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HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF MONASTIC LANDHOLDINGS IN SIKKIM

KEY WORDS: Sikkim, Buddhist monastery, land grants

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to present a preliminary picture on how the Buddhist monasteries and their estates were established in Sikkim from 1642 onwards. The tradition of giving land grants to the monasteries by the rulers was an age old system and Sikkimese monasteries were not exception to this. However, this paper also attempts to present the changing situation faced by the monasteries under the British Officer.

INTRODUCTION

The tradition of giving land grants to the monastic communities or the monasteries started from the ancient times in most part of the world. In general, lay Buddhist patron believes in the ancient notion of begging by the Buddhist monk in order to support themselves. But, in practical the burden of running a monastery, almsgiving was regarded as inadequate. As stated by Brook, 'monastery could not simply wait for the food to arrive, the lamps to be filled with oil, and carpenters to set to work using materials freely given'. He also says that, 'when the eating fingers become daily more numerous, begging for food does not meet the need, so the monastery has to have landed property'. Therefore, he says, land is the foundation of a Buddhist abbey (Brook, 2012).

Accordingly, Buddhist monasteries of Sikkim also had large tracts of lands given by the rulers or Chogyals of Sikkim for their survival and maintenance of the monasteries. Like in Tibet, monasteries of Sikkim also acted as a landlord and played very important role in the political and the cultural history of Sikkim.

Development of Buddhist Monasteries and its Estates

From the very beginning of monasticism in Tibet in the eight century CE, monasteries normally possessed economic resources including land, animals and labourers from which a major portion of monk's subsistence and monastic expenses derived (Goldsein & Paljor, nd). Hence, monasteries in Sikkim were no exception to this pattern and almost all the monasteries possessed lands granted to them by the Chogyal. Scholars believed that a group of lamas belonging to Nyingma sect escaping to Sikkim from persecution in Tibet in the mid 1630s, on the eve of the ascendancy of the Gelug sect into political power in Tibet, introduced Buddhism in Sikkim. Some of the important lamas of that time were – Ngadak Phuntsok Rigzin, Lhatsun Namkha Jigme and Kartok Kuntu Zangpo. Among these lamas, Lhasun Namkha Jigme and Ngadak Phuntsok Rigzin played significant role in establishing political, social and economic structure of this land by appointing Phuntsok Namgyal as the first Chogyal of Sikkim in 1642 (Rahul, 1969). Mullard says, after the consecration of Phuntsok Namgyal as a Chogyal, adopted the theory of religio - political known as *chos srid lugs gnyis*. This theory is centred in the idea that governance should include not just the secular work but also the spiritual. Unlike modern western societies where the separation of the spiritual orders and the political realm is the ideal, in Tibetan societies the unification of these two systems are considered the perfect mode of government whereby the religious influences and shapes the political and the political influences the religious. In this way a political figure or government is obliged to actively preserve and promote Buddhism. In this way, the traditional association between the royal patrons (*Yon bdag*) and the lama or religious donee (*mchod gnas*) was developed. Thus, the *mchod yon* relationship between the new king and the lama came into existence and it was with this royal support that the lamas constructed monasteries particularly in the western corners of the state (Mullard, 2011). Within the passage of time many monasteries were constructed under different Chogyals and some of the monasteries became very strong. Basically there were five big monasteries collectively known as Gyen chen nga and they

were Pemayangtse, Tashiding, Rumtek, Phodong and Phensang. Out of this, Pemayangtse became one of the greatest monasteries in Sikkim.

Pemayangtse, constructed during the tenure of Phuntsok Namgyal. However, it is believed that, Phuntsok Namgyal and Lhatsun Chenpo would have together chosen the locations of Pemayangtse monastery on a hill situated to the south of Yoksum and according to Melanie, Phuntsok Namgyal and Lhatsun Chenpo would have set the functioning principles of Pemayangtse. But the construction year of Pemayangtse was not known and it was only erected as a durable institution in 1705 under the rule of third Chogyal, Chagdor Namgyal (1686 – 1717). The monastery was intended to play a unique role in the kingdom: its lamas would be the king's spiritual masters. Thus, while founding the monastery, the first Chogyal and its religious master institutionalised the relation of chaplain and donor by which they were already linked (Meliene, n.d.). However, there is a contradiction regarding the spiritual master or religious preceptor of Chogyal Phuntsok Namgyal and also the 'patron saint' of Sikkim as Mullard says, Phuntsok Rigzin occupied prominent role during the reign of Phuntsok Namgyal and acted as a religious master to the king. Whatever may be the case, Pemayangtse became one of the prominent monasteries during reign of Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal. The arrival of Jigme Pawo in Sikkim in 1709 from Tibet brought fundamental changes in Sikkimese society. He first transformed Pemayangtse monastery from a minor monastery into Sikkim's most important monastery and the dominant religious tradition in Sikkim. At the same time, he also created the system of monastic estates. The main motive behind the creation of Pemayangtse into one of the most important monastery of Sikkim is that, Jigme Pawo himself was recognised as the third incarnation of Lhatsun Chenpo and like other incarnate lamas, he also strengthened his monastery (Mullard, 2011). Under the influence of Jigme Pawo, Chogyal Chagdor Namgyal issued a land grant detailing the territory of this Pemayangtse's estate. According to the Palace Archive records, 'Pemayangtse estate extended from the ridge on which the monastery stands north to the Rathong River, north-west to Khechopalri and south to Rgyal zhing (Gyalshing) and Legshib and the Ga led River'(Mullard & Wangchuk, 2010). Thus, Pemayangtse become one of the major monastery in Sikkim and one of the interesting feature of this monastery was a rule was set up by both Jigme Pawo and Chogyal that only a son from high Bhutia clan can be admitted to this monastery where as boys from other lower clans have to pay certain fees to get admission into Pemayangtse (Sinha, 1975). Similarly, other monasteries also received lands from Chogyal as well as lay Buddhist donors. The Sikkimese monasteries were given the rights to collect taxes from the villagers settled within their estates in order to support the monks and to perform various religious activities.

According to Namgyal and Dolma, 'Sikkimese monasteries did not possess lands given by the Chogyal, but each were authorised to collect contributions from certain villages named to support them' (Namgyal & Dolma, 1908). It means that, the monasteries do not own the lands granted by the rulers but had powers to collect taxes

from the peasants for their survival, whilst, monasteries and lamas were exempted from all kind of taxes and labour services to the king. Moreover, monasteries also acted as a central of administration to their villagers and solve petty cases.

Regarding to lord-peasant relationship under the monastic estates, all the monks acted as collective landlord where the head lama appoints senior monks as different officials to look after various matters of the monastery and one of the official were given the authority to collect taxes from the villagers on behalf of the monastery. Before the Nepalese immigration, the peasants or the families connected to the monastic estate was known as '*Miser*'¹² who were bound to the monasteries. The *miser* has to pay their rents on land and at the same time, they have to render labour services to the monastery along with tilling the monastery's demesne land. Some of the big monasteries like Pemayangtse also possessed landless *miser* or landless labourers who were attached to the monastery and were expected to cook, bring firewood and water for the lamas as well as to cultivate the monastery's fields in exchange for a percentage of the harvest (Balicki, 2008).

However, the British Land Settlement Programme implemented from 1889 onwards, brought many changes in the land holding system in Sikkimese monasteries. The traditional land grants given to the monasteries were collected by the British official, J.C. White and were redistributed and leased out to lessee landlords. As part of White's land reform, Sikkim's thirty five monasteries lost part or all their land holdings with the exception of five important monasteries – Pemayangtse, Tashiding, Phodung, Rumtek and Phensang. However, the position of these five monasteries changed under this new land revenue system. These five monasteries were given a function similar to those of the landlords or manager of landed estates. Similar to other landlords, monasteries were given *pattas* for a certain period of time which shows that monasteries do not own the land permanently under British administration. The monasteries could collect taxes on their respective estates, but have to pay back the house tax to the state and could keep other taxes like land rent for religious activities. They also had the right on tenants' labour services. Under this new system, within the monastic estates, tenants like *Pakhureys* and *Chakhureys* were found which is basically a new term brought by the Nepalese settlers. The exact meanings of these terms are not clear but some scholars say that, the *Pakhureys* were landless agricultural labourers just like landless *miser* settled under the monasteries. It has been noted that, they would receive plots in those estates in lieu of their services of manual labour rendered by them to the monastery and the lamas. Since there were no terms and conditions laid down for this compulsory labour, normally the tenants had to send one member of their family for such labours daily or whenever required by the monastery (Upadhyay, 2017).

CONCLUSION

Due to the British land reform policy, monasteries lost all or part of their land which they enjoyed since decades. Although they were provided with subsidy annually, most of the monasteries began to face financial problems. There were many cases of monks moving out of the monastery since it became impossible to maintain strong monk-body once the monasteries were stripped of their land holdings. In addition to that, monks of these monasteries lost their privileges and obliged to pay taxes to the state. Thus, monasteries lost their influence over political activities of the state under the British Officer.

1. Chogyal is a Tibetan word, meaning, a ruler or a king who ruled according to the religious law or dharma.
2. According to Goldstein, Miser was those peasants who were hereditary bound to manorial estates and under the judicial/ administrative authority of the lord of such estates. Misers held hereditary tax base fields from their lord and were physically bound to manorial estates.

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