



## Buddhism in Sikkim:

### A Study in Cultural Syncretism

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#### ABSTRACT

This study aims at 'de-mystifying' the diverse Buddhist culture of Sikkim through an analysis of its origins, belief systems, symbols, architecture, as well as the evolving culture of the monasteries using audio and visual documentation and interviews as tools. At the same time it attempts to document the cultural assimilation of other traditions (such as Hinduism) into this religious tradition. It was observed that the religious practices of Buddhism in Sikkim were influenced by the dominant Hindu religion and pre-Buddhist religions such as Bonism. The religious assimilation of different cultures in Buddhism is mainly seen in the ritualistic practices while the architectural style was influenced by the Tibetan and localized artistic forms. This assimilation can be widely viewed among the recently-converted Buddhists, that is, the Tamang and Gurung castes.

Keywords: Buddhism, culture, philosophy, rituals, Sikkim, Tibetan.

#### INTRODUCTION

About 2,500 years ago, Shakyamuni Buddha attained enlightenment after many years of intensive spiritual practice, leading to the development of one of the world's great religions. Standing for compassion, forbearance, love, non-violence and patience, Buddhism further percolated to the neighbouring countries forming its own identity therein. As heresy against Brahmanism, it sprang from the kshatriya clans of eastern India and advocated the middle path.

Traditionally, Buddhism is divided into three vehicles or routes to enlightenment: the Hinayana, Mahayana, and Vajrayana. The Hinayana school, of which only Theravada remains, focuses primarily on the teachings of Shakyamuni Buddha, including his guidance to develop meditative awareness and to cease all negative emotions and actions that bind us, lifetime after lifetime, to this suffering existence called *samsara*. Mahayana includes much of what is taught in Hinayana, emphasizing the altruistic motivation for practitioners to attain complete enlightenment. Vajrayana or tantra, means "continuum" or "unbroken stream" from ignorance to enlightenment.

It was the latter, Vajrayana Buddhism, that made a deep impact on Sikkim lying on the “crossroad of civilization and cultures”. In close proximity with Tibet, it has been immensely influenced by Tibetan culture, while retaining the dominant Hindu tradition. It was the socio-religious assimilation of these two great religious traditions, and the impact of this cultural congruence over Buddhism in Sikkim that this team wanted to map in the research undertaken under the auspices of Delhi University’s ‘Gyanodaya’ project, December 2014. The goal was ultimately to trace the cultural heritage of Buddhism in Sikkim and to identify it as a rich and unique artefact.

## METHODOLOGY

The research was conducted by collecting data through interviews, observation and audio-visual documentation. Attempts were made to experience and understand the diverse culture of the land through direct participation. Interacting with the monks to come to a better understanding of their beliefs and traditions enriched the research further. Attempting research on the ethnic and historical origins of their rich cultural and traditional heritage through oral histories and documenting lived experiences, the team aimed to trace the evolving identity of the Buddhists. Tracing the differences found within various Buddhist monastic orders in Sikkim through observation and interviews and to find the ‘uniqueness’ of each monastic order was thus the goal of this study. The team visited DO Drul Chorten Monastery, Enchey Monastery, Rumtek Monastery in Gangtok and Ghum Monastery in Darjeeling to achieve its goal. The members also interviewed several monks, lay Buddhists, shopkeepers, tourists and so on.

## RESULTS

Sikkim is known for being the abode of diverse communities. The earliest inhabitants of the state were the Lepcha or ‘Rong pa’, who came from the east, along the foothills, from the direction of Assam and Burma. Today, the Lepcha are generally devout Buddhist who at one time worshipped the spirits of the mountain, rivers and forest as natural resources. Distinct from the Lepchas are the Bhutias, who are people of Tibetan origin. The religion of the Bhutias is also a form of Buddhism specifically called ‘Lamaism’, a Mahayana form including non-Buddhist Indian elements as well as elements of the pre-existing ‘Bön shamanism’. The third community that exists in Sikkim is the Nepali community. With the exception of the Sherpas who are mainly dominant in the extreme west of the state and the Tamangs, both of whom are Buddhists, the Nepalis are at present mostly Hindu by religion with the usual division into castes.

Prior to the incursions of Buddhism, the original religion of the Lepchas and the Bhutias was a form of nature worship, variously referred to as *Pon* (also spelt as *Bon*) or Shamanism. It was a mixture of witchcraft and sorcery with the worship of spirits and ghosts. They had to be worshipped and satisfied with offerings either in the form of a stone, a strip of cloth or a branch. A sorcerer could evoke goodwill instead of bad one, expel the evil spirits who were believed to bring sickness and misfortunes. Sometimes these evil spirits were propitiated by the sacrifice of animals, often they even sacrificed humans. The *bongthing* is a male shaman who presides over religious ceremonies and seasonal festivals along with healing acute illness. The *mun* is a

healer who exorcises demons, helps to heal illness and guides souls to the after-life. Even though the Lepcha people converted to Buddhism in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the indigenous Lepcha shamans manage to co-exist with Buddhist customs and beliefs. Both Buddhist lamas and Lepcha shamans preside at many important ceremonies in Lepcha life, each to perform their individual rituals. In conversation with a local Hindu taxi driver, Vikas Biswa, the team was informed that, “It [tantric ritual practice] is neither Hindu nor Buddhist. It is a ritual which existed before these religions....when you were bitten by a snake or if you are possessed by a spirit, then there were no doctors that could come...then...the *Bijuwa* and *jhakri* came. When someone dies at your home, to prevent you from being possessed by the spirit, they perform prayer and rituals to show the right path to the spirit.... They pray for the happiness and peace of your home.... They live in jungles... We call them if we have any problems like spirit possession or being affected by black magic... In Hinduism, if my mother dies, I need to shave my head and for thirteen days no one touches me. We eat plain food without salt or oil...After those thirteen days we call the *Bijuwa* to conduct the prayers to see if the spirit has gone onwards. If the spirit has not gone, they perform prayers... The Buddhist too call the Lama (when someone dies) who conduct prayers for thirteen to fourteen days. They do the same work as the *Bijuwa* and the *Jhakris* but only their practices and names are different.”

Buddhism was brought into Sikkim and Bhutan, through Tibet in the eighth century by Guru Padmasambhava, the Lotus born also known as the Guru Rinpoche. He was the teacher of mysticism at the Nalanda University in the north of India, and was well versed in Tantricism, an amalgam of Buddhism with primitive beliefs and nature worship, then current in India. The Guru Rinpoche, whose fame as a mystic and teacher had spread across the Himalayas into Tibet, was invited by the Tibetan King, Thi-Strong De-Tsang. Padmasambhava arrived at Samye monastery around the year A.D 747 and through conversion established the first community of the lamas. He also assisted the King in building the first monastery at Samye. Lamaism was then established as a superb mixture of Mahayana Buddhism with local mythology, mysticism and magic.<sup>1</sup> That the relics of Pon as well as Tantric practices in regard to *pranayama*, *aasanas* and *mantras* are essential ingredients of cultural syncretism in Sikkim will be shown in our discussion of Sikkimese Buddhist philosophies, rituals and practices.

There are four Tibetan Buddhist traditions, namely Gelug, Kagyu, Nyingma and Sakya. **Nyingma**, is the oldest school of Buddhism, based on the early translations of Indian Buddhist texts, under the supervision of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche). According to tradition, Padmasambhava brought to Tibet the *termas*, which are texts and sacred objects that he concealed for future practitioners to discover. These have been found over the centuries by *tertons* (treasure finders), either in the physical environment or through personal revelations. According to **Ugyen Rigzin**, a lama (monk) at **Do-Drul Chorten Monastery**, Gangtok (Figure 1), “Nyingma sect is Ancient Buddhism. It came from the second Lord (Guru Rinpoche).... The other sects are from the works of later great scholars and it is not direct from the Guru.... It was prophesied by the Second Lord that his teachings will flourish in the world and in some time, some learned scholar would get some visions and discover the treasure [that he had hidden]”. He further added that the Buddhists of Nyingma sect, ‘pray for

<sup>1</sup> Joshi, H.G. (ed.) (2004). *Sikkim: Past and Present*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications, p.13

taking refuge in three jewels: Dharma, Sangha and Lord Gautam Buddha'. They pray for liberating all beings from *saramsha* or the suffering world.



**Figure 1: Interview of Ugyen Rigzin, Do-Drul Chorten Monastery, Gangtok**

**Kagyü** means “Teaching Lineage” which can be traced back to an Indian master, Tilopa, in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. Kagyü became the first school of the Tibetan Buddhism which based the lineage through identification of enlightened teachers, like, the Karmapa who is revered as a living Buddha by many Tibetans. In this context, a monk at the **Rumtek Monastery, Gangtok**, told the team, “Reincarnation... first came in Tibet... Karmapa is the first reincarnation. Presently we have seventeen reincarnation of Karmapa.... In our tradition, Karmapa has to leave a prediction letter about the place he will be born in, the sign of his mother and father and the date of his birth. Before the present Karmapa passes away he has to write down the prediction letter”.

**Sakya** stands for “Pale Earth” in Tibetan, which represents the color of the ground on which the monastery was established. One of the monks at the Rumtek Monastery informed the team that unlike other sects that choose their leaders through their belief in reincarnation, in Sakya tradition the elder son is considered the successor of this father’s position.

A monk at **Ghum Monastery, Darjeeling**, informed the research team that **Gelug-pa** is one of the newer schools of Buddhism. It was established in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, by Tsongkhapa who emphasised the need for monks and nuns to follow the *vinaya*, the monastic code of ethical conduct that the Buddha had taught.

It was observed by the team that the lay Buddhists believe in multiple gods. As informed by a **member of a Bhutia family**, “We have three gods.... First one is called Sangey that is Buddha, he is the main god. At the left...is Guru Rinpoche and at the right side is Cherezi.” Although these are the three main gods they also believe in several local deities, a practice similar to Hinduism. The main philosophy that

Buddhists follow is, “Compassion.... Lord Buddha taught us not to hurt someone, we do not believe in violence.”

Although sects have varied ways of meditation, or ways to attain salvation, their goal remains the same. **Gyanendra, a monk of Theravada sect**, informed the team: “Actually... the goal is the same but the way of living and practising is different...Just like in case of meditation and other things...The local culture and Buddhism, mixed together and became Buddhism [as practised] in local communities. But in Theravada, we just apply the direct philosophy of Buddha”. He further informed, that the philosophy of the three jewels of Dharma, Sangha and Lord Buddha, as exists in Mahayana, is similar to that of the Theravada sect, “We have same things: we chant *Buddham Sharnam Gacchami*”.

Buddhist philosophy inspires many to follow its path. In an interview, a literature student of Sikkim University, **Deepak Chettri**, said “Buddhism is not only belief in god... Buddhism is not only about these rituals (pointing to the *cham dance* being performed at Enchey Monastery) ... For me Buddha is not religion.. [it is about] peace, inner happiness, satisfaction, unconditional love [for] everyone”.

Buddhist rituals have evolved over the years into indispensable social practices as a result of the assimilation of the local rituals and practices. This assimilation can be best seen among the recently converted Hindu castes, the Tamang and Gurung, as pointed out by **Karma Yanangchen Bhutia**. The knowledge about these rituals, was gained by them through interactions in monasteries and local places.

In Martam Village, **Samsby Bhutia** had this to say about the marriage rituals, “Just like in Hinduism, here also the couple takes the Vow of Togetherness... We don’t have the concept of divorce.” The team was informed that the marriage rituals are performed by the Lamas who have meditated for a specific time. First the *loh* (astrological chart similar to the Hindu *kundli*) of the couple is consulted. The Lama decides an auspicious date and time for the marriage ceremony. In case *loh* doesn’t match, the Lama gives amulets to the couple after conducting prayers. *Yanku (Laxmi) Puja* is performed at the bride’s place. Three gods are worshipped in this puja- *Sangye, Choyendm, and Cherezi*.

When a child is born in a Buddhist family, the lama conducts prayer for his/her health and performs a naming ceremony. A similar ritual is also performed in Hindu culture called the *namkaran* ceremony. In all of these ceremonies, the Buddhist offer *cho*, which is like the Hindu *prasad*. The Bhutias offer money (guo-ten) and gifts to the monastery.<sup>2</sup> Elaborating further, a lama at **Rumtek Monastery** revealed the significance of the torma structure and the seven bowls kept in every ceremony (Figure 2). He said, “The white structures are called Mandalas made of torma. When puja is not performed, the bowls are filled with water. While performing the puja, the first bowl is filled with water to drink. The second bowl is filled [with] water to wash the feet. The third bowl has rice to keep flower. The fourth one holds the incense stick in rice. Then lamp is kept. It is followed by a bowl of water to take bath and then two rice bowl for food and music.” A Buddhist monk at Martam village, **Rapge** informed the team that he recited the Green Tara mantra (*om tare tutareture swah*) at 6.30 in

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<sup>2</sup> Subba, J.R. (2008). *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, p. 274

the morning. In the evening at 4.00 p.m, he recited the Mahakaal mantra for one hour (*om shree mahakaal yakhaya batale hunsh*). Apart from this he meditated for an hour between 8.00 p.m. and 9.00 p.m.



**Figure 2: A Buddhist prayer altar**

A **Bhutia family**, while explaining the death ceremony informed that it is the lama with immense knowledge who performs the rituals. Talking to **Vinay Biswa**, a driver, it was discovered that the family members and relatives offer auspicious *khada* cloth and money as condolence. He further informed that the common people tie 108 flags for the peace of the deceased soul. The Tibetan prayer flags and prayer wheels are two of the most prominent symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. The prayer flags, which are printed with auspicious symbols on them, are believed to bring “long life, happiness and prosperity to everyone in the surrounding area”. One of the interviewees, **Karma Yanangchen Bhutia** had put up white flags for protection from obstacles at her maternal home. Such flags are usually of five colours: yellow, green, red, white and blue representing earth, water, fire, wind, and space respectively, as told by monks **Ugyen Rigzin** of Do-Drul Chorten and **Karma** of Rumtek monasteries. According to **Binoy**, a Nepali Hindu driver, these prayer flags after being blessed by the lama are put up by the Buddhists in areas where the wind can blow over them (Figure 3). He said, the Buddhists believe that “the wind that blows over these flags” reaches their god and their ancestors. **Ongdil Bhutia**, a resident of Martam village, explained the different kinds of flags and the ones which blow in the wind are called *lung-ta*, meaning “windhorse” and sends the forces of compassion and wisdom. **Binoy** pointed to the similarity between the Hindu traditions of *Shradh* and the white flags put up by the Buddhists for the peace of the departed soul. Once the flags are put up they remain undisturbed thereafter.



**Figure 3: The auspicious flags**

The prayer wheels are turned by the devotees for the fulfilment of their prayers. They spread the message of *Dharma* through the mantras written on each wheel as told by a **monk** from **Rumtek Monastery**. The papers with the mantras, (which are for compassion, obstacles, purification and dedication) are rolled and inserted into the prayer wheels. The monk added that turning the wheels in the clock-wise direction leads to the purification of the person's "bad karma" as the person focuses on spreading the blessing of the mantra throughout the universe. **Deepak Chettri**, a student of literature, informed that what was written in Tibetan and Pali on the prayer wheels, *Om Mani Peme Hun*, was similar to Hindus' *Om Nama Shiva*.

The Buddhist tradition has incorporated into its fold the traditional folk dances, which have religious significance. **Hishuey**, a student of Shanti Niketan, West Bengal, explained about the *cham* dance being performed at Enchey monastery (Figure 4), "This is a special performance by Monks. This dance depicts the different phases of our lives and what happens after death. The theatrical performance begins with the murder of a child and then the spirit of the child is depicted as having gone through various stages as a consequence of what we do in our lives based on varied mythology... The *cham* dance is performed on the occasion of *Loosung* festival (Tibetan new year)".



**Figure 4: A lama dressed as cham dancer, *Loosung* festival, Enchey Monastery**

According to Nirmal Chandra Sinha, “Indian art, particularly iconography, is well known as idealistic, that is not realistic, Indian icons are not illustrative of realities or facts of nature”<sup>3</sup>. It holds true for Buddhist images as well. This gap between the truth and the reality present in Buddhist symbols is rooted in the belief that a divine or transcendental entity cannot be defined by a man in his limited vocabulary and vision.

The complex art of Buddhist culture can be best seen through the murals and paintings inside the monasteries. One such example, was visible in the murals of the **Enchey Monastery** (Figure 5). As explained by, a lama, **Chewng Rinzing**, the figures in the mural relate to the various avatars of the gods like the god of fire who would punish those who stray from the right path, and also Hindu figures like *Naag Panchmi* (God of water, shaped like a snake), and Lord Shiva. Another glorious example was seen in the murals of **Rumtek Monastery**, a lama, **Balia**, explained the meanings of each painting on the walls. He mentioned that the sixteen masters, also known as the *arhats*, were depicted on the murals, which signified the path shown by Karmapa. The eight lucky signs are also used widely in these murals. **Thendu Bhutia**, another lama at **Rumtek monastery**, related that the monastery is the headquarters of the Kagyu sect.



**Figure 5: A beautiful mural as seen in the background, Enchey Monastery**

Other symbols prevalent in the Buddhist art were the dragon, the lotus flower and the golden fish. **Ugyen Rigzin** (Do-Drul Chorten Monastery) while explaining the meanings of some of these symbols said that while dragons stand for animalistic power, the lotus stands for the second lord, Lord Rinpoche who was born from a lotus into a world of suffering. Explaining the architecture of the Do-Drul Chorten monastery, which was painted in white with steps in from projecting outside, monastery, the lama, **Tdozongo** informed that the valuable and special relics (gold, diamonds and precious scriptures) are kept inside a guarded area surrounded by circular walls. He informed the team, about a metal rod, kept above the monastery,

<sup>3</sup> Sinha, Nirmal Chandra (2008). ‘A Preface to Mahayana Iconography’. In Hochotsang, Kunga Yonten (comp.). *A Tibetologist in Sikkim: Selected Works of Professor Nirmal Chandra Sinha*. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, p. 318.

which reflects the half-moon shape at night. The courtyard had 108 chanting prayer wheels and lighted lamps. Another interviewee (**Chewng**), further added to the symbolic significance of lotus by explaining how, when Buddha stepped on water, with each step a lotus was born. The eight lucky symbols are also widely used in Buddhist art. **Karma** from the **Rumtek Monastery** explained, “One is the *Chakra* which we call *chor lo*. Another is ... like a flag, which we call *rgyalmtshan... matsya* (fish) which is of gold.... Like these there are eight lucky signs.”

The symbolism of colour in Buddhism could be seen in the attire of the monks. While a **bhikshu** lama wears yellow colour (as told by a **Master** at **Rumtek Monastery**), a monk belonging to the Theravada sect wears saffron. These differences between monasteries exist due to different monastic orders. Monasticism pertains to the attributes of different monasteries which emerged as a result of ideological dissensions among the disciples of Siddharth Gautama after his death, leading to sectarian fragmentation.

Monastic life requires strict discipline and direction. Each sect has its own set of beliefs and regulations to be followed by each monk and 'Lamini'. Among Bhutias, the female monk is called *Anne*; *Chotimba* being the head of the *Annes*.<sup>4</sup> It has been observed in certain monasteries that monks are forbidden to lead a family life and have to observe a vow in the 45 days festival. Each monastery obtains the financial assistance from the various dynasties or the Indian government.

Monks follow a strict schedule related to meditation, food intervals, free time, and debating sessions. Hierarchy is established in each monastery on the basis of educational qualifications and the level of wisdom attained. Modest food, handful possessions and maroon clothes represent detachment from material fondness. Students are admitted into the monasteries at an early age of 4 to 5 years. Their curriculum extends to English, Hindi, Maths, Science, and so on. Although Buddhism grew as a challenge to Brahmanical Hinduism and its practices of caste and hierarchy, among Buddhists too there are caste-specific practices. According to **Buddha**, a driver, “...tamang lama can only teach a tamang student. The book is same but the customs are different.” However, in an interview with a Bhutia family, **Karma Yanangchen Bhutia** refuted this claim of such caste specific “partiality”, “If a person is a lama and a Buddhist, then, we call the lama. It does not matter if the lama is Tamang, Gurung or Bhutia.”

Different architectural patterns of Sikkim monasteries reflect the beauty and serenity of the religion, spreading the message of value and sanctity of the Buddha’s teaching. With the migration of tribes from Tibet into the region, not only was there an assimilation with the local practices, but the architectural style also showed the amalgamation between these cultures. An artistic style close to that of Tibet is seen in the monasteries of Sikkim, such as the use of vibrant colors, pointing to a kind of localization happening through travel, transferring ideas and forms of practices, resulting in completely new synthesis.

A trip around the M.G. Road, Gangtok ascertains how Buddhist symbols have become highly lucrative items for shopkeepers who sell them as lucky charms to the tourists. In an interview with **Nalini** (a Hindu from South Africa visiting with her

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<sup>4</sup>Subba, J.R. (2008). *History, Culture and Customs of Sikkim*, New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House, p. 274

family), the research team was informed that she purchased the statues of ‘sitting Gautam Buddha and one that is sleeping. They are as gifts for my family and friends.’ She further elaborated that she was interested in learning more about Buddhism. It does not matter which religion the people follow, the philosophy of Buddhism attracts them to this religion.

When shopkeepers were asked whether the tourists asked for the significance of the souvenirs kept in their shops, an affirmative reply was given. For instance, **Susheel Kumar Aggarwal**, a Hindu shopkeeper and a native of Rajasthan, explained how the tourists are attracted to these bright and colourful souvenirs who begin to see them as instruments of inner peace after knowing their significance. Some tourists get these blessed by the *lamas* (monks) and take them home. Some of the souvenirs in his shop were made by the monks themselves. He related how these articles were also purchased by local Buddhist population to be used in performing rituals at home as well as offerings to the monasteries. He pointed out to a *thangka*, to be used in any monastery, as the most expensive item in his shop priced at Rs 1,59,000. When interviewed further, he asserted that he did not follow either Hinduism or Buddhism, but believed in practical way of living. While talking about Buddhism he said, “...I don't need to follow it actually because in practical life I am already doing it.... This is the only religion which doesn't believe in attracting people as they have already attracted so many without saying anything .They don't need to make them Buddhist. They give them peace of mind.” After interviewing various people, like the non-Buddhist drivers and shopkeepers who are following Buddhism, it was evident how Buddhist practices have percolated in the popular culture of the area.

## DISCUSSION

The research was conducted around a study of six aspects: philosophy, rituals, monastic order, architecture, symbolism and tourism which enabled the research team to develop a better understanding of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the amalgamation of the dominant cultures and religion within it.

Tibetan Buddhism is divided into **four philosophical schools**, that is, Nyigma, Kagyu, Gelug and Sakya. Do-Drul Chorten and Enchey monasteries belong to the Nyigma which is one of the oldest schools of Tibetan Buddhism. The central tenet of this school is the liberation of all beings from *saramsa* or the suffering world. Rumtek monastery belongs to the Kagyu sect, the “teaching lineage” headed by Karmapa, revered as the Living Buddha. There have been seventeen re-incarnations of Karmapa till date, who have been chosen according to the prediction letter left by the previous Karmapa. The Ghum monastery belonged to the comparatively newer school of Gelugpa, based on the teachings of Tsongkhapa, who emphasized the need to follow the monastic ethical code taught by Buddha, known as *Vinaya*. Although, the schools differ in their practices, their philosophies remain the same, that is, to attain *moksha* through detachment, compassion, *ahimsa* (non-violence) and learning.

The **rituals** followed by the Buddhists of Sikkim reflect the philosophies of Tibetan Buddhism, along with a curious blend of Hindu, Buddhist and primitive cultures. This blend can be seen in the marriage rituals where the couple takes the vow of togetherness like in Hindu culture, although they do not have the concept of divorce. In matching the couple's compatibility, *loh*, an astrological chart, similar to the

Hindu's *kundali* is consulted. Much like in Hinduism, prayers are conducted at every new step of a Buddhist life. Like in Hinduism, a naming ceremony is conducted by the lama (equivalent to the pandits) 7 to 21 days after the birth of the child. Although, the three main gods that the Sikkimese Buddhists pray to are *Sangye Choyendm*, who is the Buddha; *Guru Rinpoche*, who protected Sikkim from demons and *Cherezi*, they also pray to their local deities. These deities also include Hindu gods like Goddess Laxmi (referred to *Yanku* by the locals) and Lord Shiva. An incorporation of primitive religion can also be seen in Buddhism. Like the *Jhakris* and *Bijuwas*, the lamas too conduct prayers to show the departed soul to the right path.

The Buddhist **monks** and the *laminis* are required to follow a strict disciplined life and be detached from the worldly life. The monks are admitted to the monasteries from an early age of 4 to 5 years. Some of monasteries forbid them from having a family life. The hierarchy in the monasteries is not established through hereditary qualifications but on the basis of their learning and wisdom. These monasteries have been preserved and protected with the help of the state government.

The Buddhist philosophy is reflected through **art and symbols** as well. Buddhist art is highly complex and can take years of learning to fully comprehend. The murals and art depict the multiple avatars of Buddhas, his disciples, deities and is smattered with the eight lucky symbols in Buddhism. The art teaches the disciples to follow the right path, that is, the path of Buddha. Prayer wheels and flags are thought to fulfill a person's prayers, and bring prosperity respectively.

The Buddhist monastic philosophy is also embedded within the **architecture** of the monasteries. The five dharmic colours, that are blue, green, red, white and yellow, are used in the paintings and murals of the monasteries representing the five elements of earth, water, fire, wind and space. These colors are assumed to be auspicious to the building. The Chorten Monastery was built with the structure holding precious material at its center.

Buddhism seems, especially to have affected the **tourism industry** particularly in the retail front with the souvenir shops focusing on pre-dominantly Buddhist memorabilia. These souvenir shops mainly hold statues of Buddha, *thangka*, Buddhist scrolls, key chains, Buddhist small prayer wheels, and bells which are purchased by the tourists to take back to their friends and family. The Buddhist memorabilia cost anything around mere Rs. 20 to above Rs. 1,00,000. While the cheaper shops mainly catered to the tourists, the more expensive ones focused on both the tourist and locals, with some of them even selling their items to the monasteries.

## CONCLUSION

Buddhists may not believe in spreading their religion aggressively, but the philosophy itself inspires the people to an extent that they leave their home, country and family to follow it. The architecture of the monasteries, which is simple and yet elegant, represents the sanctity of the teachings of Buddha. When one visits the monasteries, the murals and paintings with their own religious significance could be seen at every step. Every symbol that one laid her eyes on, has a deeper meaning attached to it. These symbols are intricately linked with the Buddhist practices and beliefs. The prayer flags, are supposed to bring "long life, happiness and prosperity to everyone in

the surrounding area”. Not only the flags, but the different-colored clothes worn by the monks have their own meaning and belief behind them. The meaning behind these symbols is what attracts people from different religions and places to flock to regions like Sikkim. It has led to a boom in the tourism industry of state because the people from all over the world come to learn about Buddhism here.

Different sects that have emerged in Buddhism overtime may follow different practices but the ultimate goal is to attain *moksha*. Each monastery has its own discipline, despite the Buddhist philosophy of not punishing anyone, one may have to leave the monastery if the rules are broken. Strict schedules are followed in the monastery which one must pertain to. The rituals followed in Buddhism are linked to its philosophy. One such example can be seen when the death rituals are performed: the lama’s conduct prayers for seven days, in an attempt to encourage the spirit of the deceased person to let go of the physical realm. The philosophy behind this ritual is to cut through attachment to the physical body and thus to the sense of self-cherishing and self-identity that lie at the root of all suffering. The amalgamation of primitive practices, and religions like Hinduism and Buddhism is observed maximum in rituals, such as the ones performed at the time of birth, death and marriages. Buddhism in Sikkim may have been influenced by many religions, at the same time, it has also influenced other religions. As put forward by Tibetan scholar, Donggar Lobsang Chilai “The new Bon religion that revived after the collapse of the Tubo kingdom, transformed and absorbed all doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism... it indicates that through long struggles...both absorbed and assimilated something from the other by maintaining the form and altering the content.”<sup>5</sup>

This puts together most coherently the idea of cultural syncretism in Sikkim.

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<sup>5</sup> In Hochotsang, Kunga Yonten (comp.) (2008). *A Tibetologist in Sikkim: Selected Works of Professor Nirmal Chandra Sinha*. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.

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