was a descendant of Raghu and was the father of prince Rama, the principal character in the Ramayana.⁵

Raghuvamsa or Raghu race is a legendary lineage of warrior kings, tracing its ancestry to the Hindu solar deity, Surya. Kalidasa’s famous work, *Raghuvamśa*, depicts the legend of this race. The progenitor of the lineage was Raghu, son of the Emperor, Dileepa. Raghu was father of Aja, and thus, grandfather of Dasaratha, and great-grandfather of Rama. They are thus of the Raghuvamsa (“dynasty of Raghu”) lineage.⁶

King Dasaratha had four sons from three wives. Lord Rama was the eldest son, and the three others were Bharata, Lakshmana and Shatrughna (twins). The eldest was called Shakya-Chenpo (Sanskrit, Mahashakya), the middle was called Shakya-Lichavi (Lichahavi) and the youngest was called Shakya-Ribragpa, which meant “the Shakya of Rocky Hills.”⁷

The twenty-eighth king in descent from Mahashakya was king Suddhodana, who was the ruler of the kingdom of the Shakyas and had his capital at Kapilvastu (presently in southern Nepal).⁸ In the seventh century, before the Christian era, much of northern India was divided into kingdoms and republics. “Whereas the monarchies were concentrated in the Ganges plain, the republics were ranged round the northern periphery of these kingdoms - the foothills of the Himalayas and south of these...”⁹ Magadha and Kosala in northern India were among the most powerful kingdoms during this period. The Shakya republic was ruled by the king of Kosala who received tributes from the former.¹⁰

Ayodhya: a sacred city for Hindus



The ancient city of Ayodhya is located in the State of Uttar Pradesh in north India.

Ayodhya (also Oudh or Awadh), an ancient city, is one of the seven sacred cities of the Hindus. In the Ramayana, Lord Rama was born here during the reign of his father, Dasaratha, in what was then a prosperous, well-fortified city with a large population. In traditional history, it was the early capital of the kingdom of Kosala, while, in Buddha's time (6th-5th century BCE), Shravasti became the kingdom's chief city. Scholars equate Ayodhya with the city of Saketa, where the Buddha is said to have briefly lived. Its later importance as a Buddhist centre was attested in the 5th century C.E. by the Chinese Buddhist monk Fa-hsien, who saw 100 monasteries here. Other monuments, including a stupa (shrine), were apparently built by Ashoka in the 3rd century BCE.

The Kanauj kingdom arose here in the 11-12th centuries. During the later part of the Delhi sultanate, the Jaunpur kingdom and the Mughal Empire, Oudh gained a degree of independence in early 18th century, before its subordination to the British East India Company in 1764 and annexation by the British in 1856. This and the subsequent loss of hereditary land revenue rights helped precipitate the Indian Mutiny of 1857. Despite the city's great age, a few ancient monuments survive. Its temples and bathing ghats by the river Saryu are of no great age. Near the modern city are several mounds marking the site of ancient Ayodhya that have not yet been adequately explored by archaeologists.

(shunya.net)

Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya



Mahabodhi temple in Bodh Gaya.



Traditional Tibetan thangka painting of the Buddha.

Among the four places held most sacred by Buddhists, the Mahabodhi temple complex in Bodh Gaya, located about 115 km south of Patna, is the most visited. The other three, Lumbini, where he was born; Kusinagar, where he attained Mahaparinirvana; and Sarnath, where he gave his first sermon, are equally important, but Bodh Gaya is special. It is here, Siddharth, the restless and inquisitive prince, turned Buddha, the enlightened. The Bodhi tree under which the Buddha is believed to have meditated and attained enlightenment is located within this temple complex and venerated.

Emperor Ashoka built the first temple near Bodhi tree during the 3rd Century B.C., almost 300 years after Buddha's period (566-486 B.C.). The temple was later rebuilt, and the present structure is datable to the late Gupta period – 6th century C.E. Fahien and Hieun Tsang, the Chinese travellers who visited in 5th and 7th century respectively, recorded the existence of the Bodhi tree and the railing around it.

The temple was under regular use until the 13th century, when it fell into disuse. By that time, Buddhism had declined in influence. The structure slowly went to seed. Only during the 19th century, archaeologists and antiquarians began taking proper notice of Buddhist sites.

In 1861, British archaeologists conducted excavations in the Mahabodhi complex and later, restored the temple. The existing structure, which is 55 metres tall, is among the oldest brick Buddhist temples in India and occupies an area of 5.5 acres. The temple, the Bodhi tree, and six other sacred spots, together spread over 12 acres, constitute the core heritage zone. This historic area was inscribed as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2002 for its cultural and archaeological significance.



The Mahabodhi temple and the Bodhi tree in Bodhgaya, Bihar, northern India.

The Bodh Gaya temple has a unique management structure and is governed by a special legislation. The Bihar government owns the temple complex and enacted the Bodh Gaya Temple Act in 1949. This special arrangement had to be put in place since the Hindus, who had built a Siva temple in the campus many years ago, also claimed rights to manage. The government, through this Act, formed a nine-member committee in 1953 with five Hindu and four Buddhist members to run the temple. The District Magistrate heads the committee.

There is a long-standing demand to implement the recommendation of the National Commission for Minorities to hand over the management of the temple complex to the Buddhists.

(The Hindu)

In the year 544 B.C.,¹¹ a son named Siddhartha Gautama was born to King Suddhodana in Lumbini near Kapilvastu. He later became Gautama Buddha, also referred to as Shakyamuni,¹² the founder of Buddhism. After the birth of his son, Rahula (Tibetan - Gra-Chan-Dzin), Gautama left his worldly life and became a seeker of the truth. At the age of 35, on a full moon night, Gautama attained enlightenment while meditating under a *Bodhi* tree in Gaya, in the State of Bihar in Northern India.

The First King of Tibet

As there were no authentic written historical records kept in Tibet before the 7th century A.D, it is very difficult to trace the details of the origin of the first king of Tibet. There are, however, various sources and many different stories relating to the story of the first king of Tibet.

Tibet and Sikkim have many things in common. Three basic similarities are race, religion and culture. While studying the history of Sikkim, it is important to know something about Tibet and its people. In Sikkim, it is believed that the kings of Sikkim, known as Chogyals (religious kings or *dharmaraj*), came from Tibetan origin by descent through the first king of Tibet, Ngya-Thi-Tsan-Po.

One source says that the first king of Tibet was a descendant of Shakya Ribragpa, the third and youngest son of Dasaratha.¹³ King Ashoka (304-232 B.C.), who ruled India from 268 B.C. to 232 B.C., is believed to be a descendant of Shakya Ribragpa. One of King Ashoka's descendants was born with unusual marks on his body which were believed to be signs of auspiciousness. Unfortunately, he was disliked by the *devas* (gods), who, by supernatural means, directed him to be dressed as a female and sent into exile towards Tibet.

It is also believed that this peculiar child's father, Mak-Gyapa ("He of the hundred battles" or "Equal to hundred warriors") hid the child out of shame. When the child grew up, he wandered into Tibet.¹⁴

According to another source,¹⁵ King Ashoka had twin sons, whose names were Khabs-Dong and Mag-Gya-Pa. The two sons did not get along well with each other due to their disagreement as to who should be the next king after their father's death. Mag-Gya-Pa ("he of the hundred battles" or "equal to hundred warriors") had three sons. The youngest son, Na-Lag-Chen,¹⁶ was endowed with unusual marks on his body which were believed to be signs of auspiciousness. Unfortunately, he was disliked by the *devas* (gods), who, by supernatural means, directed him to be dressed as a female and sent into exile towards Tibet. Na-Lag-Chen is believed to be the progenitor of the first king of Tibet, Ngya-Thi-Tsan-Po.¹⁷

In another source,¹⁸ it is said that one king, Sal-Gyal (Sanskrit - Prasanjit) of Kosala had five sons. The youngest one had some remarkable features, among them being lengthy eyes, the lower eyelids of which moved upwards while winking or shutting the eyes, dark blue eyebrows, webbed fingers and toes, and a double row of fully developed pearly white teeth.

Because of these peculiarities, the parents of this child did not like the infant son. They regarded him as a monstrous prodigy and wanted to get rid of the child. They placed him in a closed copper vessel and set it afloat on the Ganges. Fortunately, the child did not die but was picked up by a peasant who raised him as his own son. When the child grew and attained full maturity, he realised that he was not the farmer's son. The knowledge that he was of royal blood and the fact that he was looked after by a poor farmer caused great anxiety and distress in him. His inner restlessness, after the discovery of his true origin, made him reach out for better and greater things in life. He finally

decided to leave the farm in search of high adventures, and set out northwards towards the Himalayas.

With great difficulty, he reached a big hill called Lhari (God's hill) in Central Tibet. At the foot of this hill lay a small village called Tsethang, situated at the mouth of the Yarlung River in Southeast Lhasa. The Yarlung basin was the cradle of ancient Tibetan civilisation and Tsethang was the capital of the ancient kingdom of Yarlung. Until the 7th century A.D, when King Songtsen Gampo moved the capital to Lhasa, the kingdom of Yarlung was the heart of Tibet for about 700 years.¹⁹

When the prince came down to the plains of Tsethang, all the natives thronged around him and marvelled at his peculiar looks. When they asked him who he was and where he had come from, the stranger responded by pointing his finger up to the top of Lhari to convey to them – not knowing their language – that he had come from that direction.

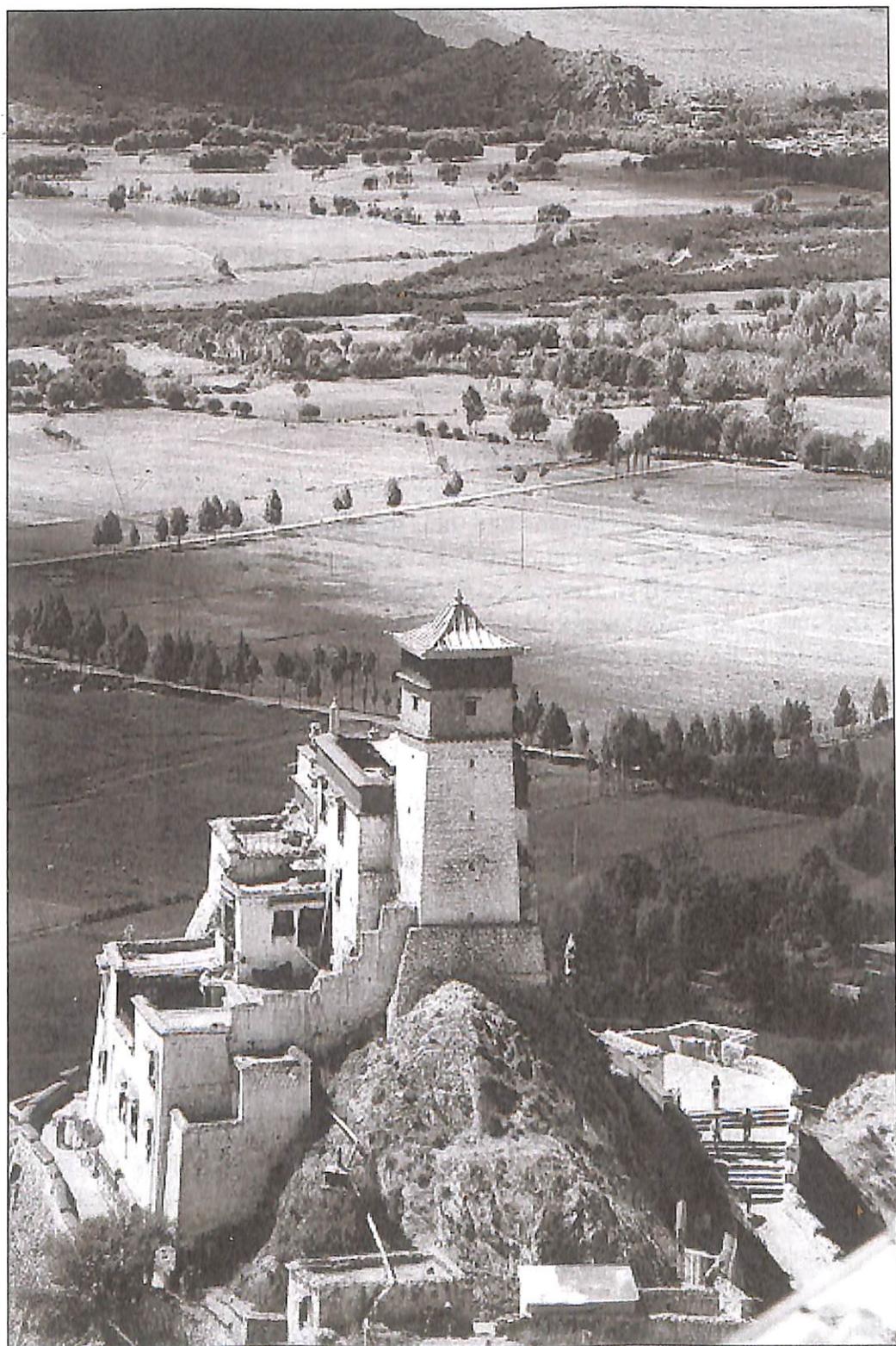
The Tibetans were amazed when they came to know this. They misunderstood his gesture and thought that he was a god who had come down to them from heaven. At once, the villagers entreated him to be their king. When the prince gave his assent, they placed him on a chair and carried him on their shoulders to Yumbu Lhakang. According to their wishes, he became the first king of Tibet and was called Ngya-Thri-Tsan-Po, meaning “chair-borne-king” or “enthroned on the shoulders” (Ngya = back, Thri = chair, Tsan-Po = powerful one or king)

It was Ngya-Thri-Tsan-Po, who in 2nd century B.C., built the palace of Yumbu Lhakang, the home of the Yarlung kings till the 7th century. Even after the capital was shifted to Lhasa, Tibet's ancient kings continued to look to Yarlung as their true homeland until the end of the monarchy in the 9th century.²⁰ The castle of Yumbu Lhakang, located 12 km south of Tsethang, is perched on a pinnacle above the valley.

Though Tibet's history goes back to several thousand years when its nomadic tribes led attacks on the borders of north-west China, it was Ngya-Thri-Tsan-Po, who in 127 B.C., successfully united Tibet as a single nation.²¹

There are many different stories relating to the origin of the first king of Tibet; each has its own unique version of the origin. However, we can base our assumption on a reliable source. This is found in Jam-Pal-Tsa-Gud (Sanskrit, Manjusrimula Tantra), which has a record of Lord Buddha's own saying, where it is mentioned:

“A person will be born in the North, who will after embracing the Tathagata's doctrine, render service to it in various ways. The country will be called Lha-Den ('seat of god,' Lhasa). It will be situated in the midst of mountains. The king will be called Miyi-Lha (people's god, Srong-Tsan-Gampo). He will belong to the Lichahavi race.”²²



The palace of Yumbu Lhakhang near Lhasa in central Tibet was the home of the Yarlung kings.

Many authors who rely on this book as a source of information believe that the royal race of Tibet descended from King Dasaratha, who belonged to the race of the Lichahavi Shakyas. Although the stories relating to the identity of the prince who came to Tibet from India differ, yet it is generally believed that a prince of the Shakya family from India went to Tibet and became its first king in 2nd century B.C., and his name was Ngya-Thri-Tsan-Po. Moreover, the Tibetan's traditional belief regarding the origin of the first king, who was a member of the Lichahavi branch of the Shakya tribe, supports the story relating to the prince who descended to Tsethang from the hill called Lhari in Central Tibet.²³ Thus, we have a combination of myths, fables and legends which account for the origin of the first king of Tibet.

The Spread of Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism took its root in Tibet in the second half of the 7th century A.D. Before this period, the Tibetans had their indigenous Bon religion. The Bon religion (shamanism) was believed to have been founded by Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, who lived in Central Asia. According to Bon historians, Tonpa Shenrab was an enlightened being, who first taught in a land called Olmo Lungring, believed to be in the spiritual realm. Some modern scholars have identified Olmo Lungring with Shangshung (Zhang-zhung), the country surrounding Mount Kailash in western Tibet and the cradle of ancient Tibetan civilisation.

The mysterious land of Olmo Lungring is said to be part of a larger geographical region to the northwest of Tibet called Tazig, which scholars identify with Iran or, more properly, Central Asia. According to the "gZer-mig," the traditional etymology of the name Olmo Lungring is as follows: "Ol" means "unborn," "Mo" "undermined," "lung" "the prophetic words of Shenrab" and "rings" "everlasting compassion." According to the "gZi-brjid," Olmo Lungring was also known as Shambhala in Sanskrit, and it continues to be known by this name among Tibetan Buddhists even today. ("gZer-mig" and "gZi-brjid" are canonical works of the Bonpo tradition.)

Bonpos claim that Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche lived some 18,000 years ago, and visited Kongpo in southern Tibet from the land of Tagzig Olmo Lungring or Shambhala. Olmo Lungring is believed to be the capital of the Shangshung Empire.²⁴

Bonpo sources say Tiwor Sergyi Jhagruchen was the first of the eighteen Shangshung (Zhang-zhung) kings who ruled Tibet before the coming of King Nya-Thri-Tsan-Po.

The ancient kingdom of Shangshung



Ancient maps showing Zhang-Zhung (Shangshung), cradle of ancient Tibetan civilisation. (balkhandshambhala.blogspot.com)

Tonpa Shenrab or Shenrab Miwo – also called Buddha Shenrab, Guru Shenrab, Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, Lord Shenrab Miwo, and known by a number of other titles – is the founder of the Bon religious tradition of Tibet.

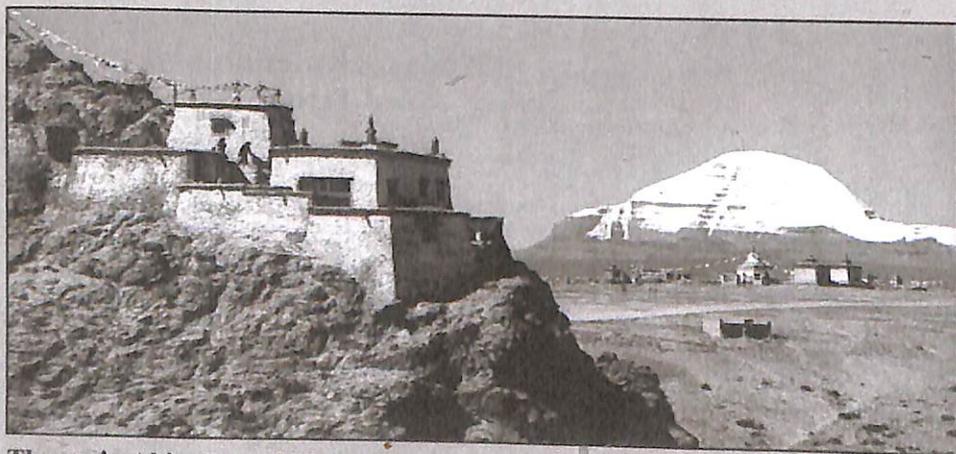
According to Bon tradition, Tonpa Shenrab pre-dates Padmasambhava and the Buddha Sakyamuni.

Zhang Zhung or Shang Shung was an ancient kingdom of western and northwestern Tibet. It pre-dates the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet. Its culture is associated with the Bon religion, which has influenced Tibetan Buddhism.

The Zhang Zhung culture was centred on sacred Mount Kailash and extended to a wide geographical area. The capital city of Zhang Zhung was called Khyunglung, the "Silver Palace of Garuda," located southwest of Mount Kailash. It is identified with palaces found in the upper Sotlej Valley. The Zhang Zhung built a towering fort, Chugtso Dropo, on the shores of sacred Lake Dangra, from which they exerted military power over the surrounding district in Central Tibet. (Wikipedia)



Lord Tonpa Shenrab Miwoche, founder of pre-Buddhist Bon religion of Tibet.



The ancient kingdom of Zhang-Zhung was centred around Mt. Kailash in Tibet.

According to the *Annals of Lake Manasarowar*, during the reign of these kings the Shangshung Empire consisted of 18 kingdoms in the west and northwest portion of Tibet. The Shangshung culture was centred on the sacred Mount Kailash and extended west to Sarmatians and present-day Ladakh and

Baltistan, southwest to Jalandhar, south to the kingdom of Mustang in Nepal, east to include Central Tibet, and north across the vast Chang Tang plateau and the TakLamakan desert to Shanshan. Thus, the Shangshung culture controlled the major portion of the "roof of the world."

Shangshung is believed to be the original home of the pre-Buddhist Bon religion. Despite the attempts of the neighbouring Yarlung king, Drigum Tsenpo, of Central Tibet to remove the influence of Shangshung by expelling Bon priests from Yarlung, Shangshung continued its dominance of the region until it was annexed by the Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo in the 7th century.

As one of the world's oldest living religions, the Bon tradition maintains a record of 9,000 years of its existence in Central Asia, including the Himalayan region.²⁵

One of the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim were the Bonpas of the Bhutia community. The worship of mountain gods in Sikkim such as that of Khangchendzonga (Kanchenjunga) were practised by both the Lepchas and Bhutia Bonpas. In Sikkim, the major clans of the Bonpas are Bonpa Nagdig, Bonpa Lhasung, Bonpa Yochag, Bonpo Napon and Bonchung. The Sikkimese Bonpas are among the eight families traditionally known as Bep-tsang-gyed, meaning "the eight respectable names."²⁶

The new kingdom, known as Bod (Central Tibet), came into being at Yarlung and Chongyas valleys in southern Tibet after the decline of the Shangshung Empire, when its last king, Ligmigya, was killed at the behest of King Songtsen Gampo around 645-49 A.D. Thereafter, the rule of the Chogyals (religious kings), which began in 127 B.C., when King Nya-Thri-Tsan-Po was enthroned, started flourishing.

The factors that helped establish and propagate Buddhism in Tibet were many, but the factors among these two are most important. The introduction of the Tibetan script made it possible for the Tibetans to learn more of the new religion in their own language. The kings who came after King Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri-Nyen-Tsen (born about 173 A.D) helped to spread the new religion through religious literature, enforced laws and other means. The kings themselves were very religious, and the people were encouraged to follow their example.

King Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri-Nyen-Tsen was the 28th king in descent from King Nya-Thri-Tsan-Po, the first king of Tibet. He reigned for eight years, and in his 80th year, he received a wonderful gift from heaven. This event is believed to be an intervention of the supernatural. While he was sitting on the roof of the Yumbu Lhakang palace, a precious chest containing three items descended from the heavens right on top of the roof of the palace. A voice from heaven uttered these words during this miraculous event, "The fifth king in descent from you will be able to unfold the meaning of the book."²⁷ The king kept this auspicious occasion a secret, referring to the book as Nyenpo Sangwa

(The Secret). Some sources say that the book was brought from India and not received from the sky.²⁸

The three articles which came from heaven were two books written with jewel water on gold leaves, a golden miniature shrine set with jewels and enclosing a crystal gem and cup. Although the people did not know what these precious items were, they treated them with great faith and reverence. Unfortunately, as they did not have their written language and could not read or write, they did not know the contents of the book. These relics were placed on the throne with rubies and other jewels. The front part was always kept alight, and the people came to worship in this place all the time.

The third in descent from King Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri-Nyen-Tsen was the blind king. A wonderful thing happened during his coronation. While worshipping the sacred relics, he, at once, regained his lost sight. This miraculous event strengthened the people's faith in these relics.

The study of astrology and medical science were introduced in Tibet from China at the time of the fourth king in descent from the above king. His name was Nam-Ri-Srong-Tsan. Salt mines were also discovered in the north at this time. Nam-Ri-Srong-Tsan reigned over Tibet for about fifty years, beginning from 570 A.D.

Chogyal Srong-Tsan-Gampo ("straight forward, strict and profound,") the son of Nam-Ri-Srong-Tsan, was a very pious and righteous ruler, and is believed to be an incarnation of Chenrezi (Avalokiteshwar, the Buddha of Compassion). Born in the year 617 A.D, Songtsen Gampo, the thirty-third king of Tibet, unified the land, founded the Yarlung's Tubo Dynasty and reigned from 630-649 A.D. In ancient China, Tibet was known as Tubo, and it was Songtsen Gampo who first established the Tubo Kingdom. He was the first king who introduced the art of writing in Tibet. Before this, the Tibetans did not have their own script and hence, any study of religious books was, therefore, not possible.

A contemporary of Islamic Prophet Muhammad (570-622 A.D), the founder of Islam and the famous Chinese pilgrim-scholar, Hiuen Tsan,²⁹ King Songtsen Gampo realised the need for a written language for religious as well as administrative purposes. He sent his minister Lotsawa-Thonmi-Sambo-Ta of the Thonmi tribe to India along with sixteen other scholars. Their main task was to study the Sanskrit language and the sacred literature of Indian Buddhists. After studying this language, they were to devise a written language (or script) for Tibet by adapting the Sanskrit alphabet for use with the phonetics of the Tibetan dialect.

They were very successful in their mission. On their return in 647 A.D, they framed the present two-fold system of writing viz. the "*U-Chen*" (headed or capital) and the "*U-Med*" (headless or running hand). The former was adopted from Sanskrit Lantsa (Devanagari) and the latter from Warty (Urdu). Thus, for

the first time, the Tibetan language appeared in written form. "He (Thonmi-Sambo-Ta), together with his pupils and colleagues, undertook one of the greatest literary ventures of mankind which continued for a thousand years, up to the end of the 17th century A.D.... Whatever had been developed in India by way of religion and philosophy was made available to the Tibetan people."³⁰ However, many sources are of the opinion that Shangshung language and script also influenced the development of Tibetan script.

At this time, Hiuen Tsan, the greatest Chinese "Master of Law," also joined the University of Nalanda in northern India to study Sanskrit. King Songtsen Gampo married two princesses. The one from China, Princess Wen-Cheng, was the daughter of the powerful Chinese Emperor Tai-Tsung, the founder of the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D). The other, a Newari lady from the Nepal King Amsuvarman, was known as Princess Bhrikuti Devi. This princess brought with her, as part of her dowry, an image of the Akshobhya Buddha and the begging bowl which once belonged to Lord Buddha. Both these queens were revered as incarnations of the goddess Tara.³¹



Tibetan King Songtsen Gampo (centre), Princess Wencheng of China (right) and Bhrikuti Devi of Nepal (left).

(Wikipedia)

China and Nepal were two great centres of Buddhism during this period, and through these queens, Buddhism took a firmer hold in Tibet. With the influence of these two wives, the king himself became an ardent Buddhist. The Rasa-Trul-Nang, later known as Jokhang Temple (Jowo Khang means chapel of the Buddha), was built in 653 A.D. The king founded the city of Lhasa,

which later became the capital of Tibet. He not only built a fortress on the Red Hill (Potala), but also built the Jokhang and Ramoche temples in Lhasa to house the sacred Buddha statues brought by his two queens.

Thus, King Songtsen Gampo fulfilled the prophecy of Lord Buddha found in the Manjushrimula Tantra, and the prophecy which came as a voice from heaven to King Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri-Nyen-Tsen, when he received the precious gifts.

Though King Lha-Tho-Tho-Ri-Nyen-Tsen first introduced Buddhism in Tibet, it was during Songtsen Gampo's reign that Buddhism took a firmer hold and was made the State Religion. The consolidation of Tibet as a nation and the conquests of several areas beyond Tibet's border added to the prestige and power of the Tibetan people. When Songtsen Gampo "came to the throne, he resolutely increased his military prestige to such an extent that King Amsuvarman of Nepal in the South, and later the powerful Chinese Emperor, T'aitung, in the North, thought it wise to seek an alliance with him and respect his ardent wishes by giving their own royal princesses to him in marriage."³²

After Songtsen Gampo died in 650 A.D., "...his successors carried their conquests deep into Chinese territory and extended their patronage of Buddhism further. During this period, Tibet conquered Chinese Turkistan and occupied Kashgarh and Khotan, and in the west, the whole of Ladakh and even Hunza and Swat. In the south, Tibet conquered Nepal and Sikkim, and Tibetan armies even occupied some portions of North Bengal. Tibetan armies also penetrated the Chinese frontiers several times."³³

One of the most important events in Tibet took place five generations after this period. Tibet's most illustrious ruler, King Trisong Deutsen, was born in 730 A.D. When Thi-Song-Deu-Tsen (Trisong Deutsen, reign 755-797) came to the throne in the second half of the 8th century, Tibet became one of the most powerful nations. During his reign, the Tibetans captured Chang-An (Sian), the capital of the Chinese Tang Dynasty (618-906) in 763 A.D. A stone pillar erected in front of the Potala in Lhasa, commemorating Tibetan conquest of several Chinese provinces, still stands to this day.³⁴

"The greatest spread of Tibetan power and of Buddhism took place in the time of the thirty-seventh king, Thi-Song-Deu-Tsen, who came to the throne in 755 A.D. His armies conquered the whole of Kansu and the greater part of Szechwan and Yunan provinces of south-western China, and even succeeded in capturing the Chinese capital Ch'ang-an or Sian and putting a new Emperor on the throne who, however, reigned for a short time only."³⁵ Thus, Trisong Deutsen became the most powerful Emperor of Tibet. During his reign, Tibet's empire crossed the Pamirs and touched the domains of the Arabs and Turks.

It was Trisong Deutsen who introduced codes of civil and criminal justice and standard weights and measures of India in Tibet. In the footsteps of his predecessors, he patronised the study of Tibetan literature and religious

translations with the help of Indian scholars. During his reign, Guru Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) and Pandit Shantarakshita (Tibetan, Khen-Chen-Shewa-Tso) were invited to Tibet in the year 749 A.D.



Statue of Guru Rinpoche in Samdruptse, Namchi, South Sikkim.

Many people in Sikkim believe that Lord Padmasambhava (from Urgyan or Oddiyana in Swat Valley in present northwest Pakistan), locally known as Guru Rinpoche, visited Sikkim during his sojourn in Tibet. He is believed to have flown from India to Chungthang, a village located at the confluence of Lachen (Teesta) and Lachung rivers in North Sikkim. Local people believe that the footprints on the big rock in Chungthang are proof of the Guru's arrival in this place. The footprints are said to be the Guru's footprints, and the area is traditionally regarded as an important pilgrimage place for Buddhists in the region. Surprisingly, some paddy is grown in front of the rock on a small patch of land. Paddy is not found anywhere else in this area but only in this particular spot. The story goes on to point out that the Guru, while having his meal, dropped some rice on the ground and hence, the explanation of the growth of paddy in this area.

The people have another story relating to the building of the famous Samye monastery, which stands fifty miles to south-east of Lhasa on the banks of Tsangpo (Brahmaputra) river. It is said that whatever the workers built during the day was destroyed at night. This happened many times, and the people believed that it was the work of evil spirits. Guru Padmasambhava, a teacher of

mysticism and tantrism³⁶ at the Nalanda University in northern India, was well known for his magical powers. He was invited to Tibet for the task of building the Samye monastery and introducing Buddhism in Tibet. Before the introduction of Buddhism, the local Bon (shamanism) religion prevailed in Tibet.

It took about 12 years to build the great Samye monastery. Some sources say it was built by 787 A.D, but others say it was completed in 766 A.D. After the completion of the monastery, many Tibetans were converted to Buddhism and some were ordained as priests. As many as one hundred persons were sent to India to translate Buddhist scriptures into Tibetan script.



Samye Gumpa, located in southern Tibet, north of Sikkim, is Tibet's first Buddhist monastery.
(www.sacred-destinations.com)

The triumph of Indian Buddhist pundits and scholars, led by Padmasambhava over their Chinese counterpart during a debate between the Indian school and Chinese school (Chan Buddhism, a forerunner of Zen) held in Tibet in 792 A.D, marked a very important chapter for laying the foundation of Buddhism in Tibet. This historic event led to the establishment of the Indian doctrine and banishment of the Chinese school from Tibet. While the Indian laid emphasis on observance of good moral code of conduct for achieving salvation, the Chinese, on the other hand, stressed on achieving enlightenment through meditation and sudden insight.³⁷

King Trisong Deutsen had four sons – Mutri Tsenpo, Mune Tsenpo, Mutik Tsenpo and Sadnalegs (Khri-lde-srong-btsan, or Tride Songsten). One of them, possibly Mutik Tsenpo, who migrated eastwards and became Gyalpo (king or princelet) of Kham-Minyag-Audong (Audong is a family name), one of the eighteen quasi-Tibetan principalities in eastern Tibet, is said to be the ancestors of Sikkim's Namgyal Dynasty. Mutri Tsenpo, the eldest son, died young. After Trisong Deutsen's retirement Mune Tsenpo, the second son took over the reign of power in 797 A.D. Since Mune Tsenpo had no heirs, power passed to his younger brother, Sadnalegs, who became king in 804 A.D.³⁸ Mutik Tsenpo could not be enthroned as he is said to have murdered a senior minister and was banished to Lhodak Kharchu near the Bhutanese border in southeastern Tibet.³⁹

It is also interesting to note the account of Trisong Deutsen's sons in Tulku Thondup's book, *Masters of Meditation and Miracles*, where it says that the king had three sons and two daughters. The name of the eldest son was Mune Tsepo, the middle one was Murup (or Murum) Tsepo, and the youngest was Mutik (or Mutri alias Senalek Jing-yon) Tsepo. The book also goes to point out that Prince Murup accidentally killed a son of a minister and was banished to the northern Tibetan border with China as a military commander. Prince Murup also lived in Kongpo in southern Tibet bordering Bhutan. During his exile and under his command, the Tibetans defeated Chinese and Turkish forces. It is also important to note that all three sons of King Trisong Deutsen were disciples of Guru Rinpoche.

The third dharma king who helped establish Buddhism in Tibet was King Ralpachen. He was the 41st king of Tibet and grandson of King Trisong Deutsen. His father, Sadnalegs, had five sons – Tsangma, Lang-Darma, Tri Ralpachen, Lhaje and Lhundup. The eldest son became a monk and the last two died during their childhood.

At the time of Ralpachen (806-841 A.D.), several pundits from India were invited to Tibet to help propagate Buddhism in Tibet. His zeal and devotion for his faith was great.

“In the first year of his reign, he called a Great Council which was attended by Indian and Tibetan scholars who discussed ways to propagate Buddhism in Tibet. As a result of that council, a number of scholars cooperated in revising the language, inventing figures of speech, polishing the literary style, coining new words, accurately defining logical and philosophical terms, formulating rules for writing and translating books. The result was the creation of an elegant and accurate language, replete with precise philosophical terms and beautiful figures of speech, thanks to which the perfect authenticity of the texts translated into Tibetan was now ensured. Sutras, Tantras and the writings of Indian scholars were translated, as well as noncanonical literature dealing with astrology, medicine, poetry, drama, fiction, etymology, Sanskrit grammar, political science and the art of invocation.”⁴⁰

King Ralpachen's reign (815-836 A.D.) witnessed the establishment of many monasteries, temples and libraries. He also encouraged Buddhist arts of painting and image-making, and this helped spread Buddhism far and wide. It is said that the first history of Tibet came to be written during his reign, which also saw the extension of Tibet's boundaries.⁴¹

During his reign, thirty monasteries were founded, and the system of priesthood was also established. These priests followed the order very strictly and were trained to become learned men in the Buddhist faith. The three greatest Tibetan kings – Songtsen Gampo (617-698 A.D), Trisong Deutsen (742-798 A.D), and Tri Ralpachen (806-841 A.D) – were all devout Buddhists and did many things to promote Buddhism in Tibet. With the rise of Buddhism in Tibet, the Tubo Kingdom became increasingly powerful, and its military power almost became comparable to that of the Tang Dynasty in neighbouring China.

Decline of Buddhism: Bonism vs Buddhism

Unfortunately, King Ralpachen was assassinated by his jealous brother, Lang-Darma, leader of pro-Bonist faction. With the help of his anti-Buddhist followers, Lang-Darma placed himself on the throne. His main aim was to revive the ancient Bon religion and put an end to Buddhism in Tibet. During his reign (838-842 A.D)⁴² many Buddhists were severely persecuted for their faith and had to seek safety elsewhere.

“Reaction came in 836 with a coup d’etat led by the nobility. Re-Pa-Gyen (Ralpachen) was assassinated, and even the life of his recluse brother who had renounced the world was not spared. The conspirators then put their choice on the throne, Lang-Dar-Ma, the persecutor. Tibetan chroniclers were unanimous in painting him as the most wicked man ever born in this world. The Chronicles of the Tang Dynasty also described him as a man of cruel and lascivious nature and given to wine. He destroyed Buddhist temples, including Tsu-La-Khang and Ra-Mo-Ch’e in Lhasa, and ordered many monasteries to be closed and the monks revert to the laity or face banishment. Persecution continued for several years, during which Buddhist leaders had to flee the country. The king appointed one of the murderers of his brothers as Prime Minister, and filled all important posts with anti-Buddhist noblemen. Tibetans condemn them summarily as incarnations of demons.”⁴³

Lang-Darma, the apostate king's rule lasted only for a short while. His ruthless suppression of Buddhism angered many people and in 841-842 A.D.⁴⁴ A monk named Lhalung Palgye Dorji who, after killing the king, fled to Kham in eastern Tibet.⁴⁵

“Lhalung Palgye Dorje set out for Lhasa, wearing a black hat and a black cloak with a white lining. He smeared charcoal on his white horse and

concealed his bow and arrow in the long, flowing sleeves of his cloak. When he reached Lhasa, he left his horse tied near a *choeten* (stupa) on the banks of the river and walked into the city. He found King Lang Darma and his courtiers reading the inscription of the treaty-pillar located in front of the Jokhang Temple.

Prostrating himself before the King, the monk freed his bow and arrow without being detected and then, standing up, he fired an arrow straight at the King's heart. While the King was in his death throes and the people around thrown into confusion, Lhalung escaped to the river bank. Mounting his horse, he forced it to swim across the river to wash the charcoal away and then, reversing his cloak so only the white lining showed, he returned to Yerpa by a devious route."⁴⁶

The decline of Buddhism in Tibet, which began when Lang-Darma assumed the throne in 836-38 A.D., led to the collapse of the Tibetan Empire. During this period that lasted for more than four hundred years (842-1247 A.D.)⁴⁷ Tibet not only lost much of its territories on all sides but the Tibetan kingdom broke into a number of independent principalities whose chieftains fought against each other on petty matters. The end of the Tubo Dynasty, which ruled Tibet since the time of King Songtsen Gampo, also witnessed the eclipse of Buddhism.⁴⁸

Lang-Darma had a son from his two queens. The son of the youngest queen was the king's actual son. His name was Nah-Dag-Wod-Srung (O-Sung, meaning 'protected by the light' as he had to hide the child from the elder queen).⁴⁹ But the son of the eldest queen was an imposition. This son was not her own child. She had picked up this child from a beggar and treated him as her own. This was done out of jealousy of the other queen. No one could say anything against her as she was a powerful lady who was determined not to let the truth be known. This son was called Ga-Dag-Yum-Stan (Yumtan, meaning "supported by mother.")⁵⁰

After a dispute between the two princes over the issue of the succession to the throne, Yum-Stan became the next king. He followed Lang-Darma's footsteps and became an ardent anti-Buddhist king. Wod-Srung, a pro-Buddhist, was regarded as the legitimate successor by his followers. This led to increased hostility between the two groups (Buddhist and Bonist) which resulted in many petty kingdoms and dynasties rising up from the splinters of the royal house. The descendants of Wod-Srung travelled towards the west and founded a kingdom in Nga-Ri and Ladakh. Descendants of King Songtsen Gampo are still said to be living in Ladakh.⁵¹

With the arrival of Atisha Dipankara (982-1052 A.D.), a renowned Tantric master of the Pala Empire from India, to Tibet in 1042 A.D., Buddhism gradually spread throughout Tibet and flourished in all corners of the land. This gradually led to the founding of four main lineages or schools of Tibetan

Buddhism, which played a significant role in Tibetan history and establishment of Buddhism. The four schools may be classified as – Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug.

While the Nyingma lineage (old one) began after the arrival of Shantarakshita and Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) to Tibet from India in the 8th century, Khon Konchok Gyalpo (1034-1102) founded the Sakya School.⁵² Marpa Lotsawa (1012-1099) laid the foundation of the Kagyu tradition, followed by Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), who founded the Gelug lineage after the establishment of Ganden, the first Gelugpa monastery in Central Tibet in 1409.⁵³

Sakya Rule in Tibet

Political unification of Tibet, under religious supremacy, was brought about by the Yuan emperors (Mongol, 1206-1368). Among the various religious sects in Tibet during that period, the Sakya sect gained prominence. While Konchok Gyalpo founded the first Sakya Monastery in 1073, it was his successor, Kunga Nyingpo, who founded the Sakya sect. The secular power of the Sakyapas in Tibet began when the Sakya Lama, Kunga Gyaltsen (1182-1251),⁵⁴ widely known as Sakya Pandita, converted Prince Godan, the grandson of Mongol ruler Genghis Khan, to Buddhism. In 1247, Prince Godan made the Sakya Pandita the spiritual and temporal ruler of the thirteen *myriarchies* (Trikor Chuksum) in Central Tibet.⁵⁵



Sakya Pandita

Five of the foremost luminaries of the Sakya tradition were the renowned Sachen Künga Nyingpo (1092-1158), Loppön Sonam Tsemo (1142-1182), Jetsün Drakpa Gyaltsen (1147-1216), Sakya Pandita (1182-1251), and Drogön Chogyal Phagpa (1235-1280). Together, they are regarded as The Five Patriarchs of the Sakya tradition.

The Mongol Emperor, Kublai Khan, who succeeded Godan, ruled Tibet through a ministry headed by the “Imperial Preceptor.” One of them was Phagpa Lodro Gyaltsen (1235-1280), nephew and successor of Sakya Pandita, who died in 1251. In 1254,⁵⁶ Kublai Khan, who was also converted to Buddhism, granted Phagpa the supreme authority to be the spiritual and temporal ruler of the whole of Tibet, which comprised of three provinces (Chol-kha-sum): U-Tsang (Central Tibet), Dotod (Kham) and Domed (Amdo).⁵⁷



Yuan Emperor Kublai Khan

Tibet’s Khön family descendants became the hereditary heirs to the leadership of Sakya which has alternated each generation between the Phuntsog Phodrang and Drolma Phodrang. The Sakya Lamas governed Tibet for over 90 years.

From the religious point of view, the most remarkable achievement of the Sakya sect was the compilation of Kangyur and Tengyur, the scriptures of Tibetan Buddhism, in 289 volumes.⁵⁸ While the Kangyur (104 volumes) contains the collection of canonical teachings of the Buddha, the collection of writings by Indian scholars translated into Tibetan is contained in the 185 volumes of the Tengyur.⁵⁹ With the decline of the Yuan Empire (Yuan Dynasty, 1271-1368), particularly after the death of Kublai Khan in 1294,⁶⁰ the power of the Sakya patriarchs gradually came to an end in 1350.⁶¹

For about two hundred years (1358-1566), beginning with the rule of Changchub Gyaltsen (1302-1364)⁶² – a monk of the Phamo Drupa (sub-sect of Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism) and the Governor of Nedong in Central Tibet – in 1358, eleven Lamas of Phamo Drupa (“One from Sow’s Ferry”), based near Tsethang, ruled Tibet for about 86 years. Changchub Gyaltsen founded the Phamo Drupa Dynasty and replaced the Mongol-backed Sakya hegemony in Central Tibet.

Tai Situ Changchub Gyaltsen’s rule in Central Tibet (U-Tsang) began in 1347 when he received the title of ‘Tai-Situ’ (Great Tutor) from the Yuan Emperor. In his attempt to regain the old Tibetan Empire under Songtsen Gampo and Thrisong Deutsen, Changchub Gyaltsen divided the country into thirteen districts (dzongs) from the previous thirteen myriachies and placed them under district magistrates (dzongpons). He himself took the title of ‘Desi’ (Prime Minister).

After the death of the fifth Phamo Drupa ruler, Drakpa Gyaltsen, in 1434, the head of the Rinpung family (related through marriage to Drakpa Gyaltsen) held power between 1436 and 1566.⁶³ The Rinpung rulers, who patronised the Karma Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism, were followed by four generations of Tsangpo kings who ruled from 1566-1642, until Lobsang Gyatso, the 5th Dalai Lama (1617-1682), took control of Tibet with the backing of Gushri Khan (1582-1655), a Mongol ruler of Kokonor.

From 1566 till the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobzang Gyatso, assumed both spiritual and temporal authority over Tibet in 1642, Tseten Dorji, a servant of the Rinpung family, and his two successors, with the title of Depa Tsangpa, ruled Tibet from their seat of power in Shigatse. Tseten Dorji and his successors patronised the Karmapa sect, and with the help of local tribes and the Mongols, ruled Tibet for over seventy-five years. During these troublesome period, the ruling families of Central Tibet (U and Tsang) patronised the Gelukpa and Karmapa sect, sub-sect of Kagyu lineage. The Ming Dynasty (1368-1644), the ruling Han Chinese dynasty of China, favoured the Karmapa sect for royal patronage.

With the advent of the Ching (Manchu Dynasty, 1644-1911), we see the rise of the Gelukpa sect. The coming of the Fifth Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617 to 1682),⁶⁴ heralded a significant change in the history of Tibet. It was the Fifth Dalai Lama, who with the help of the Mongol Prince, Gusri Khan, unified Tibet and laid the foundation of the secular power of the Gelukpa sect in Tibet, which existed till the takeover of Tibet by the Chinese in 1959. The Dalai Lama is still revered as the God-King by almost all the Tibetans throughout the world.

A new era in Tibetan Buddhism and theocratic rule in Tibet began in the 13th century when the first Mongul Emperor of China, Kublai Khan, conferred his spiritual teacher, Phagpa, one of the distinguished Sakya hierarchs, the

sovereignty of Central Tibet during this period. Patronised by the Mongol emperors, the religious and secular authority of the Sakya hierarchs over Tibet lasted for almost a century.⁶⁵ Thus, we see how the political unification of Tibet, which began during the Sakya Dynasty in the 13th century, lasted for over seven centuries (1247-1959).

The origin of the Namgyal Dynasty of Sikkim can be traced back to the reign of the Sakya Dynasty in Tibet. It was during this era that the Sakya Hierarch gave his daughter's hand in marriage to a man who was later to become the cornerstone of the Namgyal Dynasty of Sikkim.

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