



TRADITIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN THE DEMOCRATIC POLITY OF SIKKIM

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Abstract:

Sikkim, the 22nd state to join the Indian Union in May 1975, is unique with its coexistence of traditional institutions and modern institutions in a democratic polity. After its merger with India in May 1975, some of the important existing traditions were institutionalized. As for instance, the Sangha seat, reserved for the Monasteries in Sikkim in the 32 member State Legislative Assembly, the *Dzumas*, the traditional village panchayat system, functions of the Ecclesiastical department constitute few examples. The Ecclesiastical department, copied from the medieval past has continued to play a significant role in the religious space of the people. This highlights the beautiful blend of tradition and modernity in its administrative set up.

Key Words: *Buddhist, Chogyal, Dzumas, Ecclesiastical, Lamaism, monasteries, Sangha seat.*

5.1: INTRODUCTION:

Sikkim, indeed, is the only State in the Indian Union which has a seat reserved for the Buddhist monks in the Legislative Assembly constituted in terms of the Constitution of India. The MLA, in this instance, is elected by an electoral college exclusively of the monks. Sikkim also has traditional village panchayats where women's representation is still a taboo. The diktats of these panchayats are respected like the law of the land. The state also boasts of Lamas to perform miracles such as changing the weather on an auspicious day and such activities

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garnering support and finances from the State. Apart from the pristine forests, the snow clad mountains, warm and fertile valleys, roaring torrents and peaceful lakes, gorgeous flora and picturesque fauna, and gloriously glittering insects, Sikkim is also a land where people hold their traditions and customs close to their heart; though some of these may appear to be antithetical to democratic principles. Article 371F of the Constitution, inserted therein specifically with the merger of Sikkim with the Indian union, facilitated the continuity of these practices.

5.2: THE DISCUSSION:

Myths and traditions are not easily overridden; especially when those have been so much interwoven into the lives of the people. It is no longer “an inert historicised segment” (Raymond Williams: 1977) here. So much so, modernity, curiously recesses to accommodate the age-old practices and customs. The 22nd State of the Union of India, Sikkim blends tradition and modernity admirably in its administrative set up and the Ecclesiastical department in Sikkim, an incarnate from the past continues to play a significant role in the religious space of the people even today. The transition from monarchy to democracy was very smooth and riddle free as far as the continuity of the traditional institutions like Ecclesiastical Affairs and *Dzumsas* (traditional village body of Bhutia community in North Sikkim) and the Sangha seat were concerned.

The Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs has had a long history and it had been mentioned in the Administration Reports of the State of Sikkim prepared by the Political Officers since 1889. The 1923-24 report states that the Education and Ecclesiastical departments were placed under the judicial secretary. The Chogyals jealously guarded this spiritual domain even when the popular ministries were formed and diarchy was instituted in Sikkim. This department along with other important subjects such as Forests, Police, Finance, and Land Revenue remained with the Durbar as reserved subjects.

Lamaism and Monarchy, the spiritual and the temporal authorities synchronized completely during the monarchy; so much so, the Tsuklakhang Palace Monastery was witness to many important political events including the signing of the Indo-Sikkim Treaty in 1950. Monasteries were always enjoyed the patronage of the Chogyals. The five big monasteries -



Pemayangtse, Ralong, Phensang, Phodong, Rumtekhad huge tracts of land, benevolently provided by the ruler, under them. The smaller ones also received grant in aid from the Durbar. Incidentally, one of the oldest schools in Sikkim– Enchey monastic school- was established in 1909, by the Oxford-read Chogyal Sidekeong whose rule was shortest one - less than a year - during the 333-years-long dynasty, as he died under mysterious circumstances. At present, there are 97 monastic schools and 11 Sanskrit Pathsalas attached to Hindu Mandirs aided by the state government

Since the merger, the Ecclesiastical department is looking after the external affairs of the 1133 religious institutions (among them a large number are Buddhist monasteries, Manilhakhangs, Lhakhangs and Tsamkhangs) of different faiths of a population below seven lakhs. Prior to the merger, the department under the Durbar was exclusively taking care of the monasteries, even at times interfering in the internal matters of the monasteries.

Of the many activities of the present Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs is procuring material for the Sikkim Almanac. Though the Almanac is published by the Home department of Sikkim, it is the Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs that procures the master copy of the Tibetan calendar well in advance from the Astrological department of Tibetan Medical and Astrological Insititute, Ghangchen Kyishong, situated in Dharmshala, the headquarters of Tibetan Government in exile. The department prepare a list of all the government approved Buddhist Holy Days of the year ahead and submit it to the Home Department for the preparation of the Sikkim Government Calendar.

Yet another special function of this Department is to takes the responsibility of ensuring fine weather by stopping rains, which is plenty and unpredictable in the State, during special occasions like Republic Day, Independence Day and other important state functions. Up on the request from the Home department, the department of ecclesiastical Affairs, request a learned Lama, who is supposed to have possessed spiritual powers, to control the force of nature. The request always comes with a Khada (a long scarf used in all the auspicious occasions in Sikkim) to be offered to the Lama concerned.



The department continue to hold the established tradition of the Bumchu ceremony at Tashiding Monastery. Tashiding Monastery is one of the most sacred and oldest monasteries in Sikkim. It was believed that Guru Rinpoche personally blessed and sanctified this site in 8th century. The Duchi, along with Lamas from the Monastery collect a vase of water from the Rathong Chu (River) in West Sikkim. This water is kept on the Golden Altar under lock and seal for a year. In the mid-night of 14th day of the first Tibetan month of the year, the vase is taken out and water is distributed among devotees. After the ceremony, the vase will be filled with fresh water from Rathong Chu for the coming year. Devotees from Bhutan, Nepal, and even Buddhists from other places attend the ceremony and receive the holy water.

Hence, the Buddhists in Sikkim considered Rathong Chua holy river. Not surprisingly, when the government of Sikkim proposed to construct three dams (99 MW Ting Ting, 96 MW Lethang and 97 MW Tashiding) on the Rathong Chu, the dispirited monks protested against the move, perhaps the first ever organised protest since the 1970s democratic movement in Sikkim. A combined force of the Bhutia- Lepcha Association, the Tribal Women's Association and the Association of Buddhist Monks of Sikkim and prolonged protests, and a march to the capital finally found success. The government relented. The proposal was withdrawn. The sanctity of the river was preserved. However, there was no record available for reference on the stand of the Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs in the whole event.

In the earlier regime, the Chogyal, kept the key and seal of the Altar and during the ceremony in March, handed over the key to Duchi of the monastery. Later on the democratic government introduced a double lock system to ensure further protection of Holy water and Altar. Now the Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs supervise the occasion and make necessary arrangements for the festival.

Duchi measuring the water of the vase and foretelling the year ahead on the basis of the measurement of the holy water is a very important occasion of the Bumchung ceremony. For instance, if the level of the Holy water in the vase, which is measured in cups or tings, found increased, then disturbances and unrest in the State is predicted. Whereas the water level is decreased, it is sign of a possibility of drought and famine. If the level is intact, then it was considered as auspicious and indicative of prosperity of the year ahead. The Duchi of the monastery has to submit a report to Ecclesiastical Department about the omens. If the omen is



bad, then Tenchi Shapten, (prayer for universal peace and prosperity) is performed by the department in consultation with high lamas from important monasteries for the purpose.

5.3: CONCLUSION:

In this way the Department of Ecclesiastical Affairs keeps religions tradition alive in the Sikkim democratic polity. The interesting part is that these archaic practices do not constitute an anomaly to democracy; but it adds charm to the mystic mountainous state along with the colourful and splendid snow-lion and mask dances. Perhaps all these contribute to the Sikkimese identity, unique and fascinating.

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