

THE INSTITUTION OF MANILHAKHANG AND TIBETAN BUDDHIST WOMEN IN SIKKIM

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Abstract: It is widely accepted among the Tibetan Buddhist societies that, Buddhism as a way of life pay one's way for spiritual guidance not only for the advance practitioners but for the lay people to live a life filled with guiding principles of virtue and righteousness. Thus, Buddhism encourages, through its precepts, wholesome living which leads eventually to peace and harmony within individuals and among all the fellow human beings. The paper discusses *Manilhakhang*, a unique institution in Tibetan Buddhism found across Sikkim. The study is a detailed ethnographic account of how women observe and practice religious scriptures in the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The paper explores the process of lay women attaining spirituality by prayers and performing *Mani* (Holy Mantras) during auspicious days in a Tibetan Buddhist calendar year. In a patriarchal system, this was the only space that, though guided by the monks of the monastery, is completely organized by lay women.

Keywords: Buddhism, *Manilhakhang*, Women, Community, Well-being

INTRODUCTION: BUDDHISM AND MONASTRIES IN SIKKIM

Explaining about the significance of Buddhist precepts, Samdong Rimpoche (2006) states that to be a Buddhist practitioner, it is not only to know (i.e. have knowledge about) but also to be able to 'demonstrate the basis of one's knowing, the basis of knowing is in, and through, experience through the practice of both intellectual (analytical) and meditative (contemplative) methods are essential and one without the other is considered incomplete. Wadell (1971) in his work informs according to historical evidences that before the arrival of Lamaism, which is essentially a priest craft and then Buddhism in Sikkim, the indigenous ethnic communities like Lepcha, Limbu and Magar communities had their own religious systems and beliefs were animistic and shamanistic in nature.

Buddhism came to Sikkim from Tibet through the divine agency of *Guru Padmasambhava*, 'The Lotus Born', also known as *Guru Rimpoche*, who in the 8th century, prophesied that Buddhism would overrun Sikkim. The prophecy came true in the 17th Century, with the coming of three Lamas. One of the Lamas was the venerated Lhatsun Chempo, who formally introduced Buddhism to Sikkim. Born in 1595 AD, Lhatsun Chempo was a native of Kongbu in Tibet. He travelled from monastery to monastery in Tibet until he arrived in Lhasa, capital city of Tibet in 1648. At this place, he attracted the attention of Grand Lama Gyalwa Ngak Wang, who was to become the first Holy Dalai Lama. From Lhasa, armed with the grand Lama's blessings, he set about the seeking a way into Sikkim. Unable to find a path through the mountains, Lhatsun Chempo is said to have used his mystical

powers to fly to the top of Mt. Karbu, from where he surveyed the landscape until he found the way into the hidden valley. Once in Sikkim, he met other two Lamas, Sempa Chempo and Rigzig Chmepo, who had entered Sikkim from the west and the south respectively. The place where the three converged was thence forth called 'Yuksam' or place of the three wise ones. It was here, that they decided to seek out a Monarch for Sikkim and where they crowned Phuntsong Namgyal as Chogyal. After the coronation, Lama Lhatsun Chmepo concentrated on spreading the teachings of Buddha. He set up several monasteries or *Gompas* across this region, which spearheaded the diffusion of the Buddhist religious teachings. Lhatsun Chempo is represented in Buddhist art as seated on a leopard skin mat, almost naked, and with his right leg dangling down. He is blue skinned, a chaplet of skulls adorns his brow and his left hand, and he carries a skull cup filled with blood (Sonam, 2012).

Monasteries in Sikkim are divided into *Gompa*, *Manilhakhang* and *Lhakhang*, *Tshamkhan* and *Dubkhangs*. Literally, *Gompa* (*dGon-Pa*) means a solitary place or wilderness. It signifies that monk's practicing Lord Buddha's philosophical teachings should keep themselves away from their mundane daily life temptations. It is also stipulated that a *Gompas* should be situated at least a thousand yards' distance from the main village or town. This is visible and evident as most of the ancient monasteries in Sikkim are either built on the high hilltops or in a place totally isolated from the households in villages.

A *Manilhakhang* is a sub monastery of the main *Gompa* exclusively built for the nuns or lay women devotees to offer prayers during auspicious days in a Tibetan Buddhist calendar year.

The Making of *Manilhakhang*: To start a *Manilhakhang*, where there is a monastery, the following requirements are to be fulfilled: It should have one storey or one long spacious room built in a traditional architecture measuring a minimum of 20'X30' with installation of prayer wheels around the structure or one or two prayer cylinders installed in its shrine hall. 2. A *Manilhakhang* must have a statue of Lord *Avalokiteshvara*¹ (*Chen-re-Zig*) for the devotees to visualize and practice holy mantras/prayers 3. A *Manilhakhangs* should function under one *Mani Lopen* or *Ponlob Lama* who acts as a tutor having a minimum of eight devotees.

THE SETTING

Simig Lingzey Sang- Gnag Duddulling Gompa in Khamdong of East Sikkim and *Kalzung Manilhakhang* in North Sikkim are the sites for the ethnographic study. Data was collected during the auspicious day celebrations according to the Tibetan calendar in one agricultural cycle from 2018-19. The majority of the population in both *Manilhakhang* areas is of the Bhutia community; however, there are few families of Lepcha, Tamang and Rai ethnic communities also. The observations were done and information was collected through participant as an observer during the auspicious days of the calendar. Interviews were the main strategy adopted in

the research study. *Nyugnyes* are the key informants for this study. Rapport was not a difficult process, as the research assistant who is a Bhutia girl, for this study is author's student. English, Bhutia and Nepali languages were used for collecting the data among the members of the *Manilhakhang*. The author took the position of 'Observer as a Participant' during the study. The author was allowed for the day long prayers during the selected auspicious days of the calendar. Interviews were also taken at the member's residential places.

Simig Lingzey Sang-Gnag Duddulling Gompa was built in 19th century and considered to be the oldest in this region. It is situated between Thumin and Khamdong of East Sikkim. *Simig* is derived from Bhutia word "Zee Mick" meaning the Eye of 'Zee' or etched bewitched agate stone which was believed to have been found in a hollow stone which existed near the *Gompa*. This hollow stone is now filled with water. *Simig Lingzey Sang-Gnag Duddulling Gompa* was founded by a saint called Ralchen Wosel Dorjee in 1843. It is reported that Ralchen Wosel Dorjee was a student of Namda Rangjung who in turn was a disciple of Pema Wangyal of Tibet by Palri *Tulku*. Ralchen Wosel Dorjee was a highly accomplished *Yogi*. He is said to have imparted higher Buddhist teachings to Lamas of *Simig* and *Pemayangtse*. He passed away at *Ghanam Chaam Khang* or meditation centre, about six kilometers above the *Gompa*. In North Sikkim, the *Kalzung* manilhakhang was established in the year 1978 by the local villagers.

Monastery and *Manilhakhang*: A monastery is run and totally cared by monks and is a place that where monks live. On the other hand, *manilkhkhang* is a place that is occupied mainly by religiously inclined lay women during certain auspicious times of the month, where they act like monks. Ideally, the devotees of a *manilhakhang* care for the premises help with the preparation for rituals and abstain from everything to do with worldly life. They may fast or give up speaking depending on how vigorously they wish to carry out their practice.

Manilhakhangs are often also referred to as *Nyungne Lakhang*. *Nyungne* is the indigenous term for this type of practice where one chooses to "systematically enact and experience the ascetic ethic" (Ortner: 1978:34) *Manilhakhangs* inherently belong to Nyingmapa sect/ tradition in Tibetan Buddhism, which is considered to be an ancient tradition. During eight century B.C., the scriptures of Tibetan Buddhism were translated from Sanskrit to Tibetan language. The difference between an established monastery and a *Manilhakhang* is that lay women exclusively worship for the well-being of the society. The main purpose is to sit and pray for the whole day on an important and auspicious Tibetan Buddhist calendar date. They are mostly located in places that are little far off from the main monastery- that is a male domain. The two main ritual objects used by these women are:

Prayer Wheels²: The prayer wheels are the constant reminder of the presence of Buddha and simple aid to meditation. *Lamas* and Nuns with prayer wheels inform us that they have an act of unstinted devotion.

Prayer Beeds: In Buddhistic prayers, prayer beads too play an important role. They are an indispensable ritual implement. The beads, usually 108 of them are used to count *Mantras*. The most popular beads are made of sandalwood or the seeds of the *Bodhi* tree.

RITUALS : SIMPLICITY IN PRACTICE

There have not been many studies on the *manilhakhang* specifically. The reason for this is due to it is over shadowed by a larger establishment like the monasteries in this region. The main objective of the study about the *manilhakhang* is to comment on the perception of gender within Tibetan Buddhism to a certain extent. It can be taken as an entry point to understand the reasons behind certain social set ups and attitudes towards gender roles. More specifically, one can examine the questions as to why women form the majority among the devotees who visit a *manilhakhang*? This is an area that has not been covered much in existing literature on the Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. Eller (2007) states that to explain religion or any other social or physical phenomenon is to construct a model of it, to identify processes or mechanisms at work in it, and/or to give reasons for it. Rituals in Tibetan Buddhist tradition are important and have significance in everyday life. Following the *Dharma*, this is a path that cleanses all defilements such as attachment ignorance that are in the minds of all sentient beings. It is a method that liberates all the sentient beings from endless suffering of *Samsara* and leads them toward enlightenment, the state of perpetual bliss. It is a path that avoids harming others and concentrates only on benefitting others. According to *Vajrayana* tradition, this is possible through simple practices like making aspirational prayers, dedicating to merit, and rejoicing in virtue. It is beyond just a simple good-hearted or well-intended gesture. These practices are very symbolic and considered to be powerful skillful means of positive changes. Anie Karma Sonam Palmo's instructive booklet called *Basic Buddhist Teachings* (2012) acts as a great piece of informative work that can act as a guide for someone who wishes to understand the meanings behind various Buddhist practices, rituals and symbols. It gives very simple and straightforward explanations of the reasons behind certain acts and the symbolism behind it all. Turner defined ritual as "prescribed formal behavior for occasions not given over to technological routine, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings and powers" (1967:19).

At a broader level, Balikci's (2008) study highlights how Bhutia community in specific and other communities like Lepcha and Tamang in general in Sikkim are influenced by the presence of Buddhist monasteries. Balikci's elaborate ethnographic work on village religion explains the amiable relationship between Lamas and Shamans, despite their roles and ritual practices. Taking a Weberian approach, Gellner (1990) presents the Buddhist practices in Nepal and the influence of Tibetan Buddhistic tradition. As this study is centered on a religious institution and practice, specifically of Tibetan Buddhism, he provides an epistemological understanding of

this subject. It acts as a reliable reference point for the way different anthropologists have dealt with Buddhism so far. Dasgupta et, al(2014) have comprehensively studied the monasteries of Sikkim from the point of view of the structural and Organizational aspects in a synthetic way by visual/material culture and the dynamics of monastic system. The authors have presented visual culture and dynamics of monastic system in Sikkim. A brief mention of *Manilhakhang* is given in their work (p 20).

As gender is the focus of the study, works like Gender, Identity and Tibetan Buddhism by June Campbell (2003) and Meeting the Great Bliss Queen: Buddhists, Feminists and the Art of the self by Anne Carolyn Klein (2009) have been referred to for this paper. While Campbell explores the symbolic depiction of gender in Buddhism, Klein uses a feminist approach to handling Buddhism. The Buddhism studied in both cases focuses on Tibetan Buddhism.

Detailed ethnographic aspects of *Manilhakhang's* functional process both at ontological and empirical is analysed in this paper. It is reported that women from all the age groups irrespective of their marital status attend *Manilhakhang's* son auspicious days of the month. According to the Tibetan calendar, these would be *tsed-gyed* (eighth day of the lunar month; considered the day of Medicine Buddha and Tara Goddess), *tsed-che-nga* (full moon or the fifteenth day of the lunar month) and *nam-khang* (new moon or the thirtieth day of the lunar month). On these earmarked auspicious days, women offer prayers together and some of them even undertake fasts.

All *manilakhang's* are dedicated to the god *Chen-re-zig*, or more specifically, to his form called *Chok-tushen-po*⁴. It is reported that *Chen-re-zig* is the Buddhist god of compassion and represents Buddha's speech and the scriptures. One can find him in almost every Buddhist altar, sitting on Buddha's right. He is a beautiful white coloured being sitting on a big lotus with legs folded. He has four arms, two hands clasped together in front while the other two are holding prayer beads in the right and a lotus in the left. He has a calm and peaceful expression. However, in the form of *Chok-tushen-po*, his white peaceful figure is standing with a thousand hands stretched out to form two semi-circles on both sides of the body and with nine heads ready to help the devotees absolve their sins.

The altar of a *manilakhang* essentially requires just one big statue of either forms of *Chen-re-zig*. There must also be either a hundred and eight prayer wheels outside around the manilhakhang, or just one or two big prayer wheels inside the altar room or lhakhang. The lhakhang can be considered the main area of a *manilhakhang's*; it is in and around this place that the devotees usually spend most of their time. This is where most of the activities take place. As *Chen-re-zig* is the centre of this whole practice, it is generalized that the devotees try to emulate the qualities of this deity – mercy, compassion, peace and knowledge.

Ritualistic Symbolism in *Manilhakhang*: An offering of water is made at

the Buddhist altar every morning and removed every evening before sunset in all the *manilhakhangs*. There are usually seven bowls of water offered at the altar. Incense is burned and a butter lamp is always kept burning. These seven bowls of water along with the butter lamp represent the eight fold offerings according to the “ancient Indian tradition of hospitality towards guests”. This Indian origin of a core Buddhist ritual should not be a surprise as India is the birthplace of Buddhism. “Starting from the left, the first two bowls of water symbolize water for drinking and washing feet”, which are the first things offered to a guest. After that he is welcomed with a garland of flowers represented by the third bowl of water, “while fragrant incenses are burned to cleanse the air”, which is represented by the fourth bowl of water. The butter lamp comes next, which represents the decorative lights that are lit in the guest’s honour. The fifth and sixth bowls represent the “sweet-smelling juices and food” that he is offered. “Finally he is offered musical entertainment before his departure” represented by the seventh bowl of water.

As Buddhism is widely spread in Sikkim, *Manilhakhangs* can be found in every Buddhist village, but the way they function will vary depending on the culture and community of the area. In Khamdong area of East Sikkim and *Kalzang* in North Sikkim, it is compulsory for the members to attend such auspicious events and meetings in the *Manilhakhang*. Generally, there are few absentees, unless there is a pressing issue at home or their individual health condition. In this area, it is found, there are few women who are not members of the *Manilhkhang* i.e. those who do not attend *Manilhakhang* for various reasons. Earlier, there was a practice that it was only after her son is married that a mother of a family must start attending it. Even if there are two women in one household with married sons, say the mother and grandmother, only one of them have to compulsorily attend the ceremonies and meetings. This is done in the interest of the entire community/village prayers are offered by the women. Senior members stress the need for attendance to gain collective power.

There is no hierarchical or organizational set up for *Manilhakhang*. Most of the activities are shared among themselves. To run the regular prayers and meetings one or two women take lead in the group. If there are consistent absentees among them, a small fine is collected from them only to make sure that everyone is attending. The women in this position were informally elected every two years by the other members. Another position was that of the *Gneypa* who was in charge of the kitchen and all the duties that came along with it. This was also a position up for re-election every two years. Then was the position of the cook or the *Naam*. This position was usually given to three new members of the monastery for a year. If there were no new members then names of the younger members of the group were written and drawn from chits of paper at random.

The prayers were offered together with everyone seated in a small wooden structure built next to the *Manilhakhang*. This structure had been built by the

community, which presumably meant that the *dzumsa* had put the village to work. A closed shelter such as this is a necessity as rainfall and unexpected weather are very common features, Sikkim being the wettest region of the Himalayan strip. Earlier, the women would simply sit in the main altar room of the monastery for their prayers and interactions. The wooden shelter was simple and has spacious to accommodate more than 50 devotees. It was just a single big room one stepped into after taking off one's shoes at the entrance. All the women sat along the walls on mats. Due to the lack of space some were even seated in a row in the middle of the room. There were thirty eight members in total at Kahmdong and forty five at *Kalzung manilkhhang*, but the women who is in charge of cooking duty usually stayed in the kitchen to provide food and tea for the ones inside the shelter. Women in the shelter were the ones who offered prayers. Once the cooking job is over, the women will also join the common prayers along with the other members.

A PARELLEL ASCETIC LIFE

From the early Buddhist period until now, gender equity is a significant feature in every day life and monastery affairs. Being egalitarian in nature, women's social roles are not rigid in Buddhist societies, they were given equal opportunities to become/lead a renunciant lives as nuns along with men. It is reported that women's role is not seen only in few monastic affairs. At an Ontological level, women are being considered as 'asexual' rational beings, where physical identity becomes less important. One of the senior most woman member reported that 'We are called *nyuney*, but in truth we are *anies* (meaning nuns), Ortner (1978) in her studies states that, one can propose that these ladies 'become monks' during the time they spend in the monastery, especially during the four day celebrations of the five special full moons called *tsed-che-ngas* that take place through-out the year. This process informs us that a *Manilhakhang*, therefore, is not full time institutionalized 'Nunnery', where all women practice as 'monks', it is only on a part-time basis and do not take the vow of celibacy expected of fully ordained nuns. Thus, women irrespective of their marital status can lead parallelly an austere life. The heads of both the *Sang- Gnag Duddulling Gompa* and *Kalzung Manilhakhang* are in charge of all the religious decisions for the *Manilhakhang*. They allot one monk to take care of the daily religious duties, like keeping the butter lamp lit at the altar and offering fresh water in seven (or any number that is a multiple of seven) bowls in the morning and clearing the same in the evening. However, the maintenance and smooth functioning of the monastery itself lay in the hands of the head of the *nyungne* (literally means "to fast") women.

On the auspicious days *nyungne* women are dressed in red blanket type cloaks called *ghyapas*. This is a typical Tibetan piece of clothing, further exemplifying their affinity to their neighbours. These *ghyapas* have different designs depending on their use or the sex of the person it is meant for. They can be used for carrying

babies or for protection from the weather, but only the nyungne ladies use the red coloured *ghyapas*. These are pinned with silver, usually decorated, double ended hook on the front. It is noticed many of these *ghyapas* are being folded into bags as well. The burden to be carried was simply wrapped within the blanket and then slung onto both shoulders and then pinned at the front.

During these auspicious days, women gather at 5 or 6 am in the morning. On a normal *tsed-che-nga* one saw the women split into smaller groups, some sits in the main hall, some are making new wicks for the lamps, while a few others in the kitchen preparing tea. The really elderly women headed straight to the wooden hut as there were usually enough younger hands to carry out all the work. While the wicks and tea were being made, another important task was being conducted – the collection of the butter and oil. Half of the butter is used for the butter tea that flows in from the kitchen throughout the day, while the rest of it is mixed with oil and used for the *chimeys* (butter lamps). Everyone had to contribute for purchasing the necessary items for the prayers. Most of the butter was fresh, and all were home-made. This mix of butter and dalda was melted in a pot and stirred together in the kitchen on the other side of the *Manilhakhang* that wasn't being used for the preparation of the food. This mixture was poured into an ancient looking kettle, and then poured into the hundred and eight *chimeys* at the altar. These were then lit by anyone present and left as an offering. After all the work was done, everyone moved into the wooden hut. Women assigned to kitchen duty served them tea. Snacks that had been brought from their respective homes, like *sayyo* (puffed rice), *phongu-amcho* (deep fried snacks made of flour; literally meaning “donkey’s ears” due to its shape) and *khapzey* (traditional Bhutia biscuits), were shared among them. After the partaking of some tea over a little local gossip, everybody settled into their places around the room and began chanting the prayers.

They were seated with a bowl of raw rice in front of them. They wore their *ghyapas* and put their palms together. With their eyes closed in full concentration, they sang three important prayers. During one of them, they occasionally threw the rice into the air little at a time. Apparently in order to join the *Manilhakhang*, the women first received training from the *Omzey* so that the prayers were said correctly. They would also record these teachings and prayers on their cell phones and practice them at home. A steady, unified stream of pitches flowed out of the *Manilhakhang* and took over the otherwise quiet surrounding. Most of the women were confident with their knowledge of the prayers sang loudly, while the one's unsure, slowly followed their lead. Wongchuk (2011) explains, the recitation part which comprise of holy mantras of the Tibetan texts that, upon hearing the united prayers, it reminds a single sound as most of them follow the same rhythm. The collective prayer echoes the wholesome well-being for the entire community which signifies women's prayer not for their family own well-being, the prayers in *Manilhakhang* transcend one's self.

Once the prayers are over, women are served tea once again as they wait patiently for the *Naams* to finish cooking. As this is a break time from the continuous long prayer for three hours, women shift their conversation to mundane issues among themselves about their children, their families and other happenings in their surrounding villages. This religious physical space, where exclusively women congregate and pray for the community well-being is a site for the growth of women's spirituality without any hindrances from their male counterparts. Though, most of the *Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu, Tamang* and Nepali communities are patrilineal and patriarchal, it is reported that women do have certain degree of freedom and are encouraged to participate in the prayers during these auspicious days. Every one expressed that *Manilhakhang* is a place not only to worship for, but a place for one's freedom of sharing their experiences of everything with other fellow women practitioners. This is a unique religious organization which is exclusively meant for women to unwind themselves; otherwise they are preoccupied with their daily household chores.

Even though, *nyungne's* expected to minimize casual chatting, it was found that for many of the women, these conversations were a part of the *Manilhakhang's* routine. However, regardless of this, prayers and serving for the devotees of the *Manilhakhang* were still the focus of the entire group. It is during the five auspicious *tsed-che-ngas* that one could observe the women's monastic piety to the fullest.

RITUALS IN FULL MOON DAYS

Women who attend *Manilhkhangs* observe all the prescribed rituals during the auspicious days of every month according to the Tibetan lunar calendar. The Tibetan lunar calendar is based on *Dhatok* (book). Women follow the auspicious day's according to the calendar, and it is found in every house. However, on the five most auspicious full moons throughout the year their practice became a bit more elaborate. These were the *tsed-che-ngas*, i.e. the fifteenth day, of the first, fourth, sixth, seventh and ninth months according to the lunar calendar. Around these days, they spent four days and four nights at the monastery. It was at this time that the women lived most like the full-time monks and nuns of the monasteries and kept their fasts. It is reported that, there were three ways one could observe these important events. The first and strictest practice was called *nyungne*. Here, one kept a fast and refrained from talking on the fourteenth and fifteenth days. One had to sit on the floor and nothing else. The other more lenient one was called *sorju*. This involved fasting with only one meal a day and with the freedom to talk. The third type of practice was where one alternated between the first two practices. This was called *karpotsed-gyed*.

The way these four days were usually spent was as follows. On *tsed-chuksum* i.e. the thirteenth day they assembled at the *Manilhakhang*. The next day, *tsed-chukdsey*,

they had to clean everything. Not only in the *Manilhakhang*, but their own bodies as well. The day after was *tsed-che-nga*. On this day they woke up before sunrise. They figured out if it was the right time to be up by looking at the lines on their palms. If there was enough light for those to be visible to them then it was time to get up. Immediately after waking up, they had to go wash their bodies. This was done even in the freezing winter cold when the water felt more like ice. After this they had to pay obeisance at the prayer hall of the monastery. This was done by *chhyag-tsed-shey*, a bow where one kneels and touches one's head to the ground.

Once this was done, the Lama of the *Gompa* distributed blessed water to everyone. After this they had to stay without food and water till noon. At exactly, 12pm they were served lunch. One wasn't allowed to wear slippers the whole day. Even the green grass had to be avoided, as they might step on some small creatures inside the grass. For lunch; butter tea, sugar tea, and *tsampa* (ground barley or maize) had to be consumed, even if it was just a small amount. This was apparently written in the *pecha* (scriptures). Regular food was served with the exception of meat. After lunch women were only allowed to consume tea. They weren't allowed to leave the premises at all that day. On *tsed-chudup*, the next day, they had to wake up early again and bow at the altar. *Seyn-jham* (a kind of porridge) was served for breakfast. This meant that they could now rest. This day was just meant for relaxation. There were no prayers offered. They could visit their home for a while if they wished, but were actually allowed to return only after lunch the next day. In the mainstream Tibetan Buddhist ritual practice, they follow the text, however in *Manilhakhang*, the senior monk *Manilopen* will interpret the text which is written in Tibetan. Currently, the text is available in Nepali language for the convenience of the women who can not follow Tibetan language, even for those who cannot read Nepali; they simply chant the mantras along with the other attendees in the *Manilhakhang*.

Apart from the auspicious days of every month according to the Tibetan calendar, women also offer prayers at *manilhakhang* during the annual festivals like *Saga Dawa*, *Drukpa Tshe*, *Guru Rimpoche Thunkar Tshechu*, *Pang Lhabzol* and *Lhabad Duechen*.

It is evident why *manilhakhangs'* are so important in Buddhist communities. To become a monk one needs to be able to read the scriptures fluidly, which is why it is compulsory to know how to read and write Tibetan. These novices are taught the scriptures and trained in ritualistic practices from childhood. Even after this, many monks are sent for meditative retreats for extended periods of time. It is only once they pass this stage that they can truly be called a *lama*, or one who has the knowledge of dharma. Not everyone can devote so much of their lives and become true monks. The devotees of a *manilhakhang* are not expected to learn to read the scriptures. It is enough for them to simply learn the prayers orally from the *ponlov* (tutor). Thus, a *manilhakhang* offers the lay women the chance to practice the "acetic ideals" (Ortner 1978, 34) of a monk. It makes it possible for

the religiously inclined, but uneducated person, to take the first few steps towards spiritual awakening.

CONCLUSION

Buddhism as a spiritual path deals with human nature. It is widely accepted as a philosophy of mind. The tradition deals with the philosophy of mind and emptiness through appropriate reasoning, and takes a systematic approach. Buddhism deals with various means and methods directed towards the realization of the natural state of individual mind. Thus, Buddhism enables one to get enlightened by using chanting of holy mantras from the text. There is no authentic history of Sikkim before the 16th century except the reference of this region in the prophecy of *Guru Rimpoche*, the Lotus Born which describes the land as one of the most sacred hidden lands. In several prophecies and apocalyptic books of the *Bodhisattva* of compassion, *Avalokiteshwara* and the Lotus Born Buddha, Mahaguru *Padmasambhava* (*Guru Rimpoche*), Sikkim is considered as the epicentre for the spirituality and blessed land in the eastern Himalayas. People believe that it is their duty to safeguard this sacred land.

A sub type of main Tibetan Monastery, *Manilhakhang* is a sacred religious and spiritual site, where lay women with their austere spiritual practices follow most of the Tibetan Buddhist textual precepts in the form of Praxis, which is visible in their everyday life. Ordinary women shall attain the desired spiritual path prescribed in the text; lead a parallel ascetic life parallelly a family life. The uniqueness and spirit of *Manilhakhangs'* all over Sikkim thus enlighten us that lay women offer prayers not for their family, but pray for well-being of their whole community at large. *Manilhakhang* ascetic prayers facilitate to conquer inner enemies, such as selfish clinging, vanity and enmity. In this sense, these dedicated prayers and offerings are aimed not to benefit for One's Self, it is beyond individual's peace and harmony, but for their whole community. The ideal of collective salvation, *sarva mukti* has been found in these *Manilhakhang* prayers. Being free from ego sense is a selfless precept and activity and for the sake of others. All persons have to become divine. This concept of the *Bodhisattva* ideal championed the cause of *sarva mukti*. Thus, *Manilhakhang's* aim is altruistic- *nyungne's* must not content with their own enlightenment towards *Bodhisattva*-is a process of compassionate act to minimize suffering for fellow villagers.

However, *Manilhakhang* is a place where mostly elderly women perform prayers for the well-being of their community. *Manilhakhang* provides an ample place for the women to devote themselves, as the main monastery is preoccupied with many rituals and other obligations for everyone in the community. *Nyungnes* expressed themselves about the significance of this institution, as they have their own space without any disturbance and involvement by the male members from their community. To guide and lead them externally, they take advice from the

Manilopen. A system which is completely run by women from decision making to organizing is significant in its own way.

Notes

1. *Avalokitesvara* (Sanskrit: Lord who looks down, Tibetan: *Chen-re -Zig*) is a bodhisattva who embodies the compassion of all Buddha's. He is one of the more widely revered *bodhisattavas* in mainstream Mahayana Buddhism
2. A prayer wheel is cylindrical wheel (Tibetan: *Khor*) on a spindle made from metal, wood, stone, leather, or even coarse cotton. Traditionally, the holy mantra '*Om Mani Padme Hum*' is written in Sanskrit externally on the wheel. Also sometimes depicted are *Daikinis*, Protectors and a very often the eight auspicious symbols *Ashtangamala*.
3. *Chok-tushen-po* is one form which is defined as Chok(The Great), *tushen-po* (The compassionate). The one who is also compassionate, omnipresent, always watching us and protect all humankind.

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