

Thobgyal Sarpa: the Only Tibetan Bonpo Settlement in India

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Abstract

By studying the social structure of the Thobgyal Sarpa Tibetan refugee settlement, a minority religious community of Tibet's indigenous faith, Bon, based at Solan in North India, this paper shows how the people at this settlement are struggling to preserve their religious tradition in the face of the challenging situations, such as the social and ideological change and the sectarian suppression prevailing both at home in Tibet and in exile in India. The paper looks at the two major segments of this settlement, the monastic and the lay community, and their roles in this struggle and the success that they have achieved. The paper also looks at the people of Thobgyal Sarpa's embracing of modern education for their children and opening themselves up to the outside world, and it finally sums up by speculating what the future holds for them.

Introduction

Thobgyal Sarpa, also known as the Tibetan Bonpo Foundation, is a cluster unit among the Tibetan refugees in India and it is the only unit or settlement of its kind, because its members are exclusively the followers of Bon religion. Tibetan Buddhists call them 'Bonpo.' Bon is the oldest religion of Tibet. It is often referred to as the native religion of Tibet. When Buddhism was introduced in Tibet in full scale in the eighth century, the only religion that it encountered was Bon (sBa gsal snang 1980[8th century]:34-35). Regarding its origin, the Bonpos themselves maintain that it first flourished in Zhangzhung² and from there it spread to Tibet. They regard as the founder of their religion Tonpa Shenrab, who was believed to have lived 18,000 years ago in a land called Taksig adjacent to Zhangzhung (Karmay 1975:175, 180). Western scholars have different opinions about the origin and the stages of development of this religion. However, they all seem to agree that this religion in its earliest form in pre-Buddhist Tibet was a kind of shamanistic belief, and along with the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, it had opportunities to develop into an organised religion as it exists today (Kværne 2000:7-16).

Today, Bonpos are the religious minority not only among the Tibetan refugees, but also in the entire Tibet. The exact percentage of their population is not known, but it is estimated that the population of Bonpos in Tibet is less than five percent of the entire Tibetan population (Baumer 2002:16), and for the exile Tibetan community it is less than one percent. This paper looks at the Bonpos' struggle to preserve and promote their religious traditions, the mission that they have started amidst manifold challenges. The paper looks at the structure of this relocated society Thobgyal Sarpa and the roles of its different segments, such as the monks, nuns and lay community, in terms of the contributions that they have made or are making to preserve the religious tradition of Bon. The paper also looks at the contributions that the Dharamsala based Tibetan government in exile has made in this respect. Last, the paper looks at the people of Thobgyal Sarpa's cautious embrace of modern education for their children at large, and their opening up to the outside world, in terms of sharing their religious tradition.

This study is based on the information collected through participant observation and first hand experiences and also other modes of collecting information, such as personal communication. The author spent several years among the settlers studying their religion and culture in between the time ranging from 1970 to 1990. He had occasionally participated voluntarily in the settlers' welfare activities, such as community health worker and school teacher, for both the monk and the lay communities. The author is also an ex-settler of Thobgyal Sarpa turned into researcher on Bon. Thus, this paper is an outcome of multifaceted sources.

Background History

According to the recent news, the March 28, 2009 will be celebrated as the Serf Emancipation Day across the Tibet Autonomous Region (Zhang 2009). On that day the existing traditional Tibetan government, Gandhen Photrang, was replaced by the Preparatory Committee for the Tibet Autonomous Region, which in 1965 was replaced by the proper government of Tibet Autonomous Region. On the March 10 of the same year, a national uprising against the Chinese presence in Tibet, the 'Lhasa revolt,' also took place. A massive protest rocked the city, but eventually succumbed in the hands of the People's Liberation Army. As a result, the Dalai Lama fled Tibet to India and some 100,000 Tibetans followed him into exile (Smith Jr.

1996:452). The first generation settlers of Thobgyal Sarpa are from among those just mentioned.

The Tibetan refugees have been relocated in different parts of India. Today, there are 21 agricultural settlements, 11 cluster units, eight agro-industries and four carpet-weaving cooperatives. The population in each of them varies from one settlement to the other. The agricultural settlements have as many people as several thousands, whereas the cluster units only a few hundreds. Thobgyal Sarpa is one of those cluster units. The name 'Thobgyal' is derived from the name of a valley called Thobgyal in Central Tibet, located to the west of Lhasa on the north banks of the river Tsangpo in Tsang region. It was here that some very important Bonpo monasteries were located; especially the one that was the prototype of what now exists in Thobgyal Sarpa, i.e., the Menri monastery. The word 'sarpa' means 'new' hence, 'new Thobgyal.'

Thobgyal Sarpa is situated in the countryside of Northern India, in the vicinity of a small town known as Solan, 295 km to the north of India's capital city, Delhi. Solan is known for its scenic landscape of lush green pasture hills and rich forests. Besides the other means of transportation that connect this town with the rest of the country, the narrow gauge rail line introduced by the British during the colonial rule is a main attraction. Thobgyal Sarpa is in the eastern suburb, 15 km from the town centre.

Thobgyal Sarpa, spreading over an area of 51 hectares, is a relocated Tibetan village of some 100 families and its permanent settlers number some 400. In addition, the village has a monastery, nunnery and a boarding school, which accommodates a total of 360 monks, 50 nuns and 250 school children. In all, it is a settlement of some 1,000 people, but most of the monks, nuns and the school children are not locals. Many of them have come from as distant countries as Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet, their purpose is to learn the tradition. Upon the completion of their education and training, they will go back to their homeland.

The village is spread on the sides of two low laying ridges facing each other. A river locally known as the Chondoli, flows east in the valley. A large part of the area is fertile land and yields two major crops a year, apart from the seasonal cash crops, such as beans, tomatoes and red peppers. The two major crops are wheat and maize. The region is rich in vegetations and

fruit trees, such as wild pomegranates and walnuts among others. Higher ridges are covered with dense forests of a variety of tropical evergreen trees and plants.

At its inception in 1965, Thobgyal Sarpa had a population of 350 people, including monks, nuns, lay men, women and children. Apart from the monks and nuns, the house holders altogether totalled 91 families. (Gyaltzen et al 2003:22.) Except for the youngest generation, who were born in India in between 1960-65, the rest came from different parts of Tibet, where Bon religion had its strongholds. These regions are Khyunglung and Jadur in the northwest and some parts of Kham and Amdo in the east. The Bon holds strong in Kham in the regions such as Nagchu, Khyungpo, Derge, Nyagrong and others; and in Amdo in the regions of Zungchu and Ngaba. Those 350 earliest settlers of Thobgyal Sarpa are from Khyunglung, Jadur, Hor, and Zungchu (also known as Amdo Sherpa).³

Historically speaking, Bon religion had suffered suppression from time to time, beginning from the time when King Trisong Detsen (742-797) declared Buddhism the state religion of Tibet in c. 779. The Bon priests were then ordered by the king either to convert into Buddhists or to leave the country, and the practice of Bon was banned (sBa gsal snang 1980[8th century]:34-35). As a result, except for sporadic practitioners and followers in the fringes of the country, Bon suffered a total collapse in the central Tibet, and this situation remained until the 10th century.

Due to the reasons such as the collapse of the Tibetan imperial power in the 9th century and subsequent disintegration of Tibet into several princely kingdoms until the 11th century, this had paved the way for the Bon religion to re-emerge. The Bonpo priests saw tremendous success in their mission. By the end of the 15th century, hundreds of monasteries, hermitages and other Bon learning centres came into existences in different parts of Tibet. The survey of Bonpo monasteries reported by dPal-ldan Tshul-khrims in his *G.yung drung bon gyi bstan 'byung* provides a long list of the monasteries. (Tshul-khrims 1972:564-643.)

Since then the mission of Bon priests continued, without having to face any serious suppression. As a result, several regions, including the ones mentioned above have gradually grown into Bon strongholds and remained so until 1959. After that the rampage of the Cultural Revolution (1965-69) reduced them into no more than abandoned ruins or cattle sheds. Later their reconstruction began following the 'leniency' in the late 1970s and in the

subsequent years. According to the survey of Bonpo monasteries and their photo documentation carried out by Christoph Baumer (2002:62, 94, 101, 137-147) in the 1990s, several of the monasteries are already functioning.

Here two monasteries, Menri (built in 1405) and Yungdrung-ling (built in 1834) have to be mentioned for their significance as the central seats of learning and practice for all Tibetan Bonpos. Menri was built in 1405 by Nyammed Sherab Gyaltzen (1356-1415), and Yungdrung-ling in 1834 by Nangton Dhawa Gyaltzen (1796-1862). These two figures enjoy high esteem among the Bonpos all over Tibet. Moreover, Nyammed Sherab Gyaltzen enjoys the position of *Gyalwa nyipa*, meaning the next to the founder of Bon religion, Tonpa Shenrab. Anyone graduated from these monasteries are recognised as the qualified Bonpo spiritual mentors (*Geshe*) across Tibet. Likewise, the head lama or the ‘throne holder’ of Menri, i.e. the successor to the throne of Nyammed Sherab Gyaltzen, enjoys the position of being the head of all Bonpos. The reigning throne holder of Menri, at the time when the political unrest broke out in Tibet in 1959, was the 32nd in line. He fled Tibet and died in India in 1962. His successor, the 33rd throne holder Lungtok Tenpe Nyima (born in 1927) now lives in Thobgyal Sarpa. This is one reason that makes Thobgyal Sarpa an important place for Bonpos.⁴

Sensing from what their predecessors had gone through in the past in the imperial Tibet in the eight century downwards on the one hand and the gruesome fate of destruction that the Tibetan religion and culture had then been facing with at random in the hands of the cultural revolution (1965-69) on the other, the then Tibetan Bonpos in exile had all the reasons to be cautious and protective. And the founding of Thobgyal Sarpa was one such attempt.

Tibetan refugees began to swarm to India in the years 1959-62. The government of India put them in camps at the road sides in the friendly climate regions in the northern Indian hill stations, such as Kulu, Manali, Chamba, Narkanda and others, and they were employed in road construction works. From 1965 onwards, the programmes to relocate them into permanent settlements began to be implemented. Sites for the settlements were decided upon by the government of India in collaboration with the Tibetan government in exile. As a result, large settlement sites with capacities to accommodate thousands of settlers were constructed and brought into shape to receive the settlers. Those sites are situated in the southern and central parts of India. The strategy was simple: the Tibetans on the roadsides were to be

relocated, transporting them in big groups. For the Bonpos, who were then scattered among other Tibetans in those road side camps, this strategy did not sound promising. Like a drop in the ocean, they would vanish in the crowd of other Tibetans, who do not share the same faith. And this could prove a blow to the existence of their religious tradition. It was then that Bonpo lamas decided to found a settlement of their own. Lupon Tenzin Namdak (born in 1926), the ex-chief spiritual instructor of Menri, took the full initiative and played the key role in founding this settlement.

The Structure of the Settlement

The structure of the settlement allows its members to live within their cultural and religious atmosphere, to promote and preserve their religious tradition, and to have access to the modern education for their children and decide a career. The entire settlement is embraced under the umbrella of the Tibetan Bonpo Foundation, with three high profile offices that oversee every state of affairs that are carried out. These offices are that of the president, the founding director and the general secretary. The president and the founding director are predetermined, whereas the general secretary is directly elected by the people from time to time. The position of president is reserved for the head of the monastery, the throne holder of Menri Lungtok Tenpe Nyima. The post of founding director is held by Lupon Tenzin Namdak himself.

Tibetan Bonpo Foundation has two major sections: the monastic establishment and the lay community. On the one hand there are monks and nuns working for the preservation and promotion of their religious traditions, and on the other hand there are lay householders who, besides working for their living, support the monastic establishment financially and morally. This classification of the segments within this society speaks of the roles of two major categories, the monastic community and the lay community. Both these communities pursue identical goal of preserving their religious tradition. But their roles and the modes of contribution may differ.

The Monastic Establishment and the Roles of the Monks and Nuns

The entire complex of the monastic establishment is embraced under one name, Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre. In the early days it was called the Bonpo Monastic Centre, which later on in 1980s was changed into Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre. The difference between ‘bon’ and ‘yungdrung bon’ is both cultural and theological. According to a Bonpo lama, ‘yungdrung bon’ refers to the religious school, whose doctrine is build on the teachings of Tonpa Shenrab, whereas ‘bon’ refers to what is generally known as the popular religion of Tibet, a practice that is known across the country irrespective of creed, such as the custom of raising prayer flags (*lungta*) and so on.⁵

The Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre, as a monastic establishment in the present context, is not to be taken as just a monastery with some monks observing their everyday religious services. It is a major centre, under which there are several institutions, pursuing different goals. Based on the goals that those institutions pursue, they may be divided into three categories: religious, cultural and educational.

The principle objective of the religious institutions is to keep alive their religious traditions among their people and to prepare their younger generations for a successful transmission, to allow the tradition to continue from generation to generation. The objective of the cultural institutions is the preservation and the promotion of the cultural aspects of the Bon tradition, the aspects of Bon that are universal across Tibet. The objective of the educational institutions is the task of introducing modern education for their children, including the young monks and nuns.

There are three religious institutions, the main monastery Pal-shenten Menri-ling, the academy for monks Yungdrung Bongyi Shedup Dhude, and the nunnery Redna Menling. The monastery was founded at the same time as the settlement itself, but the main temple building that stands in the heart of the monastic compound was inaugurated in 1969. It is a massive structure with beautiful Tibetan style architectural designs, surrounded by rows of monk quarters and other buildings for different purposes. At present the monastery has some 360 resident monks of different age groups, mostly coming from Tibetan Autonomous Region,

Tibetan habituated regions in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu and Yunnan, and the border regions of western Nepal and Indian Himalayas.

This monastery is like the heart of all Bonpos, for it is the headquarters of the throne holder of Menri. For the people of Thobgyal Sarpa, it is like the very heart of their community. The relationship between the monastery and the lay community is said to be like that of ‘lake and fish,’ interdependent and reciprocal. Through their spiritual achievements and the philosophical realisations, the monks fulfil the spiritual needs of the lay people. Whereas the lay people, in turn, support the monks by making offerings and keeping devotional relationship with them.

There are three categories of monks in Thobgyal Sarpa monastery: 1) school going young monks, 2) monks undergoing higher studies and training, and 3) monks already graduated and engaged in various religious missions. The basic criterion for becoming a monk in this monastery is to take ordination. There are two levels of ordination, the novice and the full ordination, each one involving a number of vows to be taken, such as abstaining from killing and stealing. Both levels of ordination are essential and have to be taken in sequence, first the novice and then the full ordination.

However, for those who are school age, ordination is not compulsory. They are called for a ‘hair cut’ ceremony which is normally presided over by the head lama, the throne holder. Thereafter their hair is shaved and they are provided with monk’s robes. With this ceremony, they become bona fide members. At present there are 160 of them. They are introduced to the preliminaries of the monastic education. They are taught to chant and recite prayers, to play the instruments of religious music, to read scripture, do calligraphy and paint deities and *mandalas* and so on, and to participate in the daily prayers and other monastic ceremonies. Their main task is to attend the local secondary school (see below for more on this school). Upon graduation (i.e., matriculation), they are called for to choose whether to continue with the monastic life or to return to the household life and to become incorporated in the lay community. If they choose the monastic life, then they have to take not only the ordination but also the full time courses of higher monastic studies and practices. If they choose the household life, then they have to leave the monastery, but the monastery may still support them financially to build a professional career.

The monks of the second category are the ones who have chosen to live a monastic life. For them there is, as a rule, no going back, as breaking vows is a serious offence according to the monastic ethics. They are expected to observe their vows as seriously as a ‘man drawing arrow from his bow to hit the target.’ The breaking of vows may take place accidentally or intentionally, but this is not considered a choice but an offence and the consequence is expulsion from the monastery. It is said that back in the old Tibetan society, such cases were looked upon as culprits and were awarded severe punishments of whipping.⁶

The full time monastic course is conducted by the academy for monks, Yungdrung Bongyi Shedup Dhude, also known as Bon Dialectic School. This school was founded in 1978 following the same pattern of curriculum as it was prescribed in the Menri and Yungdrungling in Tibet. It offers a comprehensive course covering all aspects of Bon doctrines, meditations and rituals, extended over eight years. The contents of the course cover the subjects, such as logic, the stages of path to Enlightenment, the teachings on ‘perfect wisdom’ (*sherphyin*), the philosophy of middle path (*uma*), cosmology, ethics, esoteric trainings of the meditation of transformations (*ngag*), and highest level meditation techniques of sudden realisation (*dzogchen*). Upon the completion of the course, the candidate receives a degree known as *Geshe*. This is the highest degree of Bonpo monastic education, an equivalent of the doctor of divinity.

The first group to receive this degree at the Thobgyal Sarpa’s monastery consisted of six successful candidates and it took place in 1986. Ever since then, almost every other year the convocations are held, following the *Geshe* examinations, and degrees are awarded to the candidates numbering somewhere between two to ten, depending on how many have managed to take the final examination.

At present, there are 165 monks undergoing full time course. Their time schedule is tight and demands extremely hard work. During the winters the course begins at seven in the morning and ends at eight in the evening, whereas in the summers, it lasts from six in the morning to half past eight in the evening. There is a 45 minute lunch break, during which the monks eat together at the dining hall, while one monk reads from the life of Tonpa Shenrab. The themes of the subjects taught in the morning differ from those taught in the evening. The classes for the subjects mentioned above are taught in the morning sessions. In the afternoon and evening, the classes focus on the subjects of more general types, mostly universal to all

Tibetans irrespective of creeds. These include Tibetan grammar, lexicology, poetry, metaphors, prosody, astrology, painting, sculpture, *mandala* creation, and traditional Tibetan healing arts. Practice of philosophical debates is treated with utmost importance. Everyday the monks spend around four hours on debate, which is done in the open air in a specially made arena behind the main monastery building. It is a question and answer type of debate: one monk, while sitting on the ground, answers the questions posed to him by another one standing in front of him. Meanwhile, the questioner may try to prove him wrong by applying different methods and others may also join the questioner in this effort. Each statement is followed by a loud clap and a kick on the earth with the left foot. They continue with the same process of learning for eight years and sometimes more until they are declared qualified to appear for the final examination and prove themselves to be the fit candidate for the highest degree.

The monks of the category three, those who have graduated and engaged in different missions, are mostly the seniors and they are well accomplished spiritual mentors, the holders of Geshe title. At present there are 50 monks in this category. A selected few, who have chosen solely to continue with their spiritual quest as deep into the inner essence as possible are engaged in the highest level spiritual trainings of retreats and meditation. Another group of such monks are engaged in preaching. Yet another group is engaged in different positions in service of the monastic establishment, such as teaching the monks at the Dialectic School, attending to various technical and nontechnical works at the monastery's library, healing centre and so on.

The nunnery at Thobgyal Sarpa is still young, as it was founded in 2003. It is located up on a hill slope in the south bank of the river, facing towards the monastery in the opposite. At present, it houses 54 nuns, who came mostly from Tibet and border regions of Nepal and Indian Himalayas. These nuns may also be categorised into three age groups, the elders of above 50, the youths of above 18 and of school age. The basic condition that permits them to become full fledge member is same as it is with the monks, namely the ordination. The procedure of ordination, and the vows are very much similar to those of the monks, except for some variation in the number of vows needed to be observed. Apart from observing their vows, they participate in the daily prayers and meditation sessions, the elder nuns have the responsibilities to guide the younger nuns in observing celibate life and to teach them the

daily recitations, rituals, religious music and so on. Since it is a new nunnery, the full time course leading to *Geshe* has yet to be introduced.

Just as it is with the monks at the monastery, the young school age nuns are allowed to become bona fide members by participating in the ‘hair-cut ceremony.’ Garbed in maroon robes with their hair clean shaven, it is sometimes hard to differentiate them from the monks at distance. They are introduced to the preliminaries of monastic education and the way of life, which includes, learning to chant prayers, playing the instruments of religious music, attending the daily prayers, and participating in the rituals and ceremonies. Besides that, they attend the local secondary school. At present there are 34 such nuns attending the school in different grades, and they will continue as long as it takes for them to graduate. Upon the graduation, they will also have a chance to decide whether to continue with the nun’s life or to choose that of the household life and a professional career.

This far the paper has basically described the roles of the monks and nuns in Thobgyal Sarpa and their engagement in preserving their religious tradition. In this process, one may notice two main functions: absorption and the transmission. First they engage themselves in learning and meditation, a process through which they absorb the tradition in themselves by experiencing the spiritualism and understanding the background philosophy. And then they transmit it to the next generation in its entirety like a vase full of nectar poured in its entirety into another vase (*bum pa gan byos*).

Apart from this, the Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre also values the cultural aspects of Bon. As it has already been explained in the beginning of this paper, the Bonpos themselves seem to believe in a kind of cultural and theological demarcation between the meaning of ‘bon’ and ‘yungdrungbon.’ Such a cultural aspect of Bon is also taken care of by a separate unit, which in this paper is classified as cultural institutions.

The cultural institutions have for their focus the preservation and the promotion of the indigenous intellectual, spiritual and artistic factors of pan-Tibetan phenomena and that of Zhangzhung. Teamed with a group of well talented Geshe, the unit operates, among other things, a research centre for Zhangzhung and Tibetan studies, a healing centre of the traditional Tibetan healing art and herbal medicines, a library of manuscripts and museum

artefacts, and a publication section of research works, journal and other compositions of various types.

The Lay Community and Its Role

The lay community at Thobgyal Sarpa has a population of some 400 and they are divided into four groups based on their native origins, such as Khyunglung, Jadur, Kham and Amdo. They earn their living by farming and by doing small business, like selling woollen clothes in the distant metropolitan cities in the winter, and the tourist souvenirs in the nearby hill station of the tourist resorts in the summer.

From what has so far been described in this paper, it is somewhat apparent that the monastic community has the major role to play when it comes to the preservation of their religious tradition. It is an idea shared by the Bonpos themselves too: “the present abbot Lungtok Tenp’i is convinced that the cultural identity of the Bonpos can only be preserved through the monasteries in exile, for he is quite sceptical about the future of Bon in Tibet itself” (Baumer 2002:180).

The twofold engagement of the absorption and the transmission can also be noticed among the lay community, but in a different form. For lay people it is the belief that is transmitted from parents to children, the belief in the religious tradition. This very belief determines to which tradition one belongs. As for the absorption, the lay people at Thobgyal Sarpa spend half a year or so once in a lifetime to fully engage in religious practices. There is a set of practices called *ngondro*, which people believe is absolutely essential to carry out once before death. An important part of this practice is that of the ‘transfer of consciousness.’ It is believed that upon mastering this technique, one becomes the master of one’s consciousness. One becomes capable of protecting one’s consciousness from falling prey to negative force.

Another role of the lay community in this respect is to support the monastic community financially and morally with full devotion. The relation between monastic and lay community, as it has been said above, is essential factor. At Thobgyal Sarpa, there is a number of special ritual events that take place at the monastery. During those occasions, the lay community

actively participates by meeting the needs in cash as well as in kind. It is therefore not misleading to say that the lay community at Thobgyal Sarpa is also equal partner in the mission of preserving their religious tradition.

Now, besides the roles of the monastic and the lay community, there is one more important factor, whose contribution in this respect is no less significant, and that is the role of the Tibetan government in exile.

Thobgyal Sarpa and the Tibetan Government in Exile

As a relocated Tibetan refugee settlement and as a cluster-unit representing a specific religious entity, Thobgyal Sarpa directly comes under the Tibetan Government in Exile's Department of Home and the Department of Religion and Culture. Besides the relationship between Thobgyal Sarpa and the Tibetan government in exile, a turning point in the history of Bon took place in 1977. That year, the Tibetan government in exile granted a long standing demand of the Tibetan Bonpos to have their representative in the Assembly of Tibetan people's deputies (the Tibetan Parliament in exile). In the following year, the government declared its formal recognition of the head lama of Thobgyal Sarpa monastery Lungtok Tenpe Nyima as the head of Bonpo sect, by conferring on him the equal rank as those of the heads of the four Buddhist sects, Nyingma, Kagyud, Sakya and Geluk.

This development is very significant not only for the people at Thobgyal Sarpa, but also to all the Bonpos at large. It secures the legitimate right of the Bonpos, of which they had long been deprived of. The Tibetan Parliament in exile is the highest legislative body of the Tibetan refugees. It was founded in 1960 as an essential step to introduce democratic system in the exile Tibetan community. The parliament consists of 46 members: ten from each of the three provincial regions of Utsang, Dhotod and Dhomed; two from each of the four Buddhist schools and Bon; two from Tibetans in Europe and one from America; and three members with distinctions in art, science and literature. Headed by a speaker and a deputy speaker, the parliament sessions are held twice a year. The granting of this right to the Bonpos is a significant gesture of recognition of the status of Bon religion at the state level, although at present it is limited within the exile community only.

Embracing Modern Education

There is still one more segment of Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre, whose role is very different from that of religious oriented institutions. There are two education oriented institutions at Thobgyal Sarpa. They are the Bon Children's Home and the local secondary school, the Central School for Tibetans. Bon Children's Home was founded in 1987 in collaboration with the Department of Education of the Tibetan government in exile, and it is solely administered by the Yungdrung Bon Monastic Centre. Whereas the Central School for Tibetans is an undertaking of the government of India, set up especially for the Tibetan refugee children. Almost every Tibetan settlement across India has a Central School for Tibetans.

Besides the fact that they are administered by two separate parties, the relation between those two are indispensable. Bon Children's Home functions as a home away from home for the Bonpo children who have come to Thobgyal Sarpa to attend the local secondary school. At present the home has 294 children, of which 188 are girls. These children come from Bonpo families in different regions in Tibet, Nepal, and Indian Himalayas. Like any other school of this level in India, this school is affiliated to the Government of India's Central Board of School Education. It was established in 1975 as a primary school, and eleven years thereafter, it was upgraded to a middle school. Finally, in the year 2003, it was further upgraded to a secondary school. All these developments took place, due to the fact that the Bon Children's Home has been able to provide the necessary infrastructure, and the strength of students.

The home also offers the children an atmosphere where they can learn the preliminaries of their religious tradition, such as prayers, history, way of life and so on. The role of Bon Children's Home therefore contributes not only in embracing the modern education but also in preserving their religious tradition. These children are the future of Bonpos, their role in keeping the tradition alive is crucial. The efforts of Bon Children's Home have created an atmosphere where these children can learn their religious tradition at the same time when they go to school.

Conclusion

From what has been covered in this paper, it is clear that Thobgyal Sarpa's activities are directed towards preserving religious tradition of the Bonpos, while being located in the far corner of a Himalayan foothill in North India amidst the globalizing Indian society. Considering the challenging situation in which the Bonpos have spearheaded their mission and the length of the hard-earned distance that they have covered at the end, one must admit that they have been successful in their mission. The structure of their society and the function of each of its segment, such as the monastic and the lay community reveal this fact. Through this study one sees the birth of a society reliving a religious tradition that at one point of time was in the verge of extinction.

Transformed from a tiny refugee settlement to a bustling seat of learning, attracting people from as far as Tibet and Tibetan habituated regions of Qinghai, Sechuan, and Gansu to the northwest frontiers of Himalayan regions, the people of Thobgyal Sarpa have come a long way to re-establish the identity of their religious tradition in the social milieu of the Tibetan refugees in India. Their diehard efforts to fulfil their mission have even attracted the higher echelons of the Tibetan government in exile and have encouraged the latter to approve their legitimate right to have their representatives in the Tibetan Parliament in exile. Thobgyal Sarpa is now internationally known centre of learning for Bonpos and their monastery's monks have reached as far as the US and Europe to spread the message of their tradition and what it has to say for the humanity.

However, it must also be mentioned that only the time will tell whether the future of Thobgyal Sarpa will be that flowery. Challenges are many and the days ahead are likely to be demanding. Climate change, economic crisis, terrorist threat and the world food crisis are likely to haunt the world and Thobgyal Sarpa is no exception. When the circumstances get worse and the competitive antidotes fail to bring remedy, one cannot help but hope for a bright light that might shine from those holy traditions, including that of the Thobgyal Sarpa. But how realistic this hope can be is something that only the tradition holders can tell.

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Notes

- 1) Thupten K. Rikey (thupten.rikey@helsinki.fi) is a PhD candidate at the Department of East Asian Studies, Institute of Asian and African Studies, Helsinki University. His fields of interest are folk culture and religion.
- 2) An ancient kingdom of what is today's northwest Tibet, being integrated into Tibetan territory in the eighth century. For more on this kingdom and its cultural civilisation see Bellezza 2008.
- 3) Not to be confused with Sherpa of Nepal.
- 4) For more on those two monasteries, see Tshul-khrims 1972:587-590 and Baumer 2002:139-140.
- 5) Personal communication with one of the Geshes in 2000.
- 6) Personal communication with the monastery's kitchen manager in 1999.

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