

Buddhist Monasteries of Western Himalaya and its Functions

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Abstract: *The gompa or gonpa is a Tibetan word used for monastery in the western Himalaya. The gonpa resembles a small, nearly independent village comprising ordained and un-ordained monks. In the western Himalaya, these monasteries are the center of learning as well as religious activities. On the basis of this, the two types of monasteries have been identified in the region of western Himalaya. These are ritualistic monasteries and academic monasteries. The present paper is mainly focus on the Buddhist monasteries of western Himalaya.*

Key Words: *Buddhism, Buddhist Monasteries, Gonpa, Western Himalaya and Lama/Monk.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The youngest and the highest mountain range of the world is Himalaya. The literal meaning of Himalaya is abode of snow. The traditional definition of the Himalaya is that it is a great range of mountains that separates India, along its north-central and north eastern frontier, from China (Tibet), and extends between latitudes 26° 20' and 35° 40' North, and between longitudes 74° 50' and 95° 40' East.¹ In this sense the Himalaya extend from the Indus Trench below Nanga Parbat² (8,125 m) in the west to the Yarlung Tsangpo-Brahmaputra gorge below Namche Barwa³ (7,756 m) in the east, a west-northwest to east-southeast distance of about 2,400 kilometers.⁴ This definition includes, politically, the independent kingdoms of Nepal and Bhutan, a small part of Pakistan, parts of China (Xinzang Autonomous Region), as well as the western, central, and eastern sections of the Indian Himalaya.

The Himalayan area can be divided into three meso-physiographic locales or three transverse zones (1) Western Himalaya (Jammu-Kashmir, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh), (2) Central Himalaya comprising of hill districts of Uttarakhand, (3) Eastern Himalaya- from Sangrila range and the Brahmaputra watershed.⁵ There are marked differences between these zones in respect of climate, topography and vegetation. Since our research is mainly based on the monastic centers of the western Himalaya, thus our main emphasis will be on the western Himalaya.

The western Himalaya is 880 kilometer long from the Indus to the Kali waterways, covering a total region of around 4, 33,000 square kilometer in the region of Ladakh, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir. It has two physiographic territories: Kashmir Himalaya and Himachal Himalaya. The Kashmir Himalaya generally lies in union territories of Ladakh and Kashmir covering a region of around 350,000 square kilometer. It is around 700 kilometer long 500 kilometer wide with a normal tallness of 3,000 m. The Himachal Himalaya lies in the state of Himachal Pradesh covering a zone of around 45,000 kilometer. Topographically, the territory of Himachal from south to north can be divided into five zones – 'the Shivaliks' or outer Himalaya, lower Himalaya or Dhauladhar, lesser Himalaya, trans-Himalaya, and 'Alpine zone' or the greater Himalaya.⁶ The western Himalaya (altitude 4,500 meters and above from mean sea level) are bordered on the north by the Tibetan plateau, on the northwest by the Karakoram and Hindu-Kush ranges. The mountain ranges like Nanga Parbat, Pir-Panjaj, Dhauladhar, Zaskar, Ladakh and east Karakoram comes under the western Himalaya only. Indus, Satluj, Chenab, Chandra, Zaskar, Bhaga and Spiti are the major river system of the western Himalaya region. The rivers are responsible for valleys of western Himalaya. Kinnaur valley is formed by Satluj river where as Spiti valley is formed by the Spiti/Piti river. There are other minor rivers which are the tributaries of major rivers, these rivers are Tsarab, Lingti, Baspa, Ropa, Pejur, Kirang, Tidong, Pin, and Parechu. Some of the famous passes of western Himalaya are – Rohtang, Kunzam, Hamta, Chandrakherni, Khardung-la, Tanglang-la, Pin-Parbati, Kugati, Bhabha, Chonia, Manirang, Parang, Hangrang, Shipki and Baralacha-la.

Ladakh, Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti all these astoundingly beautiful valleys are located in the remotest location of Indian western Himalaya. The vegetation of the western Himalaya changes with climatological condition, precipitation, elevation and soils. Seventy percent of area of western Himalaya is cold-arid desert with small amount of vegetation. Ladakh is newly formed union territory whereas Kinnaur, Lahaul and Spiti are the frontier districts of Himachal Pradesh. Union territory of Ladakh comprise of five different regions which are Changtang⁷, Zaskar, Kargil, Nubra and Leh. Lahaul and Spiti are two different valleys of Himachal Pradesh. The district of Kinnaur itself is divided into two parts on the basis of climatic and physiographic conditions, these are upper Kinnaur and lower

Kinnaur. The lower Kinnaur and Lahaul is the green belt of Himachal Pradesh whereas upper Kinnaur, Spiti and Ladakh are the cold deserts. . One can find vegetation only around river banks or near habitational sites. The rainfall is very scanty in this zone. The soil is of high texture with variable fertility. The climate is temperate in summers and semi-arctic in winters. This climate and soil is best suited for the cultivation of dry fruits. Snowfall in the western Himalaya starts in the mid of October and continues till March-April. During this period, the whole region remains cut off from the rest of the world and villages become almost isolated. During winters inhabitants move to the lower hills.

People of Western Himalaya follow a unique type of Buddhism, which is the mixture of Bon⁸ and Tantric Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism.⁹ According to a legend, Guru Padmasambhava¹⁰, who is the founder of Vajrayana Buddhism, visited the region during his journey to Tibet to spread Buddhism. Guru Padmasambhava was the first to introduce Buddhism in the region during eighth century CE and it is called as 'First Diffusion of Buddhism' in the Himalaya.¹¹ Tibetan Buddhism was introduced in the valley in tenth century CE through Tibet which is called as 'Second Diffusion of Buddhism' in the Himalaya. During the 'Second Diffusion of Buddhism' in Himalaya, one hundred and eight Buddhist monasteries were built by the great translator Rinchen Zangpo. Rinchen Zangpo is also known as temple builder. The famous Tabo monastery was constructed in 996 CE by the King of Guge kingdom of western Tibet Yeshe-od in Tabo Village, under the supervision of great Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055 CE).¹² The oldest monasteries of western Himalaya attributed to Rinchen Zangpo are Alchi, Lamayuru, Sumdha, Mangyu, Wanla, Nako, Tabo, Kee and Nyarma.

According to Robert James Miller the word monastery is used for any unit where there is a resident body of monks. The *gompa* or *gonpa* is a Tibetan word used for monastery in the western Himalaya. The *gonpa* resembles a small, nearly independent village comprising ordained and un-ordained monks.¹³ In the western Himalaya, these monasteries are the center of learning as well as religious activities. On the basis of this, the two types of monasteries have been identified in the region of western Himalaya. These are ritualistic monasteries and academic monasteries. The ritualistic monasteries are those monasteries where daily rituals are performed. These rituals include ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death. These type of monasteries are the center of religious as well as cultural activities and monks who live in these monasteries render service to the monasteries and the laity of the region. These monasteries are smaller in size, mainly built as temples having meditation room. These type of monasteries do not offer any type of academic degrees. These monasteries mainly act as a temple for common people. The academic monasteries are those monasteries which offer academic degrees. These monasteries act as educational institutions for the monks and offer specialized study in various branches of Buddhism. The main function of these monasteries is to teach monks religion along with other secular subjects. They trained their inmates in art and craft, which include painting, sculpting, carpentering as well as knitting. They trained them in every aspect of life.¹⁴ These monasteries are also responsible for religious and cultural activities. These are bigger in size, mainly built having an assembly hall, dwellings for monks, temples, library, kitchen, school, courtyard and dining area. The academic monasteries served as head monasteries for lower level monasteries.

Most of the monasteries of western Himalaya are ritualistic monasteries. Some monasteries play dual role also, they act as ritualistic as well as academic monasteries. In medieval times, because of their strategic location, monasteries like Dhankar, Tanguyud Monastery and Kee acted as forts.¹⁵ The bigger monasteries like Hemis, Diskit, Karsha, Spitik, Phyang, Thiksey, Lamayuru, Likir, Kardang, Tabo, Kee, Dhankar, Chango, Nako and Kannam are the academic monasteries of the region. These monasteries are the educational institutions in themselves. They act as training centers as well as dwelling for the monks. These monasteries prepare novice monks physically as well as mentally strong, by imparting religious education as well as modern courses which includes subjects like English, Mathematics, Science, Social Science and Physical Education. They impart basic education to the novice monks, which include reading and writing of Tibetan script, recitation of Buddhist texts and their interpretation. The monks who desire to study further are free to join bigger Buddhist institutions in Karnataka, Dharamshala, Darjeeling and they are sponsored by the monasteries themselves.¹⁶ Beside these academic monasteries, other monasteries smaller in size and housed by limited numbers of monks also exist. They mainly act as a place of worship or resting place for monks. Sometimes these monasteries act as museums and a center for preserving scriptures and traditions. The monasteries of the western Himalaya are not only centers of learning but also act as center of cultural activities. They organize annual and monthly festivals on special occasions such as monthly full moon celebration, Buddha purnima, birth of famous Buddhist gurus, foundation of sect or monastery and *Losar*.¹⁷ The celebration can be in the form of mask dance, lecture on Buddhist philosophy, Buddha's teaching and recitation of important Buddhist texts for the masses. Each and every monastery of the region, perform these celebrations. A special group of monks are trained by monasteries to perform mask dance and to play musical instruments. They perform a drama in the form of dance, also known as *Cham* dance. These dramas or dances are performed to teach people about the events which were held in the past. The most famous drama, which is performed by most of the monasteries is of evil king of Tibet, who was against

Buddhism. The people of the region eagerly take part in these festivals. They attend these festivals for entertainment as well as getting the religious knowledge.

For religious merit, lay follower provided their service to the monastery. They provided, food as well as material required for certain rituals, although monastery uses its own income in doing so. For these celebrations, monasteries get donations from the lay followers. Presently, these festivals are attended by the people from all over the world. In 2014 CE, the Kalachakra¹⁸ was performed by the fourteenth Dalai Lama in Ladakh, which was attended by two lakh lay followers from all over the world.¹⁹ Most of the festivals are celebrated in the winters. The monasteries like Hemis and Thiksey conduct these festivals in summers also. By conducting these festivals in summers, the tourist are attracted to these centers, which help monasteries in collecting good amount of donations.

There are monasteries as small as a single room structures and the bigger monasteries have multiple floors with hundreds of rooms. These monasteries are housed by the monks. These monks are responsible for fulfilment of religious needs of the lay followers. They provide religious service to common people of the region. By performing daily rituals for the people. The lay followers invite these monks to perform rituals and ceremonies related to birth, marriage and death. It is impossible to do any auspicious work without consulting a monk or performing a ritual by the monk. The lay followers, invite these monks to purify their house environment by reciting important Buddhist texts like that of the *Bum* and *bKa'-gyur*.²⁰ The *Bum* is a collection of sixteen volumes and *bKa'-gyur* is a set of one hundred and eight volumes. Some of these rituals take days to complete. In return, monks get donation in the form of food, cloth and money. By performing these rituals, monasteries are closely linked to society. The monasteries of the region are self-sustained institutions in every aspect. From the ancient times, there is continuous flow of donation and alms to these centers. The donations can be in the form of agricultural or barren land, cash or in kind. Presently, most monasteries of the region have their own vehicles, land to grow food, money to fulfil their basic needs and sponsor their inmates for further studies. In the western Himalaya, it is a tradition to send elder child to the monastery. Because of this tradition, the land owned by its inmates directly belongs to the monastery. Each and every monastery has land holding in different villages and localities, scattered widely over the region. Most of the land is granted by the royal families for construction of the monastery and some land is donated by the lay followers out of their faith. The agricultural as well as barren land are the main source of income to the monastery. Presently, monastic centers use these land holdings to lease out to people in need and in return they get the share of the production.²¹ The share of the production is collected by the monastery itself on annual basis. In most of the cases, the share is fifty per cent of the total production, without any other charges. If the seeds and fertilizer are provided by the monastery then additional charges are collected otherwise it is fifty per cent of the profit. There are some monasteries, which own shops also. These shops are rented out to the people for continue flow of an income.²² The income is then used by the monasteries in the maintenance of the monastic complex as well as to sponsor their inmates for higher studies. The monasteries give loan to common people in the form of wheat and barley. Raising of crop on monastic land and harvesting them, is considered as sacred duty. For the religious merit, people of the region, use monastic land to grow food for the service of the monastery. By helping poor and needy people, these monasteries play an important role in economic growth of the region. The monasteries of the region play an important role in health sector too. They provide health care to local people by establishing medical clinic. Most of the monasteries are housed by an *Amchi*, a person who specializes in Tibetan medicine. These *Amchi*'s provide basic medicine to local people for common ailments, like viral fever, cough, cold, body ache and for stomach related ailments.²³ Some *Amchis* are world famous for their contribution to the field of Tibetan medicine. These *Amchis* are produced by academic monasteries, where monks are trained in the field of health care.

There is another aspect of monasteries, which is unique in itself. Some monasteries of the western Himalaya, act as a body which help people in resolving their personal issues. The people of the region, take personal advice from the senior monks of the monastery, for solving their personal problems or community issues. It can be a legal advice or related to marital issues or some property issues. The monasteries also act as centers of art and crafts. Many monks are trained by these monasteries in the field of mural and *tang-kha*²⁴ painting, sculpture making, carpentering and knitting. Tabo monastery in Spiti is the academic monastery, which trained monks in *tang-kha* painting. Most of the painters were laymen according to Tucci.²⁵ The monks received the basic training in painting and thus were entrusted with the work of decoration in the temples. The painting was considered as one of the important branches of knowledge.²⁶ Presently, monks learn and practice the art of painting for six to eight years under the professional monk in the monastery. They are guided by their masters especially on the use and control of colors related to representation of sky, fire and vegetation.²⁷ The professional monks train the monks on proportionate representation of facial features, hand, feet and hair, which is practiced by the students on chalk board. The painters give importance to facial details, hair, eyes and expressions. The central painted figure used to be the largest and the lines were more stylized and graceful with dynamic and animated pose. The monasteries also play a role of museum. Most of the monasteries have in their possession valuable material which include scriptures, *tang-kha* painting, musical instruments, sculptures

and masks. The Hemis and Stok monasteries of Ladakh are famous for their good collections of antiquities. In short, monasteries of the region act as complete institutions in themselves. Each family in the village is economically as well as socially linked to the monastic institution.²⁸



Figure 1 Monk performing rituals at monastic temple.



Figure 2: Monks performing rituals on request of the lay follower.



Figure 3 & 4: Monks playing different musical instruments during rituals

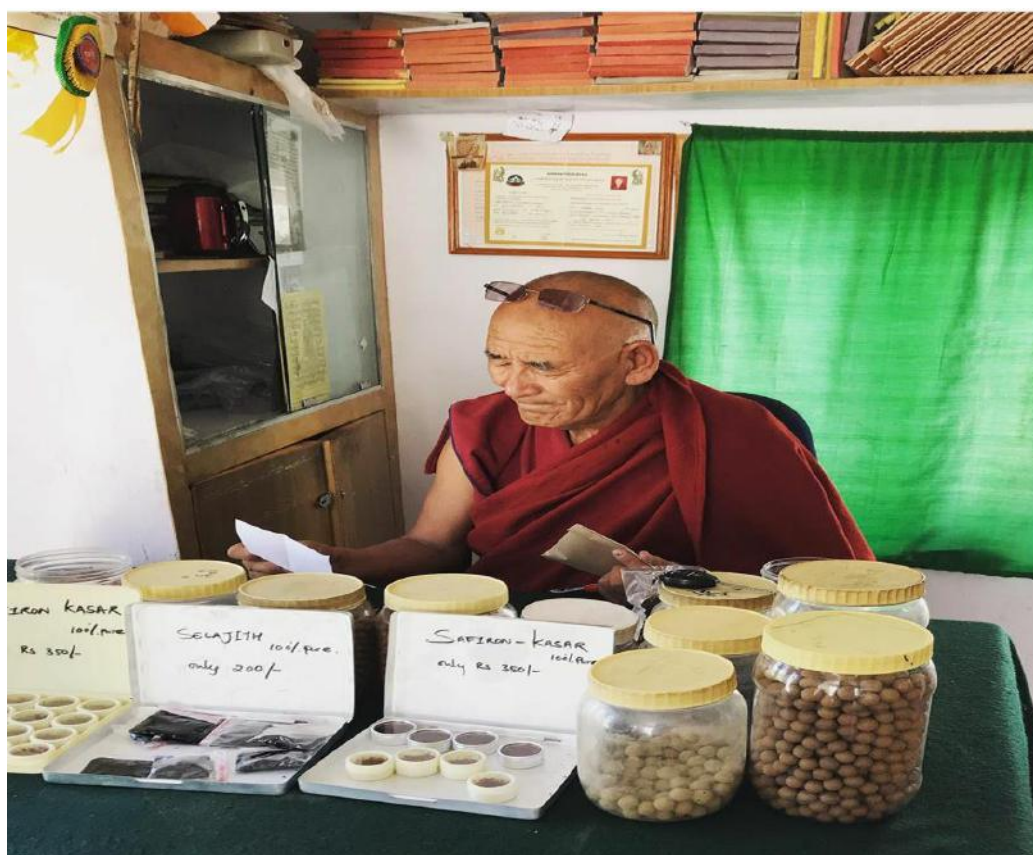


Figure 5: Amchi (Doctor)

2. CONCLUSION:

The monasteries played an important role in the life of people of western Himalayan region. The monasteries shaped the society of western Himalaya as they are not only the center of learning and religious activities but also as center of socio-cultural, socio-religious and socio-economic activities. Most of the monasteries of western Himalaya are ritualistic monasteries. Some monasteries play dual role also, they act as ritualistic as well as academic monasteries.

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- ¹⁶ Lama Chhering Dorje of Shashur monastery in Lahaul, provided us this information.
- ¹⁷ Losar is a term used by the Buddhist people of western Himalaya for New Year.
- ¹⁸ Kalachakra is a religious festival; in which religious teaching is preach by the fourteenth Dalai Lama.
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- ²¹ As informed by Sonam, a semi-ordinate monk at Tabo monastery of Spiti.
- ²² Lama Lobsang Gyalson of Thiksey monastery in Ladakh provided this information.
- ²³ The information is provided by the lama Rigzin Namgial of Kardang monastery.
- ²⁴ The *tang-kha* is a painting, which literary means “something rolled up” painted on canvas prepared through cotton or linen cloth, which is taken in the proportion of 4:8 or 2:5.
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