



Sikkim's Namgyal Institute of Tibetology: its origins and current activities

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The intention of this paper is to re-introduce the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT) to the world of Tibetan Studies today: its origins, purposes, activities, resources and publications. It hopes to invite scholars from the international community to make use of the Institute's facilities, carry out research in Sikkim on any aspect of Tibetology, Sikkimese history or the languages and cultures of Sikkim's numerous ethnic communities, and contribute to the NIT's Bulletin of Tibetology

Since its establishment in 1958, the NIT has sponsored and promoted research on the religion, history, language, art and culture of the people of the Tibetan cultural area which includes Sikkim. The NIT's library holds one of the largest collection of Tibetan works in the world outside Tibet and a museum of Tibetan iconography and religious art. It has published the Bulletin of Tibetology since 1964 and numerous books over the years.

The site on which the institute was established was donated by the late Chogyal (king) of Sikkim Sir Tashi Namgyal in memory of his departed son Paljor Namgyal. The foundation stone of the institute was laid by the 14th Dalai Lama on the 10th of February 1957 and the institute was declared open by the late Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on the 1st of October 1958. The building of the institute is an imposing monument and a splendid example of Sikkimese architecture.

When the Institute was founded in 1958, Sikkim was still an independent Buddhist kingdom and the Institute, its scholars and library had an important role to play in Sikkimese society. This role became even greater following the Chinese take over of Tibet in 1959 and the settlement of eminent Tibetan rinpoches and scholars in Sikkim. The same was true for the rest of the world and Tibetology soon gained worldwide recognition and greatly progressed as an academic discipline. However, following the end of the Buddhist monarchy in 1975, the winds of change swept rapidly through Sikkim and the subject of Tibetology gradually lost the importance it once enjoyed. The NIT now wishes

to regain its prominent position, this time as an important research centre in the Eastern Himalayas.

In the summer of 2002, as the newly appointed Director of the institute, I undertook to expand the NIT, restructure its research wing and open its doors to international collaboration. This is being done through the creation of new research programs, monthly lecture series, seminars, language classes, fellowship programs, publications and collaboration with foreign scholars. It is hoped that the institute will actively promote Tibetan and Sikkimese studies, and become a dynamic research centre. In order to help me achieve this, I have appointed Tashi Tsering (Amnye Machen Institute, Dharamsala) as part-time Consultant and Anna Balikci Denjongpa (PhD London) as Research-Coordinator.

From its publication department, the NIT has undertaken to translate and publish its rare manuscripts, histories of Sikkim and sacred guide-books in order to make them available to a larger public. Among its new research programs, the NIT's Research Officers have undertaken a project to document the social history of Sikkim's 60-odd monasteries in order to publish an illustrated book on the subject. A second project proposes to locate, digitalize and document old and rare photographs of Sikkim, both in India and abroad. The aim is to create a digital image bank at the NIT and organize a permanent photographic exhibition. The NIT is also establishing a visual anthropology project in order to produce an enduring digital record of Sikkim's vanishing indigenous and Buddhist cultures.

An international inter-disciplinary seminar on Sikkim will be held at the institute towards the end of 2003 in honour of famous Sikkimese scholars in Tibetan studies. It is hoped that the seminar will generate interest in Sikkimese studies and facilitate the establishment of an international association for Sikkimese studies based at the institute.

The NIT will soon undergo a general expansion of its infrastructure and facilities. The construction of a new building which will house a library, study rooms, a conference hall, studios and an administrative wing is to begin before the end of the year. The present hostel will be renovated to accommodate visiting scholars wishing to carry out research at the institute.