Buddhism spread to countries outside its homeland in India and became spatially deeply rooted in Tibet. As the time passed, its was classified into many sects. The Bhoutivas of Sikkim are said to have migrated to Sikkim from Tibet sometime in the seventeenth century. They are the followers of Nyingma sect. They established themselves as a ruling class dominating the indigenous Lepcha. With them, Mahayana Buddhism entered Sikkim and developed as the state religion. In this paper, there is an humble attempt to throw light on the introduction of Buddhism in Sikkim.

It is believed that Guru Padmasambhava had personally visited both Bhutan and Sikkim during his travels in Tibet in the eighth century A.D. Although he left no converts and erected no buildings, he is said to have led away to caves many holy books for the use of posterity, and to have personally consecrated every sacred spot in Sikkim. According to the legendary accounts, Guru Padmasambhava entered Sikkim by the “Leedy Pass” Jo-la and he is said to have returned to Tibet by way of Jo-lam Pass, resting en-route on the Kun-phu and creating the Yoko-là by ‘tearing’ up the rock to crush an enormous demon.

Buddhism was introduced in Sikkim by Lhatun Chempo, who was a resident of Konglo in the lower valley of the Tashigo. His name means “The Great Revered God.” His religious name is Kun-zang nam-gye (Skt. Samantabhadrā) He is also known by the title of Lhatun nam-tha-jig-med (Skt. Abhayākāśādeva) with reference to his alleged power of flying. He is also sometimes called Kuduo Dro-gchen Chden Chempo (Skt. Maitreyakorhamsa).

Besides constructing a number of monasteries and shrines, he selected the sites for other monasteries. The oldest monastery founded by Lhatun Chempo is Dub-de, which was constructed soon after the consecration of Phuntsog Namgyal. Soon afterwards, shrines seem to have been erected at Tashiding, Pemayangtse, Sang-nga-cho-ling, over spots consecrated by Guru Rinpoche and these ultimately became the nucleus of the monasteries. It is also said that Lhatun Chempo selected the site for the Pemayangtshe monastery.

Waddell, in his book Lamaism in Sikkim, has recorded a miraculous appearance of Lhatun Chempo in Sikkim and meeting with other two lamas. These three lamas convened a council and despatched two messengers in the vast for the search of Phuntsog, as it was prophesied by Guru Rinpoche. Phuntsog was brought and crowned at Choogyal (Skt. Dharmaraja) or religious king. He was at that time aged thirty eight years and he became a lama in the same year which is said to have been 1641 A.D. It is also recorded that Dalai Lama sent a congratulatory note bearing his seal to the emir of Guru Rinpoche, the Phurba (dagger) and the most precious sand image of the Guru as presents. This gesture bound the new king to the Tibetan government and in times of crisis he looked to the Tibetan government for protection and aid. Sikkimese records known as Bras-longs-Rgyal-rabs state that Phuntsog Namgyal had assistance guaranteed to him if ever it was needed by the Fifth Dalai Lama.

Subsequent to Lhatun Chempo’s death in the latter end of the seventeenth century, Buddhism steadily progressed in Sikkim till latterly monks and monasteries filled the country. With the passing-off of time, the monasteries grew in size and number. At present, there are 67 monasteries. In addition, there are 132 Mandakhang and 22 Lhakhang and Tsimkhang.
The monastic education was however not confined to higher stage and in general education was the preliminary knowledge of Logic, scriptures, and primary knowledge of health texts were included together with ritualistic motivation. A Nyimagmapa monk therefore becomes high in various ritualistic performances and higher esoteric practices. The monks have the customary right of performing all the religious functions of the presidency. The head lama of the monastery of Penayangtse alone has the power to consecrate the Chenpo of Sikkim. In spite of the high spiritual status accorded to these lamas, they were also concerned with the state affairs. An elected monk like Dorje Jomol is worshipped by urban people and his seat is usually regarded high in the monastic order. But his associate monks had a usual access in rural areas with the consent and directive of the Dorje-Jomol.

The interpretation of Buddhist ritual and local religious practice found expression in the seasonal dance festivals held in the royal temple of Gungtok, the capital of Sikkim. Some of the performances are comparable to the ritual dance conducted by Bon priests in the south-eastern Tibetan borderlands. The masked priests represent fierce Bon deities and their attendants, and the dances are staged for the suppression of evil. Similar dances form an important part of the annual worship of the mountain god personifying Khanchenjunga of Sikkim. On some occasions of great ritual importance, a Lepcha Shamar, who may be male or female,
become possessed by the spirit of a semi-legendary Lehpa chieftain believed to have ruled the Lehpa country when the first Tibetan settlers arrived in Sikkim.

Until 1975 there was a sense in which Sikkim was still a Buddhist state, although its links with Tibet had been snapped from about 1950 when the Tibetan uprising against the Chinese invasion took place. However, cut off now from its original religious base in Tibet and incorporated into the secular state of India, it is assumed that the Buddhism in Sikkim will continue and flourish retaining its basic principles of Mahayana Buddhism.

References:
2. Dzogchen (Drod-chen) literally means “The Great End” or “Perfection” being the technical name for the system of mystical insight of the Nyingmapa and Karmapa means “the honoured.”
4. Ibid., pp. 8-9.