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Shamarpa last rite preparations even as body not allowed into Nepal

Kathmandu, July 18th.

by Kosh Raj Koirala.

Tall arches with condolence messages on banners have been erected at intervals of every few 100 meters along the road to the Sharminub Foundation from Ring Road Sano Bharyang. One banner on the arch at the main entrance to Sharminub Foundation, established by the late Shamarpa Mipham Chokyi Lodro, reads, “Hearty welcome to our distinguished delegates, guests and participants for chanting prayers and the sacred fire-ritual ceremony of Kunsing Shamar Rinpoche”.

Inside the Foundation premises are tents, toilets, kitchens and other logistics arranged for visitors for the big gathering. Atop the main building of the monastery, where hundreds of Buddhist monks are busy offering prayers to the departed soul, is a crematorium ready for the last rites of the 14th Shamarpa, whose body was supposed to be transported to Kathmandu from New Delhi on Monday.

“We have made all the preparations as per the wishes of our guru to have his last rites performed in the gumba he built. But we are miffed by the decision of the government at the eleventh hour to deny permission to transport the body to Kathmandu,” said Lama Dawa Sangbo Yolmopa, who is among those taking initiatives to bring the body back.

The late Shamar Rinpoche himself had expressed a wish to have his last rites performed in the country where Lord Buddha was born. He did so in the presence of thousands of his devotees during the World Peace Mahapuja organized in Kathmandu four years ago. President Dr Ram Baran Yadav, government ministers, lawmakers and senior government officials were present at the function.

A worker prepares to hang posters on an electric pole against the backdrop of a recently erected welcome arch at Ichangunarayan VDC in Kathmandu on Friday as the Sharminub Monastery prepares to receive the body of 14th Kunsing Shamar Rinpoche. The

62-year-old spiritual leader died in Germany on June 11 but Nepal government has so far refused permission for the body to be brought to Nepal for last rites. (Keshab Thoker/Republica)

Yolmopa said the 14th Shamarpa attached special significance to Nepal although he has established a number of his centers around the world. “Guru wanted his final rites to be performed here in Nepal since Shamarpa has a long association with Nepal,” he added.

The Rinpoche, who was 62, died of a heart attack in Germany on June 11. As the original schedule for bringing the body to Nepal on Monday changed after the government refused permission, the body has now been taken to Kalimpong.



Preparations at Shar Minub Retreat Monastery for the arrival of Shamar Rinpoche's kudung

Strong religious sentiments

The decision of the government not to allow the the body of the Shamarpa to be brought to Nepal for last rites because of his foreign nationality has left his followers in Nepal hugely dissatisfied. “This tradition has existed since long back. If this was allowed in all past periods, including during the Malla, Shah, Rana and Panchayat regimes, why cannot it be allowed at a time when the country has turned secular?” asked Dindu Sherpa while venting ire against the government.

The late Shamarpa’s followers live in 10 various districts in Nepal. While his followers in Europe and India have already had a chance to pay final homage to him, his followers in Nepal complain that they are likely to be deprived of that opportunity due to the government’s decision.

Since the last rites of the Shamarpa need to be performed on the 49th day as per Buddhist tradition, there was an original plan to keep the body for 16 days at the Sharminub Foundation for paying final homage before the last rites. “Since it is a matter of great pride for us to have his mortal remains in Nepal, it is the duty of the government to respect people’s religious sentiments. This is all the more so because we are a secular nation now,” Sherpa further said while also threatening to take to the streets.

Meanwhile, various Buddhist organizations are lobbying hard with the president and other top officials to allow the late Shamarpa’s body to be brought back to Nepal. Lawmaker Gopal Dahit Friday raised the issue in parliament.

No connection with Tibetan movement

The late Shamar Rinpoche did not have any connection with the politics of Tibet as he and other disciples had accompanied the 16th Karmapa when the latter migrated to Sikkim four years before China took over Tibet in 1959.

Also the royal guru to the Chogyal or king of Sikkim, the Karmapa built the Rumtek monastery there. The Shamar Rinpoche lived in Sikkim until the death of the Karmapa in 1981. Since then, the Rinpoche devoted his efforts to the many projects initiated by the 16th Karmapa. “There seems to be a misunderstanding among Nepali authorities. But he was never associated with political movements concerning Tibet,” said General Secretary of the Sharminub Foundation, Rajendra Lal Manandhar.

Tibetan Mahayan Buddhism has four sects, including Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug. While the Shamarpa and Karmapa belonged to the Kagyu sect, the Dalai Lama belongs to the Gelug sect.

Shamarpa’s association with Nepal

While the fourth Shamarpa had built the Karma Raj Vihar in Kathmandu, the then Malla king in Kathmandu had made the sixth Shamarpa his guru. The Shamarpa had also traveled to Helambu area in Sindhupalchowk, where he lived for a few months.

The seventh Shamarpa traveled extensively in modern-day Mustang and Dolpa districts, and the eighth Shamarpa was born in Helambu itself. According to historians, the Karmapa in Tibet had

then sent Nepal a letter of recognition with a party of monks, who were to invite and to bring him safely back to Tibet. Then three years old, the Rinpoche was kept in the royal palace until he was seven, when he was sent to Tibet upon renewed requests from the Karmapa.

Nepal's connection with the Shamarpa is so strong that it waged a war with Tibet over the issue of surrendering the 10th Shamarpa, who took refuge in Nepal. He had sought refuge here during the regency of Bahadur Shah. Nepal declined to hand over the Shamarpa despite a series of requests from then Karmapa in Tibet.

Nepal won the war and the Shamarpa lived in Nepal till the end. His last rites were performed at Chhimi Gumba in Helambu.

But as the then Tibet government discontinued the Shamarpa tradition out of a false belief that they lost the war because the Shamarpa was in Nepal, the 11th, 12th and 13th Shamarpas were not officially declared. Tibet withdrew its 157-year-old ban on the Shamarpa only in 1955, upon the Karmapa's request.

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