

The History, Religion, Culture and Traditions of Bhutia Communities

P.T. Gyamtso



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GVA/HIS

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OF BHUTIA COMMUNITIES

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PREFACE:

From my conversations with our elderly members, the enlightened and conscious youth of the community I found out the fact that the culture, traditions and way of life of the Bhutia community are slowly decaying and the rot is set so strong now that they will gradually vanish and thus wipe out the very identity of the community. There is no standard book brought out on the subject so far for the future generation to study and take up further research on it. Against this backdrop I thought a less voluminous book containing the history, culture, tradition and way of life of the Bhutia community should be brought out in the most simple language for the benefit of the younger generation and the present exercise is an attempt in that direction.

I would be failing in my obligation if I do not mention the contributions made by my wife Mrs. Kunga Gyamtso in the preparation of this book. Besides going through the handwritten manuscript, she offered many valuable and critical inputs, which I have incorporated in the book. I must mention the labour put in by my grand-nephew Mr. Sangay Dorjee for typing out the original mss and incorporating numerous corrections

sometimes changing the whole text. My daughter-in-law Mrs. Sonam Lhamu deserves my thanks for page setting the final manuscript. Ms Karma Denkar my grand niece *besides effecting* numerous typing corrections entered the text in a pen drive in order to save the text from computer virus. She deserves my thanks for her labour.

I would think that my exercise has been richly *rewarded* if the readers particularly the younger generation of our community evince keen interest in the publication and try to improve upon its contents.

5, April 2011

Palden Tsering Gyamtso

HISTORY

From a fairly tender age I have come to realize that the language spoken by a person and the dress worn by him will indicate his distinct identity and origin. The existence of the above parameters is a must for the retention of the culture and tradition of any community in this world. I have therefore developed a strong desire from my younger age to make efforts, which will lead to retain the traditions, culture and language of the Bhutia community. In my humble way I had contributed my mite for this cause but a thought had dawned on me that all the traditions, culture and way of life of the community should be penned down in a book in order that the history, culture, traditions and way of life of the community are not lost in the wilderness due to our ignorance on the subject. My dormant desire to *do so was catalyzed into action when in an informal* conversation with the Chief Minister of Sikkim, Shri Pawan Kumar Chamling while commenting on the work of Study Series being undertaken by his Government covering the religion, culture and traditions of the different communities of the State, he regretted that despite having so many intellectuals among the Bhutia communities, none had come forward to write on the subject which he hoped to keep for the posterity of this community in print form. Stressing upon time change

where communities have come and gone without leaving any mark of their identity, he said that the Bhutia community members should themselves be more concerned than him in preserving their history, culture and traditions which unless brought into print form will be lost in the wilderness and the community will be extinct some day.

It is a telling comment from somebody who is not a member of the community. As a matter of fact this realization should have dawned on ourselves but, callous as we are, none of us have bothered to pay any attention to this important subject so far. In the course of the dialogue when he suggested that I take up the assignment and do a good job of it, I really shuddered and felt hesitant to take up the assignment simply because of the enormity of responsibility which will be thrust upon me on account of the assignment and the fear whether I will be able to do justice to it. I, therefore, took a fairly long time to prepare myself mentally for tackling the subject. In the meantime I consulted a number of reference books and visited places in Himachal Pradesh, Leh and Bhutan, to connect, confirm and correlate events which have bearing on the traditions and culture of Bhutias of Sikkim.

The life style of the Bhutia communities of Sikkim was not organized till the advent of the Namgyal dynasty and it can, therefore, be said emphatically that

the history of Bhutia communities in Sikkim has started with the Namgyal Dynasty. “In the North-West of India in today’s Himachal Pradesh, certain heirs of King Indrabodhi set out eastward in a series of adventurous migrations carried them to the high and distant mountain of Kham in eastern Tibet. Then in the ninth century of the Christian era, a Prince of King Indrabodhi’s blood founded the kingdom of Minyak and from Minyak came the ruling house of Sikkim.”

Twenty five generations after the establishment of Minyak, a Prince of the realm together with his five sons went on pilgrimage to the west. In the great monastery of Sakya, then under construction (1071 A.D.), Lamas were struggling unsuccessfully to erect four giant pillars in the main chapel. With Herculean strength, one of the five sons of Minyak Prince lifted the pillars and set them in place, a feat that earned him the little ‘Kye Bumsa’ (Strength of 1,00,000). He was invited to remain in Sakya where he married the hierarch’s daughter. Eventually, he settled in Chumbi Valley while his four brothers moved further south into what is today’s Bhutan” (SIKKIM – Text by Desmond Doig & Jean Perrin – 1971).

Khe Bumsa was childless. Upon learning that a Lepcha Chief in Kabi Lungtsok possessed prophetic power, he came down to Sikkim from Chumbi Valley to meet this great soul and seek the blessing of a

progeny. In the unpublished history of Sikkim written by Maharani Yeshey Dolma and Maharaja Thutob Namgyal on the basis of information collected from knowledgeable elderly persons of that time, Thekong Tek is described as an incarnate of Guru Rimpochi. Incarnate Lamas are supposed to be the rebirth of some very highly knowledgeable persons whom the people regard as superior to an ordinary layman. The very fact that Thekong Tek has been described as an incarnate of Guru Rimpochi shows that the Lepcha wizard from whom the first forefather of the Chogyals of Sikkim had obtained the boon of a child in the thirteenth century is placed in the highest esteem by the Namgyal Dynasty.

The place of Guru Rimpochi is next to Gautama Buddha in the Vajrayana Buddhism. Thekong Tek blessed Khe Bumsa with three sons and also prophesized that one of the descendents of Khe Bumsa would reign over Sikkim. Lest the descendents of Khe Bumsa and his followers might look down upon the simple ravine folks and exploit them, Thekong Tek got Khe Bumsa to commit to observe an unwritten agreement whereby all the male Bhutia tribes are to be treated as brothers of Lepcha and all female of Bhutia tribes to be treated as sisters of Lepcha tribes. The seriousness of this agreement was solemnized in blood brotherhood by sitting on the raw hides of animals and their intestines entwined around both Thekong Tek and Khe Bumsa and this invoking was done on 15th day of the seventh month

of the Tibetan calendar. Mount Khangchen-dzod-nga which both the Lepcha and the Bhutia tribes worship was kept as witness to this historic agreement and the event is known as Pang Lhabzol literally translated it means worship of witness – reminding the historic signing of the agreement and its implications. Today this event is an inseparable part of the tradition and culture of both the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim. The cold fact divested of glamour is that Phuntsog, one of the four sons of Mipon Rab, a descendent of Khe Bumsa was consecrated as the first Chogyal of Sikkim by three Lamas namely Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo, Gnadag Sempo Chenpo and Kathog Rigzing Chenpo in Yuksam in the year 1642.

While there is not an iota of doubt that the Bhutias of Sikkim are the descendents and followers of Khe Bumsa, the other ethnic minorities of Tibet who are located in 4,60,000 square miles and are divided into more than ten racial groups and known as Lopas, Menpas, Denpas, Sherpas etc. and share common boundaries with China, Mongolia, Kashmir, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, Myanmar and the North Eastern States, cannot be excluded from being clubbed with Bhutia clan if we consider their culture, tradition and life styles. Shri Cai Xiansheng, a Chinese journalist who had spent twenty years in Tibet studying the life styles of various ethnic groups, had mentioned in his write up 'Tibet- Past and Present, Chapter V, Ethnic Minorities

in Tibet' that the Lopas are savage and located in the southern region and the Menpas, Denpas and Sherpas because of geographic isolation from the mainland all have a typical life style and adopted zoom cultivation and they had buckwheat pancakes cooked on thin stone slab as their staple food. The Lopas preferred roasted buckwheat, dried milk curd, a kind of millet as staple food, the Denpas as confirmed smokers and drinkers and both are professed nature fetishists. The Lopas practice divination and exorcism and on occasions like marriage, funerals, foundation laying ceremonies, sowing crops, starting a journey, they kill chickens to see if the grain of the liver is propitious for the undertaking. All these traits are supportive of the fact that the Bhutias, Lepchas and Kirats in all probability may have originated from Tibetan ethnic groups like Lopas, Menpas, Denpas Sherpas etc. It is probable that ethnic groups like Lopas, Menpas, Denpas are the Present day Bhutias, Lepchas and Kirats of Sikkim. I, therefore, strongly believe that a serious anthropological study on the subject will throw more light on it.

'Nepal Ko Jan Jaati Haru' (Nationalities of Nepal) published by His Majesty's Government, Ministry of Local Development, National Committee for Development of Nationalities has mentioned that communities like Bhoty, Sherpa, Dolpa, Lohni, Shingsawa, Lopa, Dokpa and Yolmo are treated as tribals in Nepal. Talking about the Kirats Shri Bal

Chandra Sharma, in his book 'Nepal Ko Itihasic Rup Rekha' has mentioned at page 35 that the Kirats are Tibetan origin and in support as argument he has quoted Sarat Chandra Das's Journal of Asiatic Society, Volume I, Part I page 224-238; even Captain C.J. Morris's book 'Gurkhas' (Government of India publication 1933 page 84-85) supports this point.

There is no doubt that the term Bhutia is a generic name given to the people of Bhot origin and includes "myriads of tribes and clans possessing diverse culture and language and inhabiting over vast geographical boundaries". The descendents of Khe Bumsa and his followers and the various ethnic groups who have crossed over to Sikkim because of greener pastures can be called the Sikkimese Bhutias and they speak a dialect which, I am told by no less a person than Ven. Lachen Gomchen Rinpoche, has many commonalities with the old Tibetan language. Ven. Lachen Gomchen Rinpoche is the fourth incarnate of Naljor Padmai Tsenchen and was born in Yangang, South Sikkim in 1948. He graduated in Nyingmapa studies from the Benaras Hindu University in the year 1973. Today this language has been brought down in print form and is available as one of the subjects for study in the undergraduate curriculum of North Bengal University. The syllabus consists of total 50 marks in BA, B.Com and B.Sc Part I Examinations. It is also one of the official languages of the State Government.

RELIGION

Although no exact date is available for the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, it is generally accepted that the religion came into Tibet in the 7th century of the Christian calendar and it gradually replaced and also to some extent fused with the primitive local religion called 'Bon' giving Tibetan Buddhism a distinctly Tibetan colouring. It is mainly due to the effort of King Songtsen Gampo (618-649) ably supported by his two queens, Princess Wen Cheng from China and Princess Bkrikuti Devi from Nepal, Buddhism set firm foot in Tibet. Today the Tibetan Buddhists worship the Chinese Princess Wen Cheng as 'White Tara' and Nepalese Princess Bkrikuti Devi as 'Green Tara' may be out of gratefulness for unstinted support given by them in the spread of Buddhism in Tibet and one will come across their statues or scrolls in all the major Buddhist monasteries.

"Srongchen Gampo was the first known Tibetan King who unified the nomadic barbaric tribes into one nation and established a kingdom, the boundaries of which extended far and wide and was many times bigger than the Tibet of present day. In order to popularise and make it acceptable to the people, he incorporated Bhyonist practices into Buddhism and vice versa. He patronized the new religion and declared it as the State religion. It was not without any motive that he patronized and preached Buddhism in Bhot. He found it easy to



Palden Tsering Gyamtso was born in Shomoon, Nampung-Lingdok, East Sikkim on 5th April 1941. A commerce graduate of Calcutta university and a civil servant by profession, he was Secretary in the departments of Printing and Stationery, Information

and Public Relations, Industries, Labour, Information Technology, and Excise (Abkari) of Government of Sikkim. He was also Secretary to the Chief Minister. A former Member of Parliament from Sikkim, he had compiled and edited "An Introduction to Sikkimese Songs" in 1969. The book was reprinted under a changed nomenclature "Denzong Sunglu" with further additions by Denzong Lhokmen Kyiduk (Sikkim Culture and Heritage Foundation) in 2009.



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