



## Chomos of Kinnaur: A critical reflection on the gendered cultural politics

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### Abstract

The paper “Chomos of Kinnaur: A Critical Reflection on the Gendered Cultural Politics” attempts to historically locate the role of women in Buddhism in general and the Chomos (the Buddhist nuns) in the present day Kinnaur; and how historically the Chomos have been made to live a life far below dignity than that of the Lamas in the Kinnaur region. Despite some instances of women’s Buddhist ordination to higher ranks of Buddhist hierarchy since the Sixth century BCE, the Chomos within the Buddhist philosophical and religious norms as well as in general Indian patriarchal set up, are a suppressed and victimized social group whose concerns need to be brought to the fore. The critical gaze to the Chomos through a feminist lens is the need of the hour to address their material, social and political conditions and also to lend them the necessary dignity in life for the work they do in the religious order of Buddhism.

**Keywords:** buddhism, chomos, feminism, Kinnaur, lamas, patriarchy, spirituality

### Introduction

The Buddhist nuns are referred to as ‘Chomos’, fondly referred to as ‘Aani’ or ‘Chomney’ by the natives of Kinnaur. They are the ‘women of dharma’ engaged in spiritual upliftment as well as in looking after the needs of the Kinnaur regions and its Buddhist heritage, along with the Lamas. Their lives document, apart from their spiritual concerns, the way patriarchy has manifest itself in structuring their consciousness and sensibilities to give rise to a picture of them in the socio-political and cultural setting of Kinnaur. The paper seeks to explore the ways in which the Chomos of Kinnaur are being historically, sociologically and culturally constructed in a purposeful manner even though they are presently just a forgotten small community of women who are living within the structure of “Lamaism” and how they, though undertaking the similar tasks as the Lamas, do not have similar power and position in society as the Lamas. Being women living in the patriarchal set up, even though they are engaged in spiritual concerns, their materialistic life is a saga of disparities that women in general suffer from in a male-chauvinist world. Thus, to understand the lives of Chomos, the perspective of feminism is taken as a lens to look at their lives and how the institution of Chomos developed historically and culturally within the physical domain of Kinnaur and within Buddhism in general. The paper attempts to bring to the fore the lives of Chomos and the ways in which they still remain as forgotten individuals living their lives in recluse and providing the world with much needed calmness through their ways which the turbulent world needs it more than ever.

Kinnaur is rapidly changing with the ongoing changes going on around the world because of the globalized environment, because of the expansion of technology beyond the city limits and because of mass movement of people and the revolutionizing of the communication (also mass communication) with the advent and spread of Information technology. Amidst all these changes, the life of Chomos does not show much change as they are still stuck within the

patriarchal set up of the Indian society where women are usually seen as the second-class citizens having lesser rights and contribution to the making of society. This view that women because of their historical, intellectual and social contribution are not as equally important as that of men is a dubious argument which needs to be thwarted at each and every step as it is the male-chauvinist society which first curbed the role of women within the household by depriving them of education and property rights, as we see in the Indian society since the Later Vedic Age. Women have been continuously been subjected to various atrocities and sufferings imposed and perpetrated by men; and yet they carried on the essential task of advancing the civilization not just by giving birth and child-rearing, but also by providing the source of sustenance to men who thought they were busy making the world. The Chomos still carry on doing that essential role within the Buddhist spiritual order and yet they seem to be having almost no recognition in any realm and discourses of the world.

Historically, women and their roles in society have been denigrated to such an extent that it seemed that they do not perform any productive work and moreover are creatures who with their fanciful imagination often become the cause of much duels and fights, leading to destruction and disputes in society. Moreover, women are again portrayed to be creatures who usually have the tendency to transgress from the norms that are set out for them and thus need to be kept under check usually under strict supervision of the male members of the family – whether a father or a husband or a son. Women, furthermore, are not even provided an identity for themselves as they were known in relation to men. From various angles, thus, all attempts were made in the traditional Indian society to bind women so that they can be used to serve the male whims and wishes; and the notion of ‘servitude’ is never being questioned by them ever. The state of Chomos in Kinnaur is no different as they have lived in this patriarchal set up where women in general had to live a life of ignominy.

### Kinnaur Buddhism

Kinnaur Buddhism is a fascinating combination of Tantrik teachings and rituals of *Mahayana*, *Hinayana* and *Vajrayāna* coming out from the four school of thoughts which can be noticed throughout the district. *Nyingma*, *Sakya*, *Kagyū* and *Gelug* which are the four sub-sects of Mahayana Buddhism followed here are more similar than dissimilar with orders originating at different times in the history of the spread of Buddhism in Tibet developed under different teachers.

- Nyingma is the most ancient school which is also known as Ngangyur. It was founded on the first translations of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Old Tibetan in the 8th century.
- Sakya: literal meaning is 'pale earth' belong to the Red-hat orders. Name comes from the grey landscape of Ponpori Hills in Shigatse Tibet, built by Khon Konchog Gyalpo (1034 A.D. – 1102 A.D.) in 1073 A.D.
- Kagyu: Oral lineage/whispered transmission; 'Chos Lugs' traces its lineage in the eleventh century Indian Mahasiddhas, Naropa, Maitripa, Marpa Lotsawa and Milarepa to Gampopa. They further divide into Karma, Drikung, Kagyu, Taklung and Drukpa and Shangpa. Marpa Kagyu is the sub-school which originates from Marpa, Milarepa and Gampopa lineages. Marpa Kagyu also includes the four major and eight minor Kagyu lineages. Amongst the eight minor sub-sects the most notable are the Drikung and Drukpa Lineages (Red Hat Sect) in Ladakh and Bhutan. These sub sects were founded by the Pagtru Kagyu's founder Phagmo Drupa.
- Gelug: Founded by Je Tsongkhapa (1357A.D.-1419 A.D.) in the fourteenth century. The first monastery he established was called Ganden, hence Gelug or Gandepa. To this day hence the nominal head is known as Ganden Tripa. Most prominent face of the Gelug School is His Highness the Dalai Lama. Etymologically Ganden Choluk, i.e., 'the spiritual lineage of Ganden' gave rise to Galuk later modifying further into Gelug. Tsongkhapa had two disciples: Gyaltsab Je and Khedrup Gelek Pelzang, the First Panchen Lama (1385 A.D.-1438A.D.).
- Bodong is a minor school, which keeps a female nun of Tulku lineage of incarnated lamas called the *Samding Dorje Phagmo*. Its most famous teacher was *Bodong Penchen Lénam Gyelchok* (1376A.D.-1451A.D.) who is credited to have authored 135 volumes of scriptures.
- Jonang: This school has its religious-political center in Golok, Nakhi and Mongol areas in Kham and Amdo centered at Dzamthang Monastery in Tibet. In modern times the 14th Dalai Lama installed the 9th *Jebsundamba Khutughtu* as the head of this school.

Out of all the Three Rituals; Hinayana being the first form and also focusing on an individual therefore ended up being called Theravāda later in the history. Theravāda in Pali means 'the way of the elders.' Also, refers to the southern tradition as it went on to spread down south to Sri Lanka, Thailand and Myanmar. Mahayana literally means 'the great vehicle' thereby setting forth the goal of complete enlightenment of all and for Everyone and therefore inclusive rather than just to the monastics who are dedicated with a disciplined and celibate lives.

Vajrayana is similar to Mahayana only differing in the practices to attain Nirvana. It is popularly known as Tantra

and is associated with esoteric (slowly initiating into the secrets which are acclaimed to be powerful thence open to abuse) teachings of Buddhism. It is also known as the 'Diamond/Lightning vehicle' because it is followed through a devout vows and lifetime commitments. Great Historical Teachers Guru Padmasmbhava also known as 'Guru Rinpoche' and Atisha brought Teachings of Vajrayāna to Tibet from where on it kept spreading to the periphery and forward into Himalayan hinterlands to down south reaching far and wide (Powers, 2007) [5].

### The Chomos of Kinnaur

Apparently to a visitor to the hills and even to many a local population the lives of Chomos and Lamas in the serene gompas (monastery) would seem to be ideal where they are engaged in spiritual concerns. It may even seem that the cultural order of the tribal community which somehow has some elements of matriarchal system in its working has been some kind of an ideal society where things are not as it is in the male-dominated order, but when one looks beyond the apparent, when one looks deeply and critically towards the unforgiving life of a 'Chomo' who is not there out of her choice most of the times but as a victim of her circumstances ranging from poverty, polyandry, to nowhere else to go in those cold, barren and bleak mountains of those olden times; it seems that things are not so idealistic as one would like to believe. Even though the tribal community of the hills are connected with the mainstream nowadays to a greater extent, and the Chomos have better conditions than they had in historical times, yet in many ways they are made to live and practice their spiritual concerns in shackled scenarios. Their lives seem to be a saga of veiled oppressive structure of male dominance where they are being worshipped by the local community for their spiritual concerns and yet their pains and tears seem to matter to no one. They have been left in a harsh realm to deal with the harsher realities of their lives – both physically and metaphorically; and the world has moved on to enjoy the better prospects of modernization and technologically advanced civilization. The Chomos seem to be caught in the web of that ancient traditional system from where they can only see the light of modern world and but not experience any benefits of the same in their own lives.

### Women's spirituality and Feminism

It is a well-known fact that the stereotypes of masculine and feminine is a manifestation of the patriarchal mindset where certain attributes of both the sexes are being championed and celebrated. In the critical discourse of contemporary feminist religious studies, scholars like Judith Plaskow, Carol Christ and Pulitzer prize winning author Alice Walker have spoken elaborately on this exclusion and marginalization within an ideology from religious to social ranging from gender to race to the very ethnic fabric of the society. Their writings are not just questioning the prevailing structures but also at the same critiquing on the centrality of women and feminist work. More importantly, asserting that women's spirituality is also a firm ground for their feminine expressions hidden otherwise in the quiet corners of their beings. On the basis of this, it is significant to understand the ways in Chomos of Kinnaur have come to what they are today (Banssbo, 2002).

When one looks at women in Buddhism, history takes us back to 6th century BCE, when *Mahapajapati Gotami* was

the first woman to receive Buddhist ordination. In the 5th century, *Prajñādhara (Prajnatara)*, is believed to have been a woman who was the twenty-seventh Indian head of Zen Buddhism and teacher of Bodhidharma. In the 13th century, the Japanese abbess Mugai Nyodai (1223 A.D. – 1298A.D.) was the first female Zen master, as well as the first Zen abbess. In 1966, Freda Bedi, a British woman, became the first Western woman to take ordination in Tibetan Buddhism. In 1981, Ani Pema Chodron became ordained as a bhikkhuni being the first American citizen to do so. In 1988, Jetsunma Ahkon Lhamo, former name being Catherine Burroughs, became the first woman to be named a re-incarnated Lama. In 2002, Khenmo Drolma, an American woman, became the first bhikkhuni (fully ordained Buddhist nun) in the Drikung Kagyu lineage of Buddhism. She travelled to Taiwan to be ordained. Also she became the first westerner to become an abbot at the Vajra Dakini Nunnery in Vermont (America's first Tibetan Buddhist nunnery) in the Drikung Kagyu lineage. In April 2011 Venerable Kelsang Wangmo, a German nun became the world's first woman to receive the degree of Geshema (a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree) from the Institute of Buddhist Dialectical Studies (IBD) in Dharmashala, Himachal Pradesh, India. It was only in 2013 that Tibetan women were considered eligible and allowed to take the 'Geshe' exams for the first time (Geshe is a Tibetan Buddhist academic degree for monks and nuns). So it was only in 2016 that twenty Tibetan women graduated as first Geshema from the institute. Indian Tantric Buddhism and pre-modern Tibetan Buddhism provides us with evidences of the importance given to female practitioners amongst its ranks. The Shangpa Kagyu, a major school of Tantric lineage has had a history of female teachers and practitioners and two most-prominent female teachers were namely Yeshe Tsogyal and Machig Labdrön.

Thus, it can be figured out from the concise chronological representation of the above facts that women though are being ordained to Buddhist order back in the 6<sup>th</sup> century BCE, but it is in the last two decades that certain developments of women being part of the cultural order of the Buddhist realm has been put into practice. Thus, even though the institution of Chomos is an old one, yet their place in the Buddhist order had always been precarious as they were never acknowledged to be having the similar status, prestige and significance as that of the Lamas.

### A Concluding Statement

Buddhism as a religion, as a way of life had come up and popularized itself as a revolt against the atrocities of the caste-based Hindu system. Despite it being a non-violent and coherent seeker of truth, being the essence of its thought process, it has not been able to do away with the gender-based victimizations that were prevalent in the Indian society from the Classical age. Even when India has modernized itself significantly and the city-bred Indian women have come out of their exploited status to regain some realms of public life with their own competence and talent; yet amidst all these, the Chomos of Kinnaur valley are still living a life far below their dignity which needs to be brought into public gaze and debate not just to ameliorate their conditions, but to reinstate to them and to Kinnaur a much-needed serenity and sense of justice. It is essential that the overlooked issues of the Chomos' lives are critically gauged and evaluated through the cultural lens of femininity

and feminism and not just as 'women of dharma' to make the living conditions and dignity of these people a matter of concern both for the government as well as for the public.

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