

Tour Report

Visit to Sikkim by Smt. Spalzes Angmo, Hon'ble Member from 11th – 15th October, 2010

My official trip to Sikkim which was pending since a long time began from 11th to 16th October, 2010, After an arduous road journey from Bagdogra to Gangtok, the capital of the Himalayan State, I reached my destination accompanied by Shova Lepcha, my protocol and liaison officer, who turned out to be a very efficient, capable lady.

Day One: Tuesday October 12, 2010

Meeting with representatives of minority community: A meeting was scheduled for interaction with various Buddhists groups headed by Joint Action Committee of Sikkim Buddhist Association and Karmapa Reception Committee who brought forth their main demand or plea that His Holiness the XVII Gyalwang Karmapa Urgain Thinley Dorje be allowed to return to Sikkim and take over his rightful seat in the Rumtek Monastery.

According to them it had been over ten years since his Holiness arrived in India and still had not set foot in Sikkim. They have alleged that though they had received full support from the state Government but till date the Central Government had remained silent on the matter.

In the light of this background, it seems a massive rally was held by the Buddhists of Sikkim on 26th September 2010 to demand that the Karmapa be allowed to come to Sikkim so that they could realize their long lasting dream of receiving, the teachings and blessings of their Drama Guru. It is believed that nearly 40,000 Sikkimese took part in this rally, comprising the Bhutias, Lehchas, Nepalese and Madeshis including other ethnic and religious groups. This was a peaceful rally reflecting the true spirit of the people of Sikkim.

All the various groups have stressed on the one important factor that the Sikkimese Buddhists right to freedom of worship entails their right to receive teachings and blessings in person from their spiritual Guru. Since it is not

possible for the devotees of Sikkim to go to Dharmshala to receive the Karmapa's blessings and teachings, it is imperative that he be allowed to come to Sikkim to give his teachings among his followers. Representative of the Hindu Mahasabha also brought forth the demand that this holiness the Karmapa should be allowed to come to Sikkim to uphold the true traditions of a secular country.

The **representatives of Christian community** led an active lady said that thought they did into face any problem they were not aware of any welfare schemes undertaken for the minorities.

Meeting with Chief Secretary and state officials in the afternoon regarding implementation of Prime Minister's 15 Point Programme and welfare schemes in North Sikkim since it has been identified as Minority concentrated District. After a thorough, detailed discussion on how the MCD areas could develop with the active participation of both the civil society and government by putting special emphasis on education youth training and self employment opportunity besides laying the infrastructure for providing basis amenities of housing, drinking water and electricity. Stress was also laid on imparting technical training and it seems an I.T.I. had been proposed in the plan. Such an institution would be highly beneficial to generate employment opportunities among the youth.

The following schemes are being implemented in the state of Sikkim for members of the Minority communities:-

1. Pre-Matric Scholarship
2. Post-Matric Scholarship
3. Merit-cum-means based Scholarship
4. Multi-Sectoral Development Programme in North Sikkim

The response to the scholarship scheme has been very positive. Under MsDP nine projects have been accorded in-principal approval and DPRs have been submitted to the Ministry for approval and sanction. The district plan for the balance amount was being prepared.

The Project Director (ICDS) informed that North Sikkim was fully covered under ICDS. There are three ICDS projects with 191 anganwadi centers. The centers provide 6 services to 0-6 years old children, pregnant and lactating mothers. The services include immunization, pre-school education, and supplementary nutrition, health education to pregnant and lactating mothers and adolescent girls, health checkup and referral services. The children are provided 200 ml of milk in the morning, khichidi (porridge) in the afternoon and kheer once a week.

The Secretary, Social Welfare Department and Additional Secretary of Home Department and Shri R.C. Bhutia, Project Director were among officials present.

Day Two : Wednesday October 13, 2010

I visited the famous Rumtek Monastery accompanied by Deputy Secretary, Mrs. Shova Lepcha, Liaison Officer. The presence of guards around the Monastery was an unnerving sight for me and felt that it somehow disturbed the spirituality and sanctity of the whole place. Still I will always treasure the most blessed moments when I was able to pay homage to the shrine of the XVI Karmapa which was specially opened and I had the golden opportunity to pray for all sentient beings and for world peace.

In the afternoon, we visited the **Nyamgyal Institute of Tibetology** which has come to be known as the highest seat of learning of Mahayana Buddhism. The foundation stone of the institute was laid down by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and it was officially inaugurated by our first Prime Minister Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in 1958. This institute is dedicated to the cause of advancement of Tibetan studies. It is a treasure house of great murals, thankas and images of Lord Buddha and bodhisattvas. It houses one of the greatest collections of books on Mahayana Buddhism and Tibetan literature in the Bodhi or Bhoti language. Therefore, the demand of the people of this region to include Bhoti Language in the third schedule of the Constitution should be upheld and implemented by the Union Government.

Day Three: Thursday October 14, 2010

The six hour drive West Sikkim on bumpy rough roads certainly took a toll on my body but it all went away when I was received and greeted with such a warm reception by the school children of Denjong Padma Choeling Academy run by the Mayul Liang Trust. Mr. Sonam Youngda, Director of the institute took me around the school's premises and I had a close interaction both with the teachers and students and was quite impressed with their method of teaching, which combined modern education along with the Buddhist philosophy, so that the distinct culture and tradition of the region remained intact, and could be passed on to the next generation. In the evening school children dressed in monk robes performed a special prayer ceremony for world peace. All this reflected the devotion and dedication with which the institute was run by its management and staff.

The day ended after visiting the Pemayangste Monastery and a brief interaction with the nuns at the holy Kachopari Lake.

Day Four: Friday October 15, 2010

After a long drive of six hours, finally reached Gangtok and after taking some much needed rest, I met a delegation of Bhutia and Lepchas Apex committee (SIBLAC) led by convener Tsetan Tashi who appraised me of the sentiments of the Buddhist of Sikkim with regard to proposed 96 MW Lethang, Tinting and Tashiding Hydel Power Projects on the Rathong Chu; which is considered to be the most sacred river not only for the Buddhists of Sikkim but for the entire Buddhist Himalayan belt. The government of Sikkim had earlier scrapped another similar project on the Rathong chu to respect the sentiments of the Buddhists of Sikkim. According to the Nesol (A Buddhist text) the entire stretch of the area including streams, caves, trees, rocks and mountains are the eternal abode of Mahaguru Padma Sanbhava and hence the proposed Lethang, Tinting and Tashiding power project on the Rathong Chu should not be implemented to preserve the religious sanctity.

In the evening, I attended a dinner hosted in my honour by the Former Ambassador to Mangolia Mr. Karma Topdan, also present were the Chief Secretary Mr. T. Dorjee and his predecessor.

Recommendations:-

1. Inclusion of Bhoti Language in the eight schedule of the Constitution as demanded by the Buddhist community and also inclusion of Bhoti Language in the school curriculum of Sikkim.
2. To pave way for the return of the spiritual Guru His Holiness the XVII Gyalwang Karmapa Urgen Thinley Dorjey to Sikkim, so that his followers who have waited for 10 years, could receive his blessings and teachings.
3. Recommend the closure of the three hydro power projects i.e. Lethang, Tashiding, and Tinting on the most sacred river Rathong Chu, to respect the sentiments of the Buddhist community of Sikkim. Earlier in 1997, a similar project on the Rathong Chu considered to be the abode of the Mahaguru Padmasambhava was scrapped by the then State Government, since it is the most holy site for the Buddhist all over the Himalayan region.
4. Strong measures need to be taken up the state government to protect and preserve the unique and distinct identity of the Sikkimese Buddhists (mainly comprising of Bhutia and Lepchas) by promoting their culture, tradition and language.
5. The representation of Sikkimese Buddhists in Legislative assembly and all political bodies need to be enhanced since they have been reduced to a minority over the years and their political aspirations need to be fulfilled.

(Spalzes Angmo)
Member
30.11.2010