

# Indian Horizons

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January - March 2016

## Indian Council for Cultural Relations

The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) was founded on 9th April 1950 by Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, the first Education Minister of independent India.

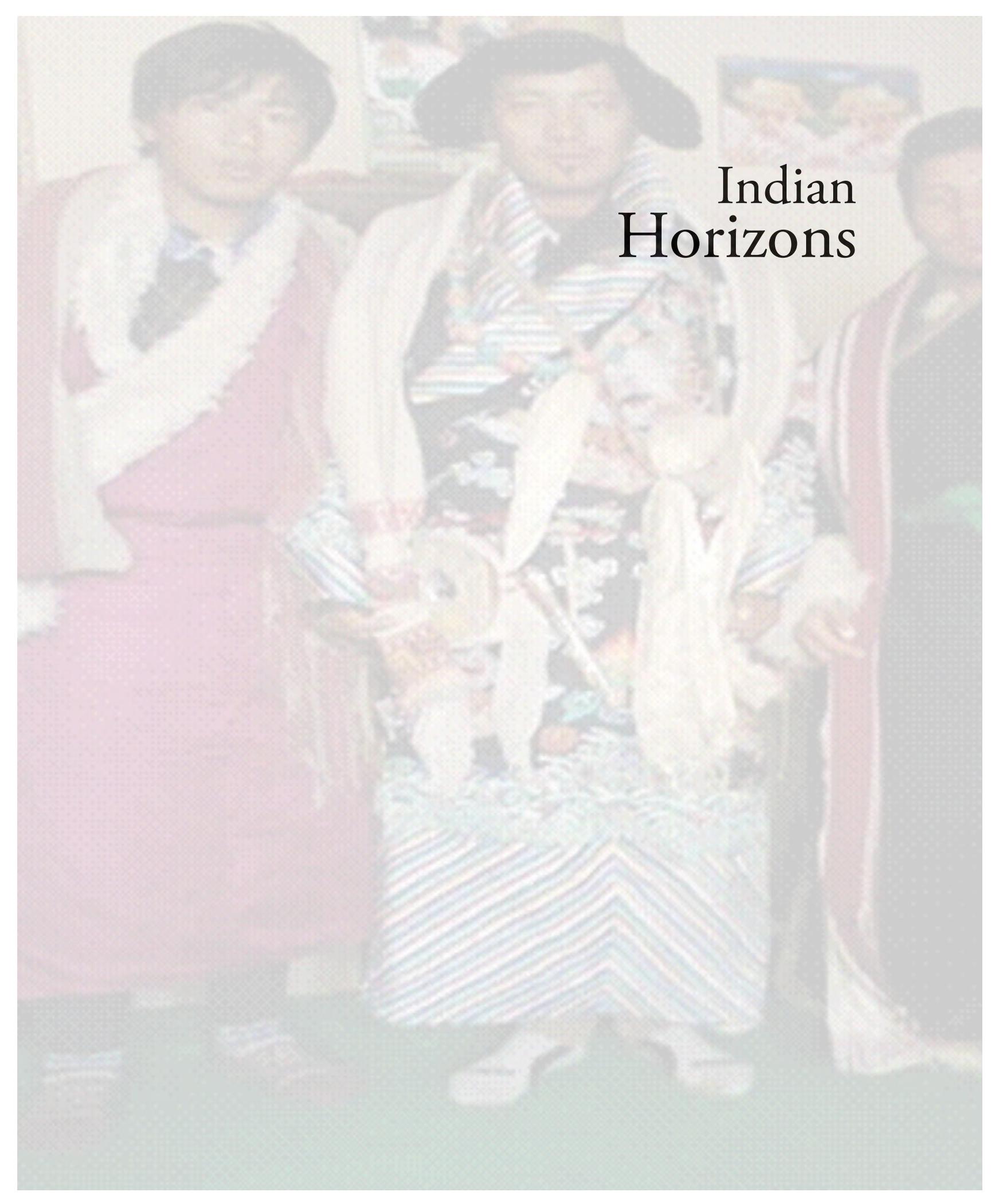
The objectives of the Council are to participate in the formulation and implementation of policies and programmes relating to India's external cultural relations; to foster and strengthen cultural relations and mutual understanding between India and other countries; to promote cultural exchanges with other countries and people; to establish and develop relations with national and international organizations in the field of culture; and to take such measures as may be required to further these objectives.

The ICCR is about a communion of cultures, a creative dialogue with other nations. To felicitate this interaction with world cultures, the Council strives to articulate and demonstrate the diversity and richness of the cultures of India, both in and with other countries of the world.

The Council prides itself on being a pre-eminent institution engaged in cultural diplomacy and the sponsor of intellectual exchanges between India and partner countries. It is the Council's resolve to continue to symbolize India's great cultural and educational efflorescence in the years to come.

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A photograph of three women standing side-by-side, dressed in traditional Indian attire. The woman on the left wears a white blouse with a blue collar and a red sash. The woman in the center wears a blue and white striped sari with a white shawl draped over her shoulders. The woman on the right wears a dark sari with a red border. The background is slightly blurred, showing what appears to be a wall with some posters or notices.

# Indian Horizons

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Volume 63 No. 1, January-March 2016

Editor  
Subhra Mazumdar

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Come summer and most households turn to planning holidays in the hills. While the popular vote tilts towards established hill stations, for the adventure loving group it is places like Ladakh and Himachal that take priority. The rich culture of Buddhist traditions that link these remote parts of the country becomes a fascinating bind. This issue of the magazine thus rakes up a few Buddhist inspired artistic and architectural icons of our culture not just from the far north, but across the country, wherever Buddhism has taken root at some time in its history.

That these links are visible beyond the place of monasteries and shrines is ably brought forth in the contribution of scholar Sohini Singh who offers an insight into representations of Buddhist sages and the Lord himself, not to forget the stunning landscapes cameos, in the innumerable canvases painter Nicolas Roerich, currently regarded as museum treasures. Coupled with a life sketch of this scholar artist and philosopher, the essay also deals with the artist's sketches and writings during the Central Asian expedition, making it a very alluring way of learning of these practices. The jagged richness, the brilliant colour palette and the serene aura in the works are illustrated through a cache of well chosen images, giving the coverage a well rounded finish.

While still a familiar stopover for travelers from Kargil onwards in the Ladakh region is the Basgo Gompa complex. While most of us have viewed this monastery on a promontory as one of those inaccessible spots that could be tackled on the next visit to the valley, Sama Haq has spared us aching joints by taking us into the heart of the complex through her exhaustive coverage of the gompa's origins and its close links with

the history of the region. The genealogy of the kings ruling this territory and their various contributions towards moulding a syncretic culture unique to the place, has been attributed by this scholar to the efforts made by legendary monks, such as Rinchen bzangpo, who were instrumental in preserving this gem of Buddhist art and architecture. Her coverage of individual monasteries in the complex are a result of personal visits to the place, which rings true in the contents of her essay.

Descending into the plains and while following the intellectual aspects of Buddhism followed in this country, one will invariably stumble upon a mention of the immense contribution made by the university complex of Nalanda. Professor Hira Paul Gangnegi has ably brought out the much sought-after studies of Buddhist philosophy and logic, that had attracted scores of Tibetan scholars here and how the influence of Nalanda thereby diversified to Tibet, through scholarly efforts. Interestingly it is a single thankha painting of a clutch of monastic intellectuals from Nalanda that the author has chosen, to establish the depth of linkages between this ancient seat of learning and the form of Buddhism that took root in Tibet.

Another university where art was revolutionized through using Buddhist iconic sources as a startpoint for its study material is Santiniketan. The famed Bengal School made its nascent beginnings, invariably using Buddhist legends and figures to express their genius. Thus the works of masters like Abanindranath Tagore, Ram Kinkar Baij, Nandalal Bose and other titans of this school, relied on Buddhist sources for artistic makeovers. Dr Arundhati Dasgupta's essay reminds us once again about these valuable elements of our national heritage.

Following the passing of away of the Lord it is the sepulchral art of stupa making that acquired a distinctive character. Dr Jyoti Rohilla Rana's look at the stupas at Amaravati is a virtual eye opener for us readers. While going through her essay one realizes that not a brick or scoop of mortar was introduced into these structures without it being guided by some or other Buddhist tenet. No wonder, these places today are more than mere relics, which is so ably introduced to us through this exhaustive coverage by the author.

That Roerich was not the only scholar-artist is evident once one goes through the essay on the works of the Russian traveler-cum-artist Vasily Vereshchagin, who one learns, toured extensively across the eastern Himalayan region, visiting the prominent Buddhist monasteries of the area. Unlike Roerich's works which were sweeping expanses bridling in entire ranges of mountains, one gathers from this latter coverage, the charm of minutiae, as the writer has detailed the carvings of a monastery door the intricacy of the costuming as seen in the uniform of a guard, the settings of isolated monasteries along roadsides leading to hillside towns among others. The essay is thus a charming travelogue realised through the brush and paint.

While some traveler scholars have concentrated their attention on an entire region, there is richness and insight to be gained through the coverage of even a single item, as is evident in the essay penned by Prof. Anupa Pande who has examined the core contents of the Lotus Sutra, a highly devotional Mahayana Buddhist text. Tabled with a plethora of pertinent quotes and their lucid explanations, the essay makes an interesting and absorbing read for even a person with a passing knowledge of this great and profound philosophy. Her references to parables, jataka tales, iconography, other mythological treasures, engages the reader all through.

That not all monasteries are in the pink of health can be fathomed through the plight of the ancient Tabo monastery nestled in the remote regions of Himachal. I was intrigued to learn of it being a specimen of mud architecture and author Virender Verma traces the route to this remote site with the eye of one who has trodden these paths with unfailing regularity. The article ends on an encouraging note stating the efforts ongoing to integrate it with educational and training institutions run on the vicinity, by the government.

Rounding up the issue is a write-up by Thuktan Negi, a research scholar, who describes the everyday life of the villagers through their practices of holding a Lolla, a narrative account of a cultural exchange between communities following two faiths, such as Islam and Buddhism. The Photo Essay section on thankha painting proves that its religio-artistic appeal is now as a collector's item through its meticulous execution in the hands of trained masters.

The usual inclusions of archival snapshots presents a clutch of international and national scholars who had graced the podium of the as guest speakers at the annual Azad Memorial Lecture series in the erstwhile years. The 'Happenings' segment is a landmark of sorts for ICCR as it is a first hand account of the Government of Mongolia's award to Dr Lokesh Chandra. A reputed authority on the subject of Buddhist Studies, the award ceremony proceedings has been graciously penned for the volume by none other than the country's emissary, the ambassador to India from Mongolia. The team at *Indian Horizons* is indebted to him for this kind gesture which has given our volume a historic significance.

Editor



Subhra Mazumdar

# Foreword

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Amb. C. Rajasekhar  
Director General, Indian Council for Cultural Relations

In keeping with our regular practice of presenting to our readership an exhaustive and yet lively unfolding of some aspect of Indian culture, the current issue of the magazine examines the monumental, artistic and domestic influences of Buddhism in the land of its origin. This exercise has been carried out through a series of designated essays by scholars and observers, of the various monuments and other artifacts on the subject, that are spread countrywide, and in adjoining areas. Our intent in veering away from a strictly classical paradigm has helped us put before our readers the semiotic richness of this culture. The contents of the essays presented therefore, have taken into account the lesser written aspects and the more commonplace takeaways that Buddhism has established in the cultural fabric of the country.

The essays on Buddhist art which includes the artistry of foreign scholars and travelers like Nicholas Roerich and Vasily Verewshchagin, have been included for their tell tale richness and artistic appeal. The use of iconography garnered from Buddhist sources by artists of the early Bengal School has been explored in another write-up. Architectural fallouts, such as stupa building in established Buddhist centres as well as monasteries, like the Basgo complex has been examined as part of the core theme of the issue. Architectural standalones, such as the mud architecture of the Tabo Monastery of

Himachal, is another case in point. The academic fallout of centres of learning such as Nalanda University also, have found space in the essays of this volume. To give a representative view of the textual richness of its philosophy, in this edition we have examined the tenets of the famed Lotus Sutra, a basis of several schools of Buddhism.

In a bid to give our readers the fallout of Buddhist culture in the daily lives of communities, the congregational practice of Molla has been examined as a customary rural get-together among communities of diverse faiths.

The volume has continued with its regular features of a photo essay based on the theme. A cache of photographs of thankhas made by master practitioners of our times, has been coded and pictorialised. The archival pages at the start, continue to stir up memories of the ICCR's long record of cultural continuance. The happenings segment is a historic inclusion that records the award conferred on Dr Lokesh Chandra, Chairman, ICCR, by the Government of Mongolia.

Thematically, the contents have been knitted together into a cohesive presentation by mingling the prevalent with the cutting edge, the scholarly with the aesthetic, the unique with the everyday experiences of people. This has been dictated by our endeavour to make the contents of the volume engaging and informative for our readers.

Amb. C. Rajasekhar

# India Produces Two Polar Stars

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Gonchig GANBOLD, Ambassador\*

A bright red, blue and red flag with "Swayambu" inscribed on it as seen on well-manicured Lutyens area, indicates one of the earliest Embassies in New Delhi. This tiny but elegant compound just behind the Delhi Golf Club since early morning, has already been brimming with commotion on, 28<sup>th</sup> April, 2016. Ministers, parliament members, government officials, folk from universities, cultural and business organisations, media communities all in their best have gathered since early morning and are excitedly waiting for something extraordinary. You might expect that something interesting rather than the boringly routine diplomatic reception must be coming up. Somehow you are right. The award conferment ceremony, is the simple but solemn event which is in the hatching.

Two of the eminent academicians of India, Shri Lokesh Chandra and Shrimati Mansura Haider have been bestowed by the Mongolian government with its highest award "Northern Star Order" for their lifelong dedication and outstanding contributions to Mongolian studies. Henceforth, His Excellency Lundeg Purevsuren, Foreign Minister of Mongolia who is on an official visit to India purposefully has come to pay his respects to these senior scholars.

As the award conferment ceremony unfolds with the lighting of the lamp and offering of bouquets, hugs and handshakes, the Foreign Minister himself introduces the two awardees before the jam packed audience. At first he

generously praised Dr. Lokesh Chandra, who marked his 89<sup>th</sup> jubilee merely a fortnight ago. This broadly smiling, silver haired, charming gentlemen has written internationally acclaimed 576 books and 286 articles. Studied at Forman Christian College, Universities of Lahore and Utrecht (Netherlands) he is well equipped with 20 some languages, including Hindi, Sanskrit, Pali, Avesta, old Persian, Japanese, Chinese, Tibetan, Mongolian, Indonesian, Greek, Latin, German, French, Russian. As a globe trotter who extensively travelled in Asia, Europe, USA and Mongolia, he has held high posts like member of Indian Parliament (1974-80 and 1980-1986) and the other national, and international bodies. I assume out of all those he is mostly proud of being titled as Honorary Director of the International Academy of Indian Culture which is a premier research institution for Asian cultures.

At present, Lokesh Chandraji is the President of the Indian Council for Cultural Relations. Speaking on the occasion of laying the foundation stone of the Academy, H.E. Dr. Rajendra Prasad, the first President of India, underlined, "*I believe there are some other institutions also carrying on researches in Indology and other branches of ancient thought, but I do not think anyone of them has been able to cover such a range of subjects and such a wide field as to include South-East Asia, the Middle East and Central Asia as the International Academy of Indian Culture. Seeing the importance of this work, it seems essential that the Academy should be encouraged in its work as far as possible. I hope this*

*important work will continue and the gaps which exist today in our know/edge of ancient history and literature will be bridged by the publications of the International Academy of Indian Culture."*

Starting from his university years he collaborated with his father, the late Professor Raghu Vera eminent Indologist in the scientific terminology for Indian languages in chemistry, physics, mathematics, botany, zoology and their ramifications. Thus, critically edited the Gavarnayana portion of the Vedic work *Jaiminiya Brahmana* with the help of newly discovered manuscripts; This Brahmana had already attracted great attention towards the end of the 19th century. European scholars had published extensive extracts but they found it impossible to edit the text as a whole. So Dr. Lokesh Chandra spared no effort and time to restore this text to its original purity. In recognition for these contributions Dr. Lokesh Chandra was awarded the degree of Doctor of Literature and Philosophy by the State University of Utrecht (Netherlands) in 1950, where he had studied old Javanese with the leading authority, Prof. Jan Gonda.

The writings of Dr. Lokesh Chandra span several languages of Asia wherein he discusses with critical acumen, the finer points of Sanskrit, Pali, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, Tibetan, Indonesian, Persian, Arabic in intercultural contexts. His work has revolutionized the understanding of the evolution of several countries of Asia as he has opened up unknown texts, facts and evaluations, tempting the scientific world to the light that keeps vigil on the far horizon, deep in history. The timeless toil of Shri Lokesh Chandra transcends exigencies and circumstances into the web of abiding international understanding. He has attended several international conferences and travelled extensively into remote corners of the world in search of frozen levels of culture pulsating in the warm reality of life.

The work of Dr. Lokesh Chandra is a passion and concretization of a common human destiny in

a shared plenitude. The East and West are not shredded fragments of continents. The destinies of the East and West are no longer closed systems. In every one of us there is an East and a West. Each person has an East, a horizon he never reaches, a beyond where the sun rises, a dimension of hope. Every human being has a dimension of the West, of maturity, where values materialize. The East and West can be harmonized in the microcosm of ourselves alone. We are the chasm and we likewise are the bridge. At this very moment Dr. Lokesh Chandra is in Cambodia for inter-cultural relations and his schedule for the coming months appears to be pretty dense.

Dr. Lokesh Chandra's work is an affirmation of the vitality of dialogue. The word dialogue is Greek *dialogos* or piercing the *logos* to reach the dialogical or trans-logical realm, allowing for the emergence of a catalyst that would break through its regional and civilizational entrapments, freeing it to function in a global matrix. His life-long mission has been inter-cultural dialogue.

Having introduced Dr. Lokesh Chandra, the Foreign Minister L. Purevsuren also profusely said, we pay tribute to Dr. Mansura Haidar and her academic works. She studied at Allahabad and devoted her entire life to the study of Indian, West and Central Asian, Mongolian and Islamic history and culture and served at Aligarh Muslim University for about four decades, teaching ancient, medieval and modern history of countries, while the thrust of her areas of research continued to be Indian as well as Eurasian history and culture, Safavids, Arab, Ottoman histories and such other subjects.

Dr. Mansura Haidar's organisational capabilities and management skills were well exhibited as Coordinator of the Centre of Advanced Study in History, Chairperson, Department of History, Dean Faculty of Social Sciences. She retained an additional charge of Principal, Women's College also for a while. Shrimati Mansura Haidar is also well-versed in several foreign languages pertaining to areas of her research, like Russian, Persian,

French, Uzbek. Being a widely acknowledged traveler, she had worked in the libraries of US, UK, France, Italy, Mexico, Hong Kong, China, Mongolia, Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzia, Bangladesh and other places. Therefore her works is known to have solid evidences and varieties of interesting conclusions. She lectured at the universities of USA, France, Turkey and other places and delivered at innumerable international and national conferences. Dr. Mansura Haidar was attached to Jamia Millia Islamia and associated with Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Central Asian University, Kalakosa Division, New Delhi, for years. Having a deep longing for research pursuits, Dr. Mansura Haidar contributed 250 articles and 13 books. Other 5 IGCA edited volumes and 3 forthcoming books are in the process of publication.

On the eve of the upcoming 11<sup>th</sup> International Congress of Mongolian Studies to be held on 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> August in Ulaan Baatar this little

ceremony alike *Mela of Knowledge* and wisdom indeed vividly highlighted the prominence of India's academia in reinvigorating Mongolia's strong bonds of culture, faith and history with her spiritual neighbour—India.

\*Gonchig GANBOLD is Ambassador of Mongolia, studied in Ulaanbaatar, New Delhi, Moscow, Oxford, Geneva, Hawaii and Munich. He joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) of Mongolia in 1980. Since then he has served as Desk Officer, Counsellor, Deputy head and Head of Department, worked at Mongolian embassies in New Delhi (1988-1991, 1996-2000), Washington. D.C., London as well as Ministry of Finance, National Security Council, worked as Director General for 'Multilateral Cooperation Department, MFA (July, 2013- August, 2015), Mongolia. H.E. Ambassador G. Ganbold presented his Letters of Credence to the President of India on 2 September, 2015. He speaks Hindi, English and Russian and contributes his articles to the INDIA EMPIRE since December 2015, and has translated over a dozen books, including the recent one titled "MODI EFFECT" by Price Lance.

May, 2016

## From our Archives

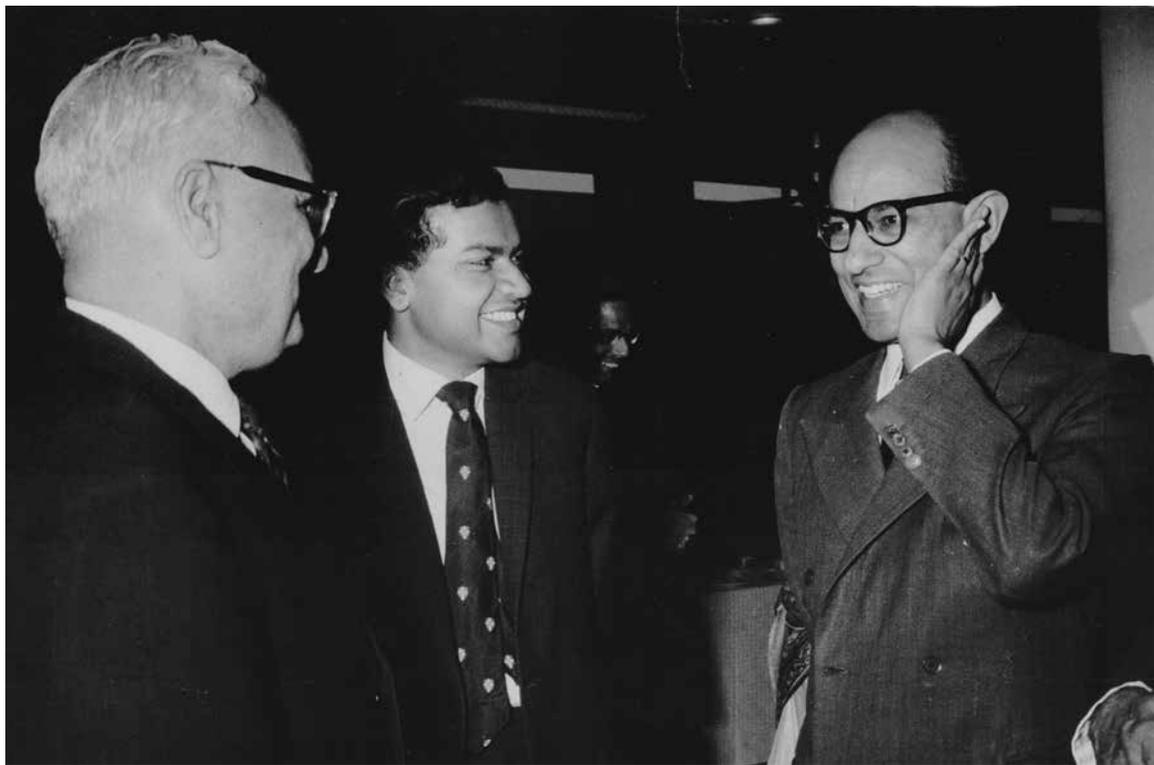
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Lecture by Iris Murdoch (U.K.), January 30, 1967



Lecture by Mr. J.B. Priestley (U.K.), February 13, 1965



Lecture by Dr. J.V. Narlikar (India), March 11, 1965



Azad Memorial Lectures by Lord Butler, March 18, 1970



Azad Memorial Lectures—1967, Dr. Linus Pauling, February 2 & 3, 1967



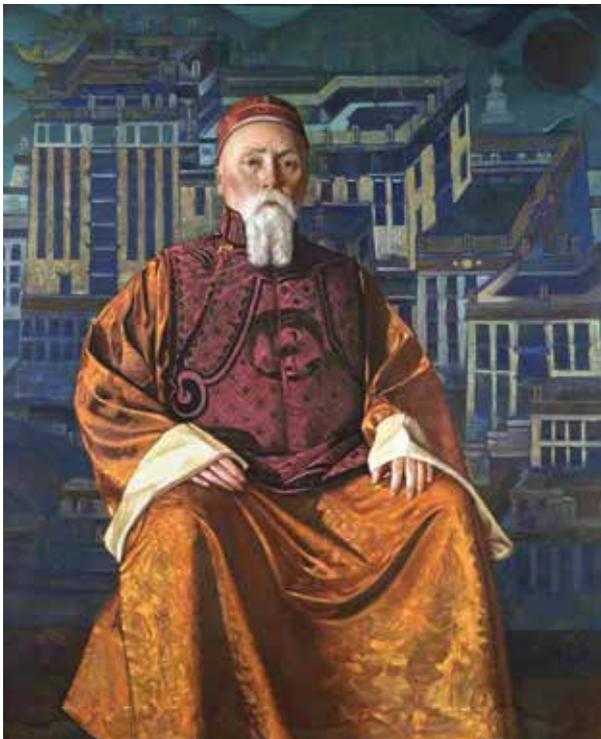
Azad Memorial Lectures by Dr. D.S. Kothari, February, 26-27, 1970

# Representation of Buddha and Buddhist Sages in Nicholas Roerich's art

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Sohini Singh (Research Scholar and Research Fellow, Department of History of Art, National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation and Museology, New Delhi)

Nicholas Roerich (pl. 1) was a renowned painter, scholar, archaeologist, writer and explorer. Born in 1874, in St. Petersburg, Russia, to Konstantin Roerich and Maria Roerich, he was an inquisitive child enamoured by eastern



Pl. 1 : Nicholas Roerich in a Tibetan Robe, Svetoslav Roerich, 1933, Tempera on Canvas, 152.4 x 124.5 cms, International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow.

Source: <http://www.tanais.info/art/en/pic/roerichs6.html>

philosophy and wisdom. He had multiple interests and hobbies as a child and devoted most of his time to reading, sketching or exploring the forests surrounding the Roerich family estate. After completing his schooling from Karl Von May's gymnasium, Roerich enrolled himself in both Art School and Law School. While drawing and painting was something he was extremely passionate about, his stint at Law School was a necessary step taken to appease his father. After his double graduation in 1897, he travelled in and around Russia as an archaeologist sponsored by the Russian Archaeological Society to document Ancient Russian Architecture.

Roerich's thirst for eastern wisdom took him to India in 1923, from where he embarked on an arduous trek to Central Asia, primarily in search of the mythical land of Shambhala. He, along with his expedition party, crossed over thirty-five peaks in the belief that the rigour of the mountains helped man find courage and develop strength of spirit. Armed with an inexhaustible energy, Roerich rendered the very spirit of the east in his paintings. These works were imbued with deep spiritual, moralistic and philosophical overtones. After the Central Asian Expedition in 1928, he settled down with his family in Naggar, a quaint little village in Kullu, Himachal Pradesh. Here he devoted most of his time to painting

and research. The Himalayan landscapes that he painted are exceptional and earned him the title, 'Master of the Mountains' since nobody understood the spiritual, symbolic and scenic embodiment of the mountains as well as he did. He lived his life travelling and exploring the treasures of the mountains, rendering and immortalizing them on his canvas.

By virtue of being the defining element of all his compositions, the mountains for Roerich were like prisms, reflecting and channelling energies which he rendered on canvas in brilliant colours. Relying heavily on the promontory view, the sky and mountains merged beautifully in his landscape studies, forming an endless chain of undulating hills, signifying the vastness of nature. Even in his symbolic works, landscapes are given prominence rather than the protagonists or events depicted, as he was aware of the all pervading power of nature. Figures therefore, appear dwarfed in comparison to the landscape. A distinctive feature of Roerich's Himalayan landscapes is a sea of clouds, above which rise magnificent snow covered peaks. The Himalayas are seen as an expression of two worlds, intersected by mist: one is the earthly world, and the other, the world of towering peaks. For him, the mountains stand as witnesses to the great reality. "His landscapes, therefore, are at once suggestive of the spiritual ascent that lies ahead of humanity."<sup>1</sup> Roerich's works exhibit a phenomenal symphony of colour. "He looks upon the forms of this world from a sphere of spiritual effort and activity, which gives his work a unique quality where colour takes on a supernatural glow."<sup>2</sup> He once wrote "Just as a composer when writing the score chooses a certain key to write in, so I paint in a certain key, a key of colour."<sup>3</sup>

The present paper seeks to analyse select paintings of Buddha and Buddhist sages from Nicholas Roerich's 'Banners of the East' series (1924-28) with regard to their aesthetic and

symbolic attributes. In order to establish a relevant context for the aforementioned paintings, references will be made to Roerich's literary works including *Shambhala*, *Altai Himalaya* and *Heart of Asia*, all of which contain a vast corpus on Buddhism in India and Central Asia and Buddhist philosophy as understood by him.

As regards Roerich's affinity towards Buddhist religion and philosophy, it is believed that his interest in Buddhism was piqued in the early 20th century after he participated in the construction of the Dastan Gunzechoinei, a Buddhist temple located in St. Petersburg. In 1909, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama allocated enough money to construct the first Buddhist Temple in St. Petersburg, in collaboration with his confidante, Agvan Dorjiev (1854–1938). A citizen of Imperial Russia and a Buryat by origin, he was an assistant, confidante and teacher of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama, Thubten Gyatso (1876–1933). He graduated from the Gelugpa Drepung Monastic University near Lhasa with the highest degree in Buddhist Philosophy. In 1901, Dorjiev visited the Ninth Panchen Lama (1883– 1937) and allegedly received some of the secret teachings about the Kingdom of Shambhala, particularly the thirteenth-century legend called "The Prayer of Shambhala."<sup>4</sup>

Dorjiev presented the First Buddhist Temple "as the symbol of Russia's reconciliation with its 'internal Orient' and national minorities, when in reality this temple would be attended by the Russian intelligentsia looking for exoticism."<sup>5</sup> Dorjiev invited Roerich to serve on the planning committee of the temple construction because of Roerich's knowledge of Eastern Teaching and influential position within artistic circles. Roerich also worked on the stained glass windows on the second floor of the temple.<sup>6</sup> Dorjiev's propositions about the connections between Russia and Shambhala appealed to Roerich, who had been researching on the mysteries of Tibet



Pl. 2: Nagarjuna, Conqueror of the Serpent, beholding upon the lake the vision of the Ruler of the Nagi, Nicholas Roerich, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.4x73.4 cms, International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/nagarjuna-conqueror-of-the-serpent-1925>

for a decade. Roerich's meeting with Dorjiev was one of the major factors responsible for his subsequent quest for Shambhala.

So, in order to map the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and find the mythical land of Shambhala, Roerich embarked on his famous Central Asian expedition in 1924. During the course of the expedition, he traversed through Sikkim, Ladakh, Karakorum, Khotan, Karashahr, Dzungaria, Altai, Mongolia and Tibet. After the end of the expedition in 1928, Roerich had accumulated a wealth of material on Buddhism and Buddhist legends which he rendered in his paintings and penned down in his writings.

The Central Asian expedition had many purposes. The official objective was to create a pictorial

record of the lands and diverse tribes of Central Asia, to study the ancient monuments and the condition of contemporary religions, survey the possibilities for future archaeological explorations and obtain a comprehensive collection of ethnographic and linguistic material on the culture of inner Asia. The other purpose, though unofficial, but, considered to be the prime mover of the expedition, was the quest for the mythical kingdom of Shambhala, and in all, a quest for the treasures of the Orient. Roerich's experiences on the expedition provided him with a wealth of material which subsequently appeared in numerous books, three in particular: *Himalaya* (1926), *Heart of Asia* (1929) and his travel diary *Altai Himalaya* (1929). The expedition included Nicholas, Helena, their son George (the scientist well versed in Tibetan dialect), and several other Europeans. Their son Svetoslav (the artist) and

Lama Lobzang Mingyur Dorje, a scholar of Tibetan literature joined them later.

### **Banners of the East Series**

N. Roerich's 'Banners of the East' is a suite of nineteen paintings executed during the course of his Central Asian expedition. It depicts the world's religious teachers and is a testimonial to the common roots of man's faith. It represents an attempt to symbolically express the spirit of the East, as understood by him.

Out of the nineteen paintings, seven paintings i.e. of Buddhist sages and Buddha have been taken up for aesthetic and symbolic analysis. The paintings are as follows:

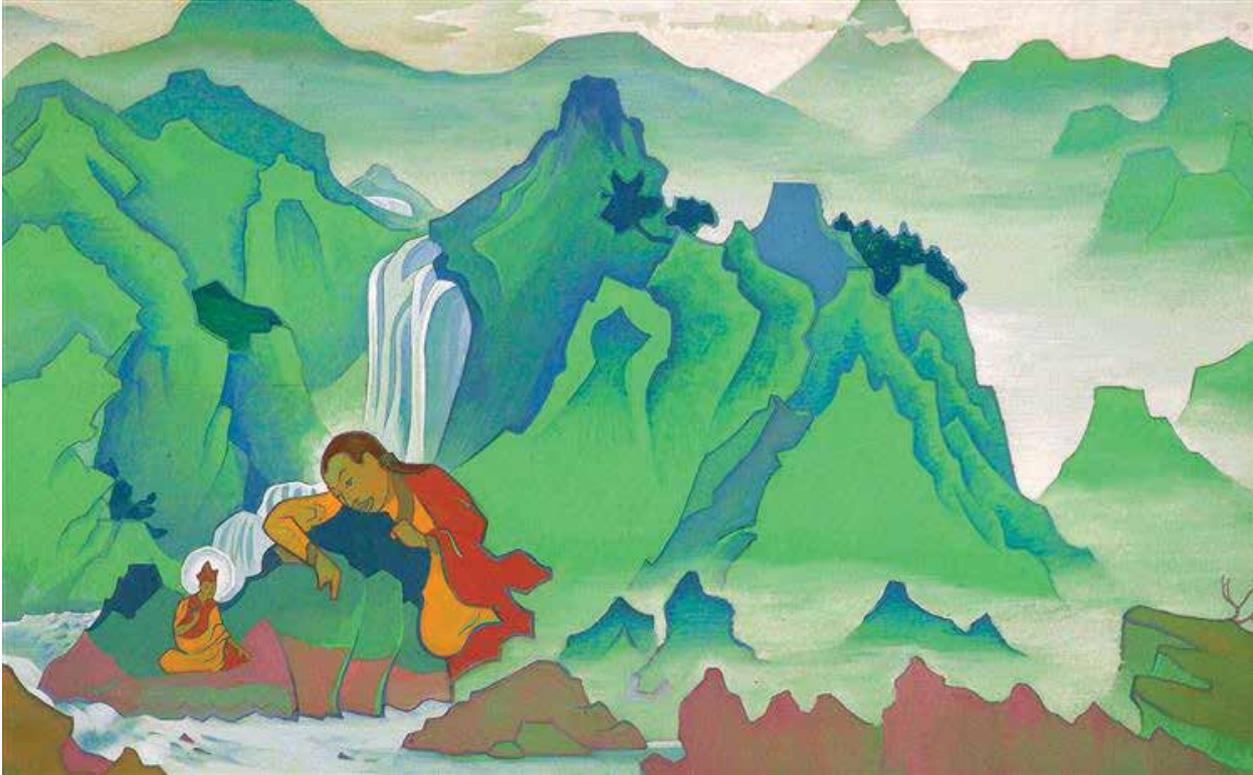
- Nagarjuna, Conqueror of the Serpent, beholding upon the lake the vision of the Ruler of the Nagi

- Saraha the Beneficent Arrow, never slackening in its mission of benevolence
- Padma Sambhava
- Milarepa, the One Who Harkened, at sunrise comprehending the voices of the Devas
- Tsongkhapa
- Dorje the Daring, who stood facing Mahakala himself
- Buddha the conqueror before the spring of life

Out of the aforementioned, Nagarjuna and Saraha were Indian sages who were pivotal in the transmission of Mahayana doctrine in Tibet, while Tibetan Buddhist luminaries including Padma Sambhava, Milarepa, Tsongkha pa were responsible for its improvisation and perfection. Dorje Shugden was viewed as a protector deity.



Pl. 3: Saraha the Beneficent Arrow, never slackening in its mission of benevolence, Nicholas Roerich, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.4x73.4 cms, Private Collection. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/saraha-the-blessed-arrow-1925-1>



Pl. 4: Padma Sambhava, Nicholas Roerich, 1924, Tempera on canvas, 117.4 x74 cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/padmasambhava-1924>

Before the advent of Buddhism, a shamanistic and animistic religion classified under the name *Bon* was practiced in Tibet. The adoption and first diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet is attributed to King Songtsen Gampo (died in c. 649)<sup>7</sup> who unified Tibet through military conquest and took two Buddhist wives, Princess Bhrikuti of Nepal and Princess Wen Cheng of China, both of whom are credited with introducing him to Buddhism. The form of Buddhism prevalent in Tibet is *Mahayana* or the great vehicle. The form of *Mahayana* practised in Tibet is often called *Lamaism* from the important part played by the *Lama*, a term not just denoting any monk but a person's spiritual master or teacher (*guru*) alone.<sup>8</sup> There are four schools of Tibetan Buddhism viz. Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Geylug.

### Portraits of Buddhist Sages

#### **Nagarjuna, Conqueror of the Serpent, beholding upon the lake the vision of the Ruler of the Nagi, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.4x73.4 cms, International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow**

Nagarjuna was one of the greatest philosophers of ancient India and his works on Mahayana are believed to have established the philosophy of *Madhyamika* (middle way) in Buddhism.<sup>9</sup> "The name Nagarjuna, *kLu-grub* in Tibetan<sup>10</sup>, means 'he with power over the *nagas*'. The epithet refers to his recovery of the Buddha's teachings on the 'Perfection of Wisdom' or *Prajnaparamita*, from the *naga* king who guarded them. The *Prajnaparamita* had been entrusted to the *nagas* by Ananda, Buddha's closest disciple.<sup>11</sup>

In this painting (pl. 2), Roerich has beautifully conjured the serene and wistful atmosphere in which Nagarjuna meditates in the presence of the *naga* king, who with his many hoods is coiled around a rocky mountain in the centre of the lake, looking at the Nagarjuna in amazement. The classic promontory view has been employed effectively and takes the viewer into the picture plane. Bathed in soft light, the colour palette of the composition, dominated by shades of blue, grey and pink is soothing to the eyes. The figure of the *naga* king stands out, illuminated in a bright golden hue enveloped by tufts of pink smoke. The figure of Nagarjuna is dwarfed in comparison to the *naga* king, but poised. Roerich had a generalized way of depicting human figures as dwarfed in comparison to nature since that was the essence of what he professed i.e. the supremacy of nature over all living beings.

**Saraha the Beneficent Arrow, never slackening in its mission of benevolence, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.4x73.4 cms, Private Collection**

Saraha was a Brahmin born in the late 8<sup>th</sup> century C.E. in the city-state of Rajni in Eastern India. Though raised as a Brahmin and educated in Brahmin law, Saraha had been imparted instruction in tantric mysteries by great Buddhist masters. He was probably educated at Nalanda, where he was taught the precepts of the *Madhyamika* (middle way) tradition of Buddhism by Acharya Haribhadra.<sup>12</sup> Saraha was credited with converting King Ratnapala and Brahmins of his court to Buddhism after singing three instructional songs. One was to the king, the second was to the queen, and the third was to the people of Rajni. These songs became the famous "Three Cycles of Dohas."<sup>13</sup>

Saraha married the daughter of an arrow smith and moved to an isolated location so that he could practice rigorous meditation. He gradually began to experience all things in their primordial form, achieving supreme spiritual attainment or *Mahamudra*.<sup>14</sup> Saraha's distinguishing attribute,

the arrow, signifies "the Gnostic awareness that pierces the heart of duality (belief in the ultimate existence of discrete subject and object). Saraha translates as "the archer" (*sara* – arrow and *ha(n)* - to have shot)."<sup>15</sup> Saraha propagated the straight path to enlightenment, similar to the direction an arrow takes when it is shot.

In this painting (pl. 3), Saraha, holding his iconic attribute, the arrow, is seated on a hillock. Donning the attire of a monk, he appears to be in a state of deep contemplation. With regard to the colour palette, the colours white, green and brown dominate, signifying the advent of winter, as is also evident in the snow covered mountains that form the backdrop. Barks of the trees on the hillock are depicted as bare and craggy, symbolic of the austerities practised by Saraha to attain *Mahamudra*. This composition is reminiscent of Roerich's stage designs, especially the ones he created for *le Sacre du Printemps*. The colour palette is strikingly similar and so is the hillscape.

**Padma Sambhava, 1924, Tempera on canvas, 117.4 x74 cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York**

Padma Sambhava was responsible for bringing Buddhism into Tibet and establishing the Nyingma School. He was born in 736 C.E. in Uddiyana, situated in the present day Swat Valley. There are many different accounts pertaining to his birth. It is usually believed that he was born as an eight year old boy who miraculously sprang from a lotus blossom upon Lake Danakosha through a ray of light cast by Amitabha Buddha. He was then adopted by king Indrabhuti of Uddiyana and christened Padma Sambhava, or the 'lotus born one'. Padma Sambhava is known by the epithet Guru Rimpoche in both Bhutan and Tibet.<sup>16</sup>

Padma Sambhava started living the life of a prince in a manner befitting of royal life. Soon, he had this deep urge to break away from the shackles of material life and seek enlightenment.

He then arranged himself to be banished from the kingdom by killing a young boy after which he was exiled and was free to pursue the path of enlightenment. <sup>17</sup>Padma Sambhava practised austerities and gained knowledge from various *dakinis* or tantric priestesses. While on a pilgrimage to Bodhgaya, Padma Sambhava was ordained as a Buddhist monk by the great master Prabhahasti acting as the preceptor.<sup>18</sup>

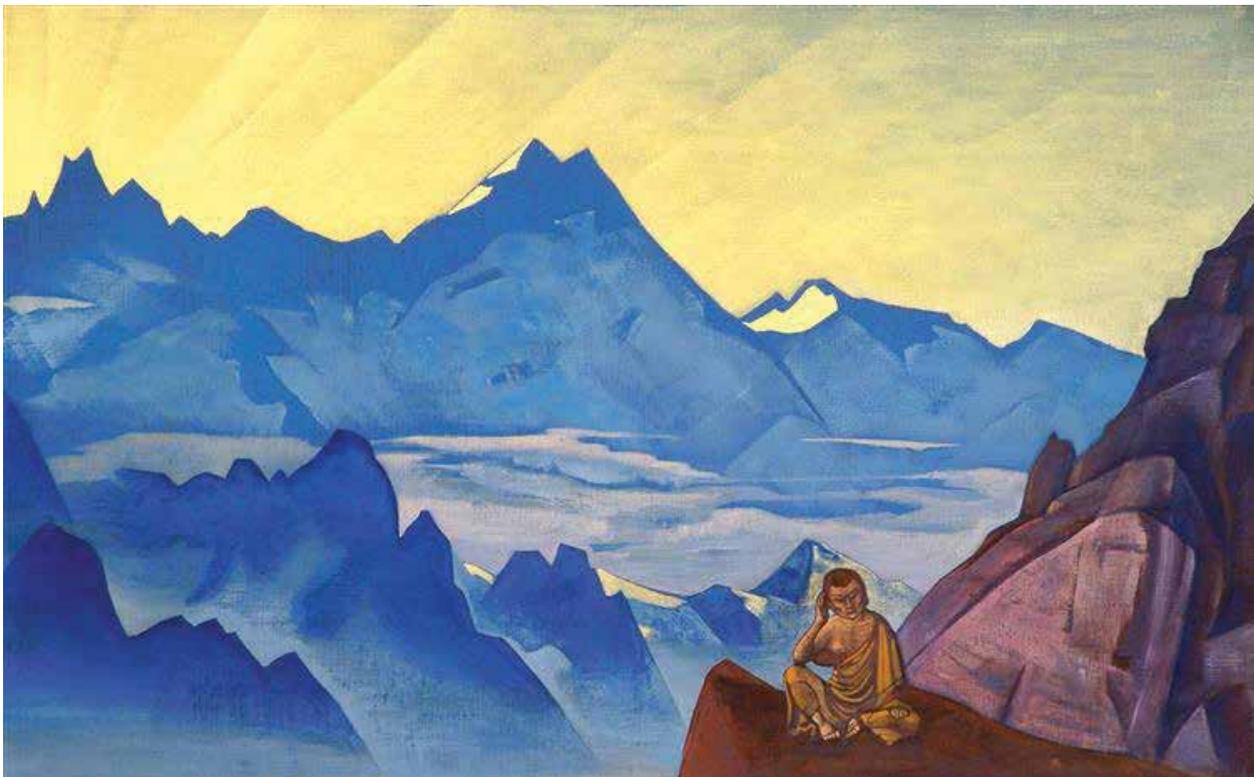
Roerich mentions a famous legend in both his travel diaries *Altai Himalaya* and *Heart of Asia* which possibly is depicted here (pl. 4), rendered according to his perception. An excerpt from *Altai Himalaya*, that offers the most plausible interpretation of this painting follows:

“When we travelled through the Sikkim monasteries we met several learned lamas who, although of the Red Sect, more than once mentioned the great approaching era and many details of Shambhala.

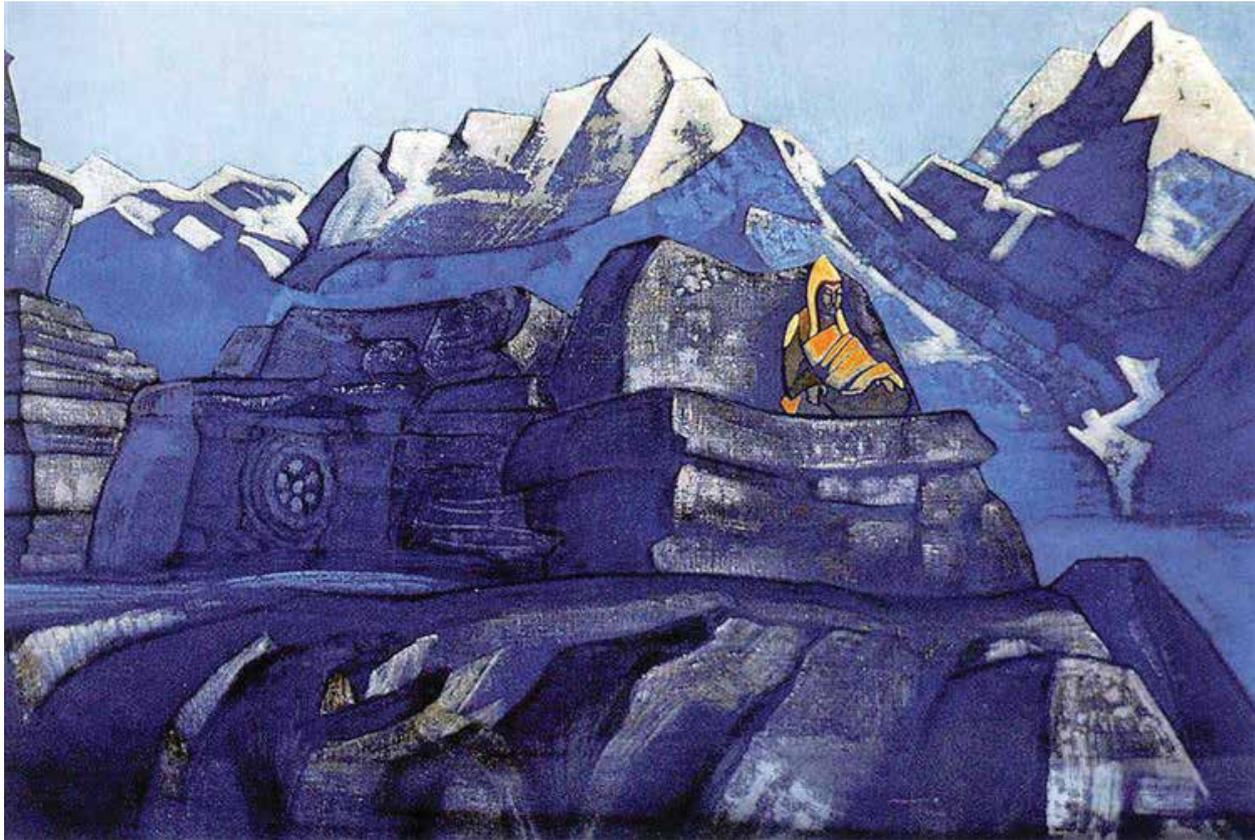
A learned lama, pointing down the slopes of the mountain, said:

Down below, near the stream, is a remarkable cave, but the descent to it is very difficult. In the cave Kandro Sampo, not far from Tashiding, near a certain hot spring, dwelt Padma Sambhava himself. A certain giant, thinking to penetrate across to Tibet, attempted to build a passage into the Sacred Land. The Blessed Teacher rose up and growing great in height struck the bold venturer. Thus was the giant destroyed. And now in the cave is the image of Padma Sambhava and behind it is a stone door. It is known that behind this door the Teacher hid sacred mysteries for the future...”<sup>19</sup>

The painting is rendered primarily in pristine shades of green and blue. Padma Sambhava is seated on a rock in a state of contemplation while the giant looks upon him from behind. He is robed in the attire of a monk and bears a translucent



Pl. 5: Milarepa, the One Who Harkened, at sunrise comprehending the voices of the Devas, Nicholas Roerich, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.5 x73.5 cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/milarepa-the-one-who-harkened-1925>



Pl. 6: Tsongkhapa, Nicholas Roerich, 1924, Tempera on canvas, 115x73.5 cms, Private Collection. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/tsong-kha-pa-1924>

halo around his head. The giant is rendered much larger in scale with thick-set facial features. It is interesting to note that the robes of Padma Sambhava and the giant are strikingly similar both in terms of style and colour. The entire scene is enveloped in mist, giving the painting an ethereal quality. The mountainous forms are reminiscent of those depicted in Chinese landscape paintings.

**Milarepa, the One Who Harkened, at sunrise comprehending the voices of the Devas, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.5 x73.5 cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York**

Born in c. 1052 CE, Milarepa is one of the most well known Tibetan Buddhist sages. He is said to have achieved "the highest attainable illumination and the mind power that enabled him to guide and shape the destiny of innumerable human

and non-human disciples."<sup>20</sup> The supramundane powers displayed by Milarepa were the result of his mastery over meditation and tantric yogic practices. He was hailed as the unrivalled master of Buddhist metaphysics. Milarepa's means of communication to his disciples was through songs which he composed himself to transmit his teachings in a simple, yet lucid manner. These songs collectively came to be known as the 'Hundred Thousand Songs of Milarepa'.

One of the most intriguing iconographic features in the portrayals of Milarepa is the gesture made by his right hand, a gesture which is appropriate for a Buddhist adept who is a *śravaka* or listener. Milarepa was a master of the esoteric teachings which were orally transmitted from the guru to the disciple. The gesture therefore may symbolise Milarepa's capacity to retain those teachings and

doctrines in his ear. As he himself said, "Unless the Secret Teachings be retained within one's ear, what gain is it to suffer sorrow?"<sup>21</sup>

In this composition (pl. 5), Milarepa, in his iconic gesture, seems engrossed comprehending the voices of the *devas* or the higher beings. He is dressed in a yellow coloured robe covering the left shoulder and leaving the right shoulder bare, characteristic of a typical monastic garb called *sanghati*. The colours blue and yellow dominate, imparting a soft glow reminiscent of the first rays of the sun. The blue mountainous forms with their jagged peaks appear distant and seem to have been rendered with bold brush strokes.

**Tsongkhapa, 1924, Tempera on canvas, 115x73.5 cms, Private Collection**

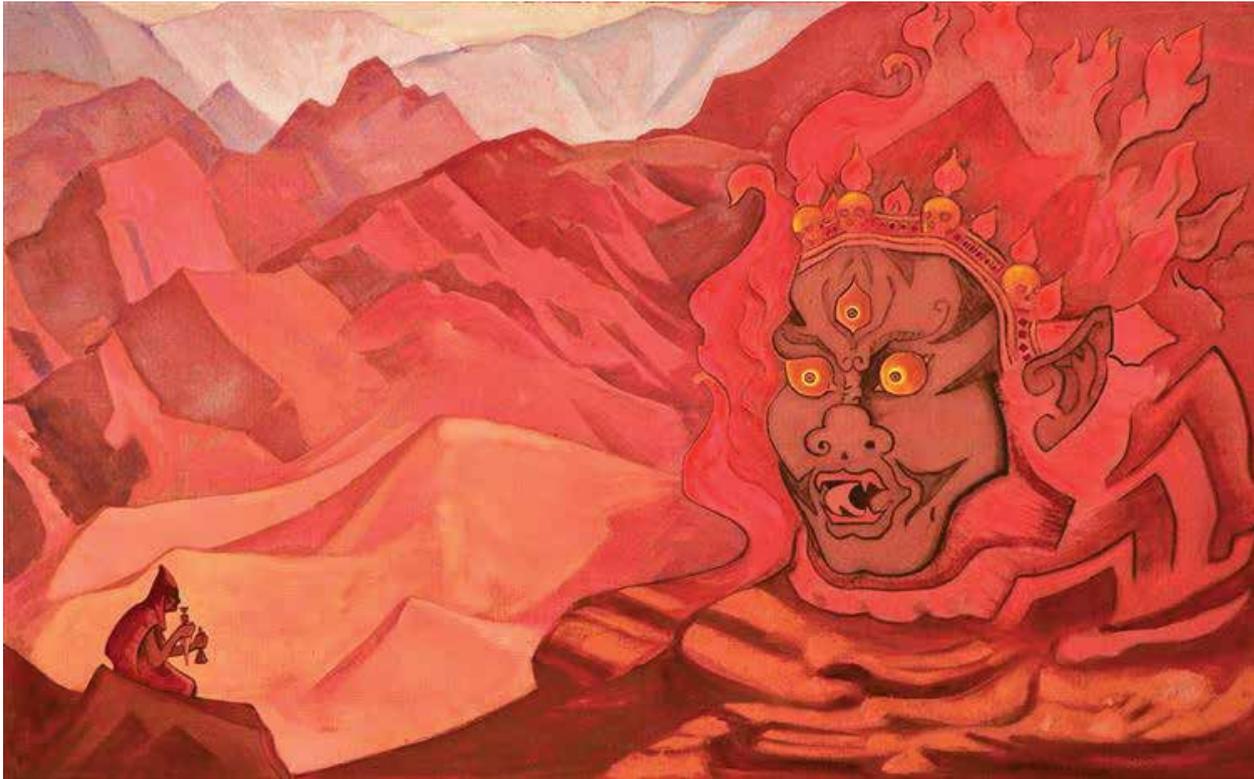
Tsongkhapa, one of the most revered Tibetan Buddhist saints, was born in c. 1357 CE in a

village called Tsongkha in Amdo, a province in northeast Tibet. By virtue of being an exceptional scholar, he is considered to be the emanation of the Bodhisattva of wisdom, Manjushri.<sup>22</sup> He received and propagated innumerable *tantric* empowerments and teachings during the course of his ascetic life, including that of the *Kalachakra tantra*. He is credited with establishing the Gelug sect of Tibetan Buddhism.

Dominated primarily by different shades of the colour blue, this composition (pl. 6) depicts Tsongkhapa in a state of deep meditation. He is robed in a typical monastic garb and is seated on a pedestal at the edge of a rocky outcrop. The *kalachakra* or wheel of time appears to be engraved on this pedestal in a simplistic manner, as out of the eight spokes of the wheel, only six are rendered. In Tibetan Buddhism, "the Kalachakra tantra describes a parallel universe known as the kingdom of Shambhala...the mythical realm



Pl. 7: Dorje the Daring, who stood facing Mahakala himself, Nicholas Roerich, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.5x74cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York. Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/dorje-the-daring-one-1925>



Pl. 8: Buddha the conqueror before the spring of life, Nicholas Roerich, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117x74.2 cms, International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow. Source: [http://www.wikinut.com/img/42svwk\\_diwhrx5ji/buddha-the-conqueror-by-Nicholas-Roerich](http://www.wikinut.com/img/42svwk_diwhrx5ji/buddha-the-conqueror-by-Nicholas-Roerich)

preserves the pristine lineage of the Kalchakra teachings, which Sakyamuni Buddha revealed to the first king of Shambhala."<sup>23</sup>

**Dorje the Daring, who stood facing Mahakala himself, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117.5x74cms, Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York**

Dorje Shugden is a protector deity of the *Dharmapala* class, that is, one who protects the religious law.<sup>24</sup> He was placated principally by the Sakya and Gelug sects of Tibetan Buddhism starting in the 17th and 18th centuries. Dorje Shugden is also known by the epithet *Dolgyal* (*Dol* is an area in Tibet and *Gyal* connotes regal demon or king spirit). There are two leading views regarding his nature and status. The Gelug sect regards Dorje Shugden as supramundane deity or '*jig rten las 'das pa'i srung ma*' (an enlightened

being). But the Sakya tradition maintains that Dorje Shugden is actually a mundane diety or '*jig nen pa'i srung ma*' (a worldly protector)<sup>25</sup>, who is controlled by the four faced Mahakala, who is considered to be a fully enlightened being.<sup>26</sup>

In this composition (pl. 7) Mahakala is depicted in the form of a sphinx or a snake with a head engulfed in a flaming red fire. His face is a fierce mask with three bulging eyes, pig snout, open mouth, with a crown of five skulls. The image of Mahakala is similar to the one in the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography in St. Petersburg. The mountains around have turned red and purple, symbolizing the wrath of Mahakala. The motionless silhouette of Dorje balances the intense dynamism of the canvas. The attributes held in his hands can't be determined with certainty; the proper right hand appears to be holding a dagger, while in

the attribute in the left hand is indistinct. The wrathful image of Mahalaka symbolises the imminent perils he is about to face in the path of spiritual enlightenment. The idea of confronting danger and overcoming one's fears was, according to Roerich, very important to attain spiritual enlightenment. Roerich, akin to the fearless Dorje, took it upon himself to prevent disasters as devastating in scale as the world wars and suggested that all countries sign a peace pact for the protection of cultural treasures of mankind in the event of armed conflict.

**Buddha the conqueror before the spring of life, 1925, Tempera on canvas, 117x74.2 cms, International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow**

Roerich has given an appropriate description of this composition (pl. 8), it is as follows:

"The founder of the most ancient world religion, Buddha, lived in North India (623-544 BC). The great Gautama gave the world the finished life doctrine...the first studying of world evolution laws doctrine: law of fearlessness, law of refusal from property, law of work value, law of personality dignity out of classes and differences, law of true knowledge, law of love, on the basis of self-consciousness. These laws let sacreds of the Great Master make humanity feel happy. He's been called "the light of the world", which discovers everything hidden to everyone who can see, like a lamp. He's liberator. He liberates, because he is free himself. Gautama never turn out of life, he could get into simple people's days. The matter of his speeches, tales he found in ordinary life, using simple examples and comparisons. Pointing at the bond between human and nature, he knew, that natural phenomenon could explain a lot in our life. His power to influence on people consisted in his own work example. "Loving heart is above all",- Buddha said that, Jesus Christ told that."<sup>27</sup>

The colour palette is dominated by different shades yellow and blue, which impart a dramatic effect to the entire composition. Lord Buddha is seated in a rocky cave which has been illuminated by his iridescent aura, in accordance with Roerich's description of him as the light of the world. The cave in which he meditates is covered with stalactites and stalagmites, possibly symbolic of the rigours he went through during his early phases of meditation. The figure of Lord Buddha is reminiscent of Central-Asian prototypes.

The 'Banners of the East' series, is, therefore, reflective of Roerich's spiritual proclivities. Apart from images of Buddha and Buddhist sages, this series also features images of other religious leaders of the world, including Moses, Christ, Prophet Mohammad, Confucius etc. It was only befitting for Roerich to create this series as he was an avowed messenger of the one world order and worked tirelessly to establish the common roots of human faith. He abided by Confucius' injunction that, "if the hearts of mortals were kindled by love, the whole world would be one family — all men would be as one man and all things would appear to be the same element."<sup>28</sup>

**Notes :**

- 1 Anita Stasulane, *Theosophy and Culture: Nicholas Roerich* (Rome: EPUG, 2005), 63.
- 2 Barnett D. Conlan, *Nicholas Roerich: A Master of the Mountains* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2003), 115.
- 3 Coleen Messina, *Warrior of Light: The life of Nicholas Roerich-Artist, Himalayan Explorer and Visionary* (Montana: Summit University Press, 2002), 47.
- 4 Marlene Laurelle, 'The White Tsar': Romantic Imperialism in Russia's Legitimizing of Conquering the Far East' in *Acta Slavica Iaponica* 25 (2008): 117-119 < [http://eprints.lib.hokudai.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2115/39550/1/ASI25\\_006.pdf](http://eprints.lib.hokudai.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/2115/39550/1/ASI25_006.pdf) > (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2016)
- 5 *Ibid.*, 119.

- 6 Detailed information about the history of the First Buddhist Temple in St. Petersburg is provided by the official site of the Temple: <<<http://dazan.spb.ru/datsan/history>>>
- 7 Giuseppe Tucci and Geoffrey Samuel, *The religions of Tibet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 1.
- 8 Rolf Alfred Stein and J. E. Driver, *Tibetan Civilization* (California: Stanford University Press, 1972), 164.
- 9 V.S. Bhaskar, *Faith and Philosophy of Buddhism* (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2009), 84.
- 10 Laurence Austin Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (New York: Cosimo, 2007) 378.
- 11 Alex Wayman, *Untying the Knots in Buddhism: Selected Essays* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarasidass, 1997), 64-65.
- 12 Abhayadatta and Keith Dowman, *Masters of Mahāmudrā: songs and histories of the eighty-four Buddhist siddhas* (New York: SUNY Press, 1985), 66-72.
- 13 Himalayan Art, *Saraha: the Great Brahmin* < <http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=340>> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2016)
- 14 Gyatrul Rinpoche, *The Generation Stage in Buddhist Tantra* (New York: Snow Lion Publications, 2005), 107.
- 15 Abhayadatta and Keith Dowman, 71.
- 16 V.S. Bhaskar, 162.
- 17 Yeshe Tsogyal, *The Lotus Born: The Life of Padmasambhava*, edited Marcia Binder Schmidt by and translated by Erik Pema Kunsang (Hong Kong: Rangjung Yeshe Publications, 1993), 37.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 13.
- 19 For the full text of Altai Himalaya, see roerich.org, writings, Altai Himalaya <http://www.roerich.org/roerich-writings-altai-himalaya.php> (accessed 20<sup>th</sup> April, 2016)
- 20 Lobsang P. Lhalungpa, trans., *The Life of Milarepa* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1995), xxviii.
- 21 Pratapaditya Pal and Hugh Richardson, *Art of Tibet: a catalogue of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art collection* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 230.
- 22 John C. Huntington and Dina Bangdel, *Circle of Bliss: Buddhist Meditational Art* (Ohio: Columbus Museum of Art and Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2004 ), 165
- 23 Robert Beer, *Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist symbols* (Chicago: Serindia Publications, 2003), 38.
- 24 David N. Kay, *Tibetan and Zen Buddhism in Britain: Transplantation, Development and Adaptation - The New Kadampa Tradition (NKT), and the Order of Buddhist Contemplatives (OBC)* (New York: Londres- Routledge Curzon, 2004), 44.
- 25 *Ibid.*, 47.
- 26 *Dolgyal Shugden: A history* (New York: Tibet House Publications, 2014), see chapter "the fifth recognition of Gyaltzen as Shugden"
- 27 Agni Art, *Buddha the conqueror before the spring of life* <<http://www.agniart.ru/eng/item-10665~Fine-art-prints~Roerich-Nicholas~Buddha-the-Conqueror-Fine-art-print-B2>> (accessed 18<sup>th</sup> April 2016)
- 28 Ruth Abrams Drayer, *Nicholas & Helena Roerich: The spiritual journey of two great artists and peacemakers* (Quest Books, 2005), 114.

# Buddhist Roots in the Art of Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose and Ramkinkar Baij

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Dr. Arundhati Dasgupta

When artists in pre-independence India were struggling to hold on to their cultural identity, they turned to Buddhism for inspiration among other stimuluses. Buddhism, which was virtually non-existent in the nineteenth century in its birthplace, yet again found an expression in images of Buddha and icons/iconography associated with Buddhist tales, during the Neo-Bengal movement. Invoking a sense of nostalgia of India's glorious past, many of the Modern Indian artists in Bengal leaned on the Hindu/Buddhist repertoire of literature and visual arts to represent the story of India that was.

The nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal witnessed an intellectual awakening as a result of multifaceted Occidental and Oriental encounters. Ancient wisdoms were revisited and reformed religious ideologies<sup>1</sup> were propagated during the Bengal Renaissance. Armed with a heightened sense of awareness of their past, the cultural intelligentsia in Calcutta ushered in a new genre of art and literature which would later be coined as Modern.

This essay looks at Buddhist ideas/principles as the source of inspiration in the works of three iconic Modern Indian artists from three generations in three different mediums. Abanindranath Tagore's water colour illustration *The Victory of Buddha* (1913), Nandalal Bose's mural *Natir Puja* (1942) and Ramkinkar Baij's sculpture *Sujata* (1935) characterise Buddhist art of India in the twentieth century. These three artists shared a symbiotic

relationship in the form of *guru* (teacher) and *shishya* (student). Nandalal Bose, blossomed as a dominant figure of Modern Indian Art under Abanindranath Tagore's guidance, passed on his legacy to Ramkinkar Baij. Though the vision of these artists resonated with Buddhist thought, they carefully steered away from the strict religious tenets and monastic conventions that later came to be associated with the religion. These artists sought to re-interpret Buddhist imagery with modern sensibilities, at times borrowing from ancient Buddhist texts, and at times from contemporary fictional works.

## Revival of Buddhist philosophy in literary discourse

Multiple socio-religious impulses led to the revival of Buddhism in nineteenth century Bengal. Rama Kundu in his chapter, 'In Thine Immeasurable Mercy and Goodness: Buddha in Tagore's Imagination' in *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 1 gives a brief account of the early traces of Buddhist studies in Modern India. British author, Sir Edwin Arnold's biographical text on Buddha, *Light of Asia* (1879) was a highly appreciated work by the English and the English educated elite Indians alike. *Light of Asia* inspired Girishchandra Ghosh's play *Buddhadev-Charit* (1885) and Nabinchandra Sen's *Amitav Kavya* (1895), which contributed towards spreading awareness about Buddhism in Bengal. In 1892, 'The Maha Bodhi Society' founded by Angarika

Dharmapala (a Sinhalese Buddhist revivalist) at Colombo moved to Calcutta. In the same year, 'The Buddhist Text Society of India' was established by Sarat Chandra Das and 'The Bengali Buddhist Association' was set up by Mahasthabir Kripasaran in Calcutta. Two of Rabindranath Tagore's elder brothers, Dwijendranath Tagore and Satyendranath Tagore wrote *Aryadharmā O Bouddha Dharmer Ghat—Protighat*<sup>2</sup> (1899) and *Bauddha Dharma* (1901), respectively. Around the same time, Rabindranath Tagore started the journal *Sadhana* where the first year was dedicated to a scholarly series called *Buddhacharit* by Krishna Bihari Sen. Another Bengali journal *Prabasi* featured a series of Buddhist articles by Maheshchandra Ghosh in the early years of the twentieth century.<sup>3</sup>

For the next five decades while Buddhism remained a predominant subject in literature, it had a significant impact on visual arts. Bengal School and Santiniketan artists, art historians and scholars like E.B. Havell, A.K. Coomaraswamy, Sister Nivedita, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Ramkinkar Baij etc.<sup>4</sup> elevated Buddhist art, architecture and iconography to an enormously important place that necessitated revisiting India's illustrious past and rethinking the nation's future identity.

### **Contribution of Rabindranath Tagore towards Buddhist Revival in Bengal**

The distinguished Tagore family and other literati of Calcutta endlessly engaged in creative experiments in literature, music, dance, theatre and visual arts. Rabindranath Tagore's works, ideology and presence had a huge intellectual and philosophical influence on his nephew Abanindranath Tagore, who went on to becoming the father of Indian Modernism. Abanindranath's work and career was admired by Rabindranath Tagore to such a great degree that when Rabindranath founded Kala Bhavan at Santiniketan, he invited Nandalal Bose's, protégé of Abanindranath to become its first principal.

Rabindranath Tagore's profound reverence for Buddha and Buddhism led him to devote a

number of prose, poetry and drama on the subject with his own personal interpretation, which had a most direct impact on Modern Indian artists in Bengal. Tagore viewed Buddhism in the light of universal love instead of it being a doctrine of sorrow and annihilation, and compassion for all creatures instead of abnegation of the self through discipline.<sup>5</sup> He often exercised artistic liberty when drawing on Buddhist texts and creating fictional narratives. According to Kundu, Rabindranath Tagore *had frequently humanized the stories of Abadanasataka by giving a subtle turn or twist to the existing text, and this has helped him to project the image of Buddha which is the epitome of compassion and love, and which corroborates to the poet's own humanistic philosophy of life.*<sup>6</sup> In many of the works, Tagore mentions the source under the title along with a brief note—*Shreshthabiksha* (Best Gift of Begging), *Pujarini* (Maiden Worshipper) and *Mulyaprapti* (Receipt of Price) mentions *Abadanasataka*; *Nagarlakshmi* (City's Maiden of Plenty) mentions *Kalpadruma-abadana*; *Abhisar* (Love's Sojourn) mentions *Bodhisattvabadan-Kalpalata*; *Samanya Kshati* (A Small Damage) and *Achalayatan* (The Immovable) mentions *Dibyabadanamala*; *Chandalika* (The Untouchable Girl) mentions *Sardulkarna-Abadana*; *Parisodh* (Repayment of Loan) mentions *Mahabastu-Abadana*, etc.<sup>7</sup>

### ***The Victory of Buddha* by Abanindranath Tagore**

Abanindranath Tagore's early works of art were the illustrations for Rabindranath Tagore's writings for the magazine *Sadhana* and otherwise in the 1890s. Interestingly, Abanindranath too, was a noted writer of children's stories and illustrated his own fictional books like *Rajkahini* (Kings of Rajasthan), *Buro Angla* (The Big Adventures of a Little Hero), *Ksheerer Putul* (The Condensed-Milk Doll), *Nalak* etc. Almost every text provided its readers with the visual representation of the characters, dramatic situations, and landscapes. In *Nalak*, Abanindranath gave an account of Buddha's life through a spiritual insight of a child hermit Nalak. Though the artist never visited Ajanta or undertook art projects at Ajanta and other Buddhist sites, he made a number of paintings with Buddhist themes. Tissa, queen of

Asoka, in *Asoka's Queen* (1910) is presented as an evil scheming woman, who was jealous of her husband's devotion to the Bodhi tree, and casts a spell, causing it to wither away. Abanindranath Tagore in his representation of Tissa portrayed her against a railing with medallions resembling those from the *stupa* at Bharhut. However, the structure referenced here appears not to have suggested a specific *stupa*, but a composite form evoking an idealised Buddhist shrine.<sup>8</sup> A miniature painting called *Buddha and Sujata* (1903) illustrates the scene where Sujata, mistaking the Buddha for the tree god, brings to him her votive offerings of sweetened milk and rice in a golden bowl.

Abanindranath Tagore painted and supervised thirty-two illustrations produced for the book *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (1913) by Sister Nivedita and A.K. Coomaraswamy. Notable paintings by Abanindranath from the book were *The Victory of Buddha*, *The Bodhisattva's Tusk*, *Departure of Prince Siddharth*, *Buddha as Mendicant* and *The Final Release*.<sup>9</sup> For illustrations in this book, the master employed romantic wash painting techniques inspired by Nihonga<sup>10</sup> works from Japan. An air of contemplation and spiritual emotionalism came to be identified with the Bengal School style. The then popular medium of oil painting endorsed by the British was replaced by the delicate water colour on paper in the Oriental style. Colour was used to portray form instead of definite contour lines. Colour was also used to convey moods by means of wide sweeps of transparent wash.

*The Victory of Buddha* was selected as the front piece of the book. Like his uncle Rabindranath Tagore, Abanindranath summarized Buddhism as a religion that taught compassion. Unlike his students Nandalal Bose, Asit Haldar, K. Venkatappa and Samrendranath Gupta, he never copied the Buddhist frescoes or adapted its style in his own works. Though he is hailed as the reviver of Indian Art, and he studied Indian canons of aesthetics, yet in his own creations he never aimed to adhere to them.<sup>11</sup> K.G. Subramanyan explains, "At a time when one kind of educated Indian was getting progressively

*alienated from his antecedents and facing the prospect of rootlessness and another kind was trying to fossilise some of these and preserve them unchanged for prosperity [Abanindranath Tagore] was one of those few who wanted to save them from both extremes and demonstrate that in a dynamic society, the past and the present exist in organic community."*<sup>12</sup> Abanindranath's *The Victory of Buddha* embodies the attainment of enlightenment instead of assault of Mara during Buddha's penance. He consciously turns away from the popular narrative of the event in which Sakyamuni was sitting under a sacred fig tree when he attained Buddhahood. He visualises this final moment of meditative absorption when Buddha is liberated from the cycle of birth and death from a passage from the book, "The sun had not yet set when Mara was defeated. Buddha remained seated beneath the Wisdom-tree. Gradually through the night the enlightenment for which he sought dawned in his heart... at dawn of day he became a Supreme Buddha, the Perfectly Enlightened. Then rays of six colours spread far and wide from his shining body, penetrating to the uttermost bounds of space and announcing the attainment of Buddhahood."<sup>13</sup> The near silhouetted image of Buddha in *dhyana* position is set at dawn in a calm and still environment, atop a hill, flooded by the light of knowledge. Executed in wash technique, the painting is built up by the slow and refined shades of earthy brown, lighter hues of yellow, blue and grey. A work such as this required more than artistic skill; it required soul. Nandalal Bose writes about his *guru* Abanindranath Tagore, "He has sought to free art from the stiff, ornamental or intricate character of technique and give it unhampered liberty in expressing *rasa* and feeling."<sup>14</sup> With this painting and a repertoire of such paintings, Abanindranath Tagore re-claimed 'Indian-ness' in Indian art.

#### **Natir Puja by Nandalal Bose**

In 1909, the Indian Society of Oriental Art sponsored Nandalal Bose and Asit Kumar Haldar for copying the fifth century Ajanta frescoes as part of Lady Christiana Herringham's team.<sup>15</sup> They were later joined by two more of Abanindranath

Tagores's students, K. Venkatappa and Samarendranath Gupta who shared the enriching experience with Bose for three months. At Ajanta, Bose for the first time became intimately familiar with the techniques of classical Indian mural paintings, strong contour lines and canons of ancient Indian art. The copies made by the group of artists were subsequently published by the India Society, London.<sup>16</sup> Twelve years later, Bose visited the Bagh Caves in 1921, and once again spent two months copying the murals. He was overwhelmed by the Buddhist caves and these exposures had a deep impact on his artistic career. Buddhist themes became recurring occurrences in Bose's works and murals became an integral part of the teaching programme at Santiniketan for the next forty years.<sup>17</sup> Partha Mitter observed that Bose strove to create an indigenous expression in Modern Indian art through an alternative mural movement in Kala Bhavan and spearheaded collaborative experiments between teachers and students.<sup>18</sup>

Bose became particularly fond of the dance-drama *Natir Puja* (The Worship of the Dancing Girl) ever since it was staged for the first time in Santiniketan in 1926, with his daughter Gauri playing the lead role of the court dancer, Srimati. It was an adaptation by Rabindranath Tagore of his own poem *Pujarini* written in 1899, which itself was based on an anecdote in *Avadanasatak*. The story relates how Srimati, a devout Buddhist servant of the royal household of King Ajatsatru, risks martyrdom so that she might continue to worship the Buddha. The king had prohibited, on pain of death, any kind of worship except that of the Vedas, but against the advice of the queen and other members of the royal household she persists. In the early evening Srimati places her offerings at the Buddhist Stupa near the palace and as she lights the lamps at the stupa she is cut down and killed by the royal guards.<sup>19</sup> The set design for the play was done by Nandalal Bose and Surendranath Kar, in which they created a Buddhist *stupa* that was shattered by the actors in the last scene.<sup>20</sup> *Nati*, it may be observed became a leit motif in Nandalal Bose's oeuvre. One of the finest and best preserved murals of Nandalal Bose in Santiniketan is that of the *Natir*

*Puja* in the Cheena Bhawan, painted in 1942. Prior to that, Bose had painted the dancer in one of the Patha Bhawan panels of Santiniketan in 1933. Once again in 1943, Bose dwelled on the subject when he was commissioned by the Maharaja of Baroda to decorate the walls of Kirti Mandir. Apart from the murals, she is also the subject of a sculpture, a drawing, a painting on silk, a series of wash paintings, a brush drawing on Nepali paper and a set of drawings on cards.<sup>21</sup>

In 1942, when Bose embarked on a personal journey of converting the dance-drama into visuals on the walls of Santiniketan, he first composed his visual narrative into eight scenes on a set of drawing cards. These drawings became the layout for the mural at Cheena Bhavan. R. Siva Kumar gives a detailed description of the eight scenes of the mural as such:

"The mural opens with Srimathi the court dancer in the palace garden on the morning of the Buddha's birthday, bearing offerings; this is followed by her meeting with Malathi, a fellow seeker. In the third scene queen Lokeshwari, deprived by Buddhism of her husband and her favourite son, confronts Utpalparna the *bikshuni*. In the fourth scene, in the presence of the princesses, Utpalparna informs Srimathi of her selection by the elders of the Sangha to conduct the worship of the Buddha at the palace altar, and in the fifth we see Srimathi and a few companions proceeding to the altar with lamps. In the sixth, Srimathi, who has been ordered by the enraged king Ajatsatru, at the instigation of scheming princesses, to dance at the *stupa*, enters in her dance robe and begins to dance. In the penultimate scene we see the succeeding stages of her dance into worship. And in the final scene we see her slain body in the foreground of a vast open landscape over which a full moon rises.<sup>22</sup>

Siva Kumar observes that the play is not easy to represent visually because of its expansive emotive prose. Bose purposefully restructures the theme and rearranges the scenes. He shows the meeting of the queen Lokeshwari and the female

monastic Utpalparna after two scenes, deviating from the writing as well as the performance. Starting the scene with a splendid representation of the dancer holding prayer offerings amidst nature, sets the tone of Buddhist tranquility and establishes *Nati* as the protagonist. *Nati* always was the chief protagonist for Bose, irrespective of the complex narrative of the play. However, unlike the bejeweled royal danseuse in the Patha Bhavan and Kirti Mandir, here *Nati* is painted in the natural rhythmic movement in the monochromatic tones of the earth. Scenes merged into one another with undulating continuity. *Nati*'s existence as a dancer and her supreme devotion to Buddha gets culminated in the penultimate scene of her dance worship, where she changes her attire from a dancer to a *bhikshuni*. The last scene shows the slain dancer with a backdrop of the large setting sun. This moving spectacle unfolds amidst nature which has been used as a metaphor for God by Bose.<sup>23</sup> Like Rabindranath Tagore, Bose learned to turn to Buddhism when dealing with contemporary predicaments.<sup>24</sup>

### **Sujata by Ramkinkar Baij**

Ramkinkar Baij is often seen as the rebel who ushered in modern Western art in India and he is also credited with being the earliest Indian sculptor to experiment with abstract sculptural forms in unconventional mediums. However, in his early works, he reveals his close associations with Rabindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose, who personally took it upon themselves to groom this extraordinary artist. He was special enough to be advised by Tagore to fill Santiniketan with his art and not leave a single space untouched by his vision.<sup>25</sup> The remoteness of Santiniketan helped Baij to develop an individual visual vocabulary. Moreover, he had the opportunity of being exposed to current Western art practices through the visiting artists of Europe. *Sujata* (1935), an eleven feet cement-concrete open-air sculpture at Santiniketan was the first example of his exuberant, energetic and earthy work, which ensured him Rabindranath Tagore's support for his lifetime.<sup>26</sup> Baij envisioned *Sujata* as a solitary figure walking alone in a

grove towards Buddha. Incidentally, a sculpture of the seated Buddha by Rudrappa Hanji was located a little ahead, which prompted Nandalal Bose to suggest adding a pot on *Sujata*'s head and create a symbiotic narrative.<sup>27</sup> In fact, not only did Baij incorporate the suggestions, he recreated the Buddha himself, when the original was destroyed in the late forties. Nature was intended as the backdrop. The sculpture of a tall, lean woman emerging from the ground was set among trees at Santiniketan under the vast sky. To survive the rough weather outside, Baij chose cement-concrete as the medium which was unconventional for the times. Mortar of cement and laterite pebbles thus far was only used for constructional material, till Baij became the pioneer for introducing it as a medium for art in India. Pranabranjan Ray notes "*Instead of stone chips and sand, he used lateritic granules, gravels and coarse lateritic earth; mixed the whole thing up with just enough cement needed for binding and bonding the mix.*"<sup>28</sup> Since all concrete constructions need support from within, Baij used bamboo poles and splits tied with canes for the armature. Baij manages to create a fluid movement in the body of the sculpture in spite of it being made of solid, unmoving concrete. Apparently, the long-limbed figure of *Sujata* was inspired by the tall, lanky figure of Jaya Appaswamy (artist and art historian)<sup>29</sup>, however, a sub-conscious inspiration of Abanindranath Tagore's *Sujata and Buddha* cannot be ruled out.

### **Conclusion**

Relay of ideas involving Buddhism is seen in three generations of artists, each involved in a personal struggle for creating their unique visual lingua. While Abanindranath Tagore strove to find the spiritual in his art, nature provided the context for Nandalal Bose, and interestingly, the human figure became paramount in Ramkinkar Baij's vision of art. Tagore's image of attainment of Buddhahood was directed inwards, where knowledge and understanding of Buddha became his guide. Bose paid homage to Buddha and his association with Ajanta and Bagh by re-introducing the lost art of painting murals, in Santiniketan. *Nati*'s bent head and folded hand

in front of the stupa symbolizes this homage. Baij's free-standing lone figure of Sujata alludes to the fact that in spite of modernist yearnings, he soaked in all the wisdom his mentors could share. His inspiration of Buddhist narratives came from his illustrious mentors, like Nandalal Bose, Rabindranath Tagore and Abanindranath Tagore. Due to the insightful judgement of these artists, Buddhist tenets like wisdom, compassion and devotion resurfaced in the country when it was desperately seeking for harmony.

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- 2 It is a book on the conflicts of Hinduism and Buddhism.
- 3 Rama Kundu, "In Thine Immeasurable Mercy and Goodness': Buddha in Tagore's Imagination" in *Studies on Rabindranath Tagore*, Volume 1, ed. Mohit K. Ray, 213-252 (Mumbai: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors, 2004), 215-216.
- 4 Ananya Vajpei, *Righteous Republic: The Political Foundations of Modern India* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2012), 217.
- 5 Tapati Dasgupta, *Social Thought of Rabindranath Tagore: A Historical Analysis* (Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1993), 21.
- 6 Kundu, *op. cit.*, p. 225.
- 7 *Ibid.*, p. 226-228.
- 8 Niharika Dinkar, "Masculine Regeneration and the Attenuated Body in the early works of Nandalal Bose," *Oxford Art Journal* 33 (2) (2010): 176.
- 9 Sister Nivedita and Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, *Myths of the Hindus and Buddhists* (London: George G. Harrap and Company, 1914), xi.
- 10 Nihonga or literally "Japanese-style paintings" are paintings that have been made in accordance with traditional Japanese artistic conventions, techniques and materials. While based on traditions over a thousand years old, the term was coined in the Meiji period of the Imperial Japan, to distinguish such works from Western-style paintings. It is known for its delicate washes and pure, luminous colour.
- 11 Ramendranath Chakravorty, ed. *Abanindranath Tagore: His Early Works* (Calcutta: Indian Museum, 1951), 18.
- 12 R. Siva Kumar, *Paintings of Abanindranath Tagore* (Kolkata: Pratikshan, 2008), 16.
- 13 Sister Nivedita, *op. cit.*, p. 270-271.
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- 18 Partha Mitter, *The Triumph of Modernism: India's Artists and the Avant-garde, 1922-1947* (London: Reaktion Books, 2007), 85.
- 19 A.K. Basu Majumdar, *Rabindranath Tagore: The Poet of India* (Delhi: Indus Publishing Co., 1993), 35.
- 20 Prarthana Purkayastha, *Indian Modern Dance, Feminism and Transnationalism* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 36.
- 21 Siva Kumar, *op. cit.*, p. 22, 47.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p.47.
- 23 *Ibid.*
- 24 *Ibid.*, p.49.
- 25 Nuzhat Kazmi, "Ramkinkar Baij: An Indian Modernist from Bengal Revisited," *Artetc.: News and Views*, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.artnewsnviews.com/view-article.php?article=ramkinkar-baij-an-indian-modernist-from-bengal-revisited&iid=32&articleid=947>.
- 26 Outlook Magazine. "Ramkinkar Baij." Last modified 30 April 2016. <http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/ramkinkar-baij/216868>.
- 27 R. Siva Kumar, *Ramkinkar Baij: A Retrospective* (New Delhi: Delhi Art Gallery, 2012), 82.
- 28 Pranabranjan Ray, "Ramkinkar Baij's Santhal Family," *Artetc.: News and Views*, accessed April 23, 2016, <http://www.artnewsnviews.com/view-article.php?article=ramkinkar-baij-s-santhal-family&iid=35&articleid=1052>.
- 29 Siva Kumar, *op. cit.*, 79.

# The Great *Stūpa* of Amarāvati— an abode of *Nirvāṇa*

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The *stūpa* is a sepulchral monument which got associated with the Buddha after his *mahāparinirvāṇa*. There were many *stūpas* that are known in the history of Buddhism but the most elaborate and highly decorated one was that at Amarāvati which is now in a dismembered state and the remains of it are now housed in different museums of India and abroad. This article discusses the idea and development of *stūpa* architecture in India and how the *stūpa* of Āndhradeśa, especially that of Amarāvati is different than the other *stūpas* of India.

## The *Stūpa*—Idea and Development

The *stūpa*, literally a mound (Hindi: *thūha*, Pali: *thūpa*), was a sepulchral monument generally made up on the site of the funeral pyre (*citā*) by collecting (*citi* or *cayam*) earth, owing to which it was also known as *caitya*. According to the Encyclopaedia of Hindu Architecture, “the *stūpa* is a name of edifices, which serve as receptacle for a relic monument. They are hemispherical or bell-shaped and rest upon a base of concentric stories, which forms the ambulatories round the tope.”<sup>1</sup>

*Caitya* is one of the synonyms of *stūpa*, the worship of which was in vogue long before the epoch of Buddha. The interesting thing about this term is that it was used not only for denoting the architecture but also sacred trees, memorial stones, images etc. It was a popular term even

during the time of Buddha, the reference of which we get in *Dīgha Nikāya*, in which he went to *Chāpāla caitya* and mentions about *Udayana*, *Gotamaka*, *Sattamba*, *Bahuputra* and *Ānanda caitya*.<sup>2</sup>

It is probably derived from the pre-Buddhist burial mounds prevalent in India; however such practices related with the dead also existed in other parts of the world. The word *stūpa* was not unknown in Vedic times, the reference to which we get in *Ṛgveda*, *Atharvaveda*, *Taittraiya Samhita*, *Vajasaneya Samhita* and *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa*, which refers to it as a bunch of wool or raised lock of hair, or the forepart of the head. The origin of *stūpa* goes back to the *Ṛgveda* where the flaming pile of Agni’s light is spoken of *stūpa*<sup>3</sup>; the *stūpa* is compared to the outspreading form of a tree standing erect.<sup>4</sup> We also find the idea of it as a descendant of the *Āṅgiras* (a name of *Agni*) named *Hiraṇya stūpa*, who had invoked god Savitā as the supreme pile of splendour, implying that both Agni on earth and Savitā in the heavens are like the two golden *stūpas* from which cosmic light emanates.<sup>5</sup>

The *Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa* speaks of religious structures like *Yūpa*, *Vedī* and the *Śmaśāna* and further explains that after the departure of the soul of the *mahāpuruṣa* from the earthly place to the heavenly abode, one should commemorate the place of death and pay homage to the dead;



Plate 2.1: Reconstruction of Amarāvati stūpa, Amarāvati Site Museum

either a memorial or a monument is to be erected.<sup>6</sup> It is also mentioned in the *Mahāvamsa* that at the site of the stūpa, a pillar should be erected and it was to be known as *Yūpa*.

During the middle Bronze Age (2600-1500 B.C.E.), we begin to see the appearance of the tumuli which are burial mounds where the dead, usually of the upper class, are entombed with gifts of weapons and jewellery.<sup>7</sup> This is evident from the highest tumulus of Mohenjodāro, believed to be the ruins of a Buddhist stūpa that may well have been raised on the remains of an earlier sanctuary. The making of the stūpa was a practice prevalent before the time of Buddha which is known from the conversation of Ānanda and Buddha in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta*. Ānanda asked Buddha, “How should we honour the body of the Tathāgata?”, to which the Buddha replied, “As they do for the remains of a Cakravartin king, so Ānanda they should do for the remains of Tathāgata. At the four cross-roads, similar to the stūpa they raise for the Cakravartins, should they raise the stūpa for the Tathāgata”. The Buddha further added that four kinds of men were worthy of a stūpa—a Tathāgata, a *Pratyeka* (Pali—*Pacekka*) Buddha, a disciple of the Tathāgata, and a Cakravartin.<sup>8</sup>

That the practice of erecting a stūpa over the relics was in vogue since previous times, is further attested by the fact that during his lifetime, Buddha himself caused stūpas to be erected over the remains of his disciples—Putigatta Tissa, Sāriputta and

Maudgalāyana. His attitude towards the custom of raising stūpas is further revealed in the utterances in the *Mahāparinibbāna Sutta* when he said, “And whosoever shall there place garlands or perfumes or paint or make salutation there or become in its presence calm in heart—that shall long to be then for a profit and a joy”.<sup>9</sup> The building of a stūpa on the remains of deceased persons is also mentioned in the *jātakas*. One such example is from the *Sujātā Jātaka*<sup>10</sup> in which a mound of earth was made by her father, when her grandfather died, enshrining the body remains of the sire. In another story of the *Mahākapi Jātaka*, we find that when a noble monkey king died, he was honoured with obsequies befitting a king. After the body of the monkey king had been burnt on the funeral pile, the ministers returned to the king taking with them the ‘crown of the head’ i.e., ‘the skull’. The king then caused a *caitya* to be made on the spot where the body was cremated and honoured it with burning lamps, garlands and perfumes while the skull was ornamented with gold and then placed on a spearhead. The spearhead with the skull of the monkey king was set up at the royal gate and the relic was honoured for seven days, and thereafter it was enshrined in a *caitya* especially built for the purpose.<sup>11</sup>

After the Mahāparinirvāṇa of Buddha, followed by his cremation at Kuśinagara, the

group of seven persons (the Lichchhavis of Vaiśālī, the Śākya of Kapilavastu, the Bullis of Allakappa, the Koliyas of Rāmagrāma, the Mallas of Pāvā, the Mallas of Kuśinagara and Moriys of Pipphalivana) claimed the remains over which they wished to erect a *stūpa* while the eighth was the Brahmin named Droṇa. Each one erected a *stūpa* on the holy relics they received.

Thus, the Enlightened One (*Bhagvan Samyak Sambuddha*) was worshiped in an iconic form i.e., *stūpa* which became almost an embodiment of the Great Master and developed into a cult, virtually supplanting the memorial concept latent in original practice. Thus, a *stūpa* was made a distinctive form of religious architecture by the Buddhists.

The Buddhist tradition recognizes three kinds of *stūpas* worthy of veneration<sup>12</sup>:

- **Śārīrika:** *stūpas* erected over the physical remains of Buddha.
- **Pāribhogika:** *stūpas* erected over the objects of personal use of Buddha.
- **Uddeśika:** *stūpas* erected for the sake of the Buddha e.g. the votive *stūpas*.

The earliest corporeal relics to be honoured, according to tradition, were Buddha's hair which two merchants, Tapusa and Bhallika, deposited in the shrine in Orissa, and is an example of *Śārīrika stūpa*. The *stūpa*, erected over the begging bowl of the



Plate 2.2: Remains of *stūpa* of varying site; Amarāvati Site

Buddha by the emperor Kanīśka is an example of *Pāribhogika* while the *Uddeśika stūpas* became quite popular as an object of dedication or votive offering.

Although the concept of *stūpa* existed long before it was included in Buddhism the construction of many of them took place under the reign of King Aśoka to mark the holy spots associated with Buddha and Buddhism while he was also responsible for the enlargement of those existing before his time. This is supported by an example at Nigāli Sāgar tank in the Basti District near Kapilavastu, the site of Buddha's birthplace, where an inscription of Aśoka<sup>13</sup> is found stating that King Priyadarśin in the fourteenth year of his reign, increased the *stūpa* of the Buddha Konākamana to twice its original size and in the twentieth year of his reign, himself visited and worshipped it.

The building and enlargement activities began after the opening of the original eight *śārīrika stūpas* containing the relics of Buddha by king Aśoka and erecting 84,000 *stūpas* over it. According to the *Mahāvaṃsa*, Aśoka once asked Moggaliputta Tissa, "How great was the content of the Dhamma taught by the Master." and when told that there were "84,000 sections of Dhamma", he replied that each one of them would be honoured with a *vihāra*<sup>14</sup>. In the same context, we get the information from the accounts of Faxian (4th century C.E.) that Aśoka wished to build in place of eight *stūpas*

erected over Buddha's relics, 84,000 *stūpas*, "on the theory that the bones of the human body comprise of 84,000 atoms".<sup>15</sup> Although we do not have the archaeological evidence of the total number of *stūpas* mentioned above but we have some of the earliest surviving examples, like Sāñcī, Bharhut and Dharmarājika. The Piprāhwā *stūpa*, in Nepal, also exists, but in ruins. The nucleus of the Dharmarājika *stūpa* in Sārṇath and also the original *stūpa* at Amarāvātī belong to the time of Aśoka, while the Bharhut *stūpa* belongs to the Śuṅga period, which is immediately after the Mauryas.

The *stūpas* were related to other religions also, the evidence of which is available from the reference of the *Devanīrmita stūpa*<sup>16</sup> (believed to have been erected by the gods) at Kaṅkāli Tīlā that belonged to Jainism. It is mentioned that it was originally made of gold and precious gems which were later on encased by stones and bricks in the Śuṅga period. The Jaina *stūpas* were so similar to the Buddhist *stūpas*, that once King Kaṅṣka found himself worshipping a Jaina *stūpa* in the mistaken belief that it was a Buddhist *stūpa*.

The *stūpas* were constructed by donation which is indicated by the inscriptions on different parts of the railing and other parts of the monument. It seems that the common people were mainly responsible for contributing towards the building activities and not just the royal court as was the

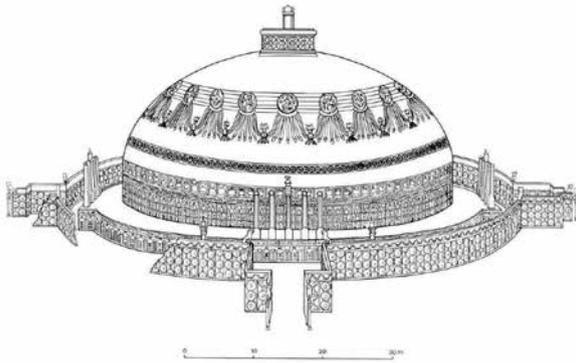


Plate 2.3: Reconstruction of great *stūpa* (Source : Knox, R.)

case in the Mauryan period. The founder of the Śuṅga dynasty — Puṣyamitra Śuṅga (circa 184 B.C.E.) is said to have favoured Brahmanism which must have been done by his successors also. However, the King Dhanabhūti is mentioned to have contributed to the Bhārhut *stūpa* donating towards the making of the eastern gateway.<sup>17</sup> The same gesture is evidenced at Sāñcī where an inscription<sup>18</sup> stating that the royal artist Ānanda, foreman of the artisans of the Sātavāhana king Śrī Śātkaṛṇi donated the southern gateway, employing the ivory carvers of Vidiśā.

One may opine that Buddhism was prevalent in south India from the earliest times. The southern art activities certainly had some relation with the art of the Mauryan period which is shown by the references of Megasthenes and Brāhmi epigraphs found in large numbers in the far south as well as the Aśokan inscriptions that spread as far as Brahmagiri, Yerragudi, Jatinga-Rameśvara and Siddhapura in the south. Since these places share borders with the Amarāvātī area, the following activities must have inspired the local artists. However, the efflorescence of Buddhist art is seen from the time of the Sātavāhanas of the Āndhra dynasty and the outstanding example of it, is the *stūpa* of Amarāvātī.

### **Stūpa Architecture in Āndhradeśa**

Under the Sātavāhanas the great art activity originated at Amarāvātī with a dynamic movement relating to the construction of the great *stūpa* and then expanding to the different sites of Āndhradeśa, like Nāgārjunakoṇḍa, Jaggayepeta, Golī and Gummaḍidurru, where altogether a new style of *stūpa* architecture and sculptures developed. The *stūpas* of Āndhradeśa were different from the *stūpas* of the north in some features like the addition of the *āyaka* platform (*mañca*) and *āyaka* pillar (*khamba*). Also, the dome of the *stūpa* was highly decorated with dome slabs (*stūpa paṭṭas*) and other ornamental features which was unlike Sāñcī and the other

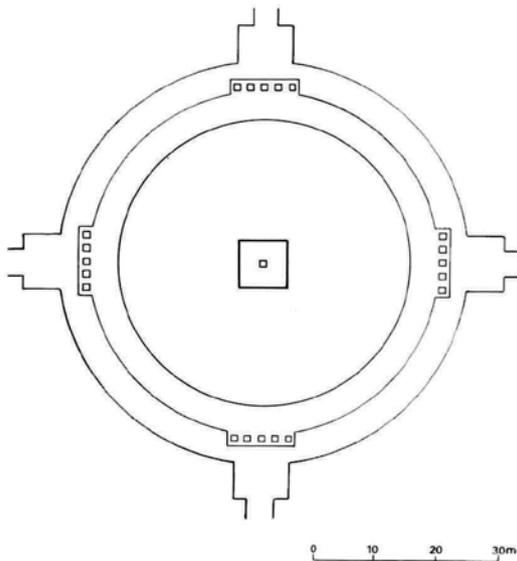


Plate 2.4: A base plan of the Great Stūpa (Source : Knox, R.)

*stūpas* of northern India. Another feature that was believed to differentiate the *stūpas* of Āndhra from that of the north is that they were built with a number of walls radiating from a central area, and interspaces were filled with mud. But now even in the north, such kind of Buddhist and Jaina *stūpa* architecture have been excavated at Dholāvirā, Sanghol, Taxilā and Kankāli Tīlā. Unlike the *stūpas* of north India there were no *torāṇas* in the *stūpas* of the south. Instead, the quadrant of the railing having reached its terminal pillars projected outwards at right angles and then with the same re-entrant device as at Sāñcī, turned inside at right angles and then turning outward at right angles, formed the gateway. Such entrances existed at all the four cardinal points of the railing which looked like modern porticoes. Also, when we compare it with the existing *stūpa* of Sāñcī we realize that at Amarāvātī we do not find the stairway (*Sopāna*). These are some of the features that mark the basic differences between the *stūpa* of north India from that of south India.

### The Stūpa of Amarāvātī

The *mahā-caitya* of Amarāvātī stood as the finest monument of Buddhism in south India. The base of Amarāvātī was a flourishing city in the times of the

Sātavāhanas which was known as Dhānyakaṭaka (in its ancient variants of Dhammakada, Dhammakadaka and Dhannakadaka). The prosperous city of Dhānyakaṭaka (the first capital of the Sātavāhanas) and the *stūpa* of Amarāvātī must have flourished due to its trade activities in the southern part of India and also its connectivity with north India and north western routes through the *Dakṣiṇāpatha*. These relations not only linked south and north India but also resulted in the exchange of cultural and artistic activities which is evident from the inscription of the southern gateway at Sāñcī.<sup>19</sup> With this hypothesis we may presume that the major art activities in north India represented at Bharhut and Sāñcī were to a great extent inter-related with the art activities at Amarāvātī and that the influences from south to north were more apparent. The *stūpa* architecture and sculptures at Amarāvātī that represent the early phase of art may be put in the same line of activities in the north during the Śuṅga period as they were the contemporary of the Āndhras.

The sculptural art of Amarāvātī experienced a long stretch of development, starting from 3rd century B.C.E.—3rd century C.E., representing the highest glory of artistic activities. The sculptures not only had influence of Bharhut, Sāñcī, Mathurā and Gandhāra but also saw the evolution of iconographical representations of Buddha. Initially in the sculptures, the Buddha was represented in an iconic form i.e. through symbols. During the Hīnayāna phase which was followed by the Mahāyāna phase, the image of Buddha was introduced.

### Architecture of Amarāvātī

The Amarāvātī *stūpa* or *mahācaitya* is the grandest of all the *stūpas* of the central India or Āndhradeśa [Pl. 2.1]. The architecture, construction, plan and use of sculpted relief are common to all the *stūpas*, but Amarāvātī *stūpa* was the most impressive and beautifully sculpted monument of that time. The *mahā-caitya*

consisted of a huge solid dome mounted on a cylindrical drum-like platform, the whole surrounded by a great railing 59 m (192 ft) in diameter. It consisted of tall pillars (*stambha*) each about 2.7 m (9 ft) high and 85 cm. (2 ft 9 in) in diameter; separated by trios of crossbars (*sūcī*) each about 82.5 cm (2 ft 9 in) in diameter with wide projecting tenons which fitted into three vertical, lenticular shaped mortises cut into the sides of the pillars. The rail was crowned by a high, decorative coping (*uṣṇīṣa*) 80 cm (32 in) wide and 30 cm (12 in) thick. It has been calculated that the railing when complete would have contained about 136 pillars and 348 crossbars (*sūcī*) supporting about 240 m (800 ft) of coping.<sup>20</sup> At each cardinal point, a gateway with a gap of 7.8 m (26 ft) was let into a railing (See Appendix-I). The gate projected from the rail at a distance of 4.8 m (16 ft) at which point its opening narrowed by 3.9 m (13 ft) by means of a pair of right angles. These openings were guarded by two pairs of lions, one pair seated stiffly and gazing upright at each other from the rail terminals where the gate began, and the other pair posed more naturally at the actual opening.<sup>21</sup> In between the railing and the drum, upon which the dome of the *stūpa* was mounted, a narrow area was seen serving as a circumambulatory walkway or *pradakṣiṇā patha*. It was between 3 and 4 m (about 13 ft) in width and paved with long, rectangular flat slabs of irregular lengths called slates which were laid oriented with their longest dimension between the rail and the drum. Standing in this narrow area, according to the evidence of the *stūpas* on the drum slabs, a pair of pillar was set up, one on either side of each gateway opening. These pillars seem to have



Plate 2.5: A long railing pillar with lenticular mortises cut in it; Amarāvati Site

been capped with small models of *stūpas* carved in round.<sup>22</sup>

As far as the dome is to be considered, it was destroyed long back, but according to Mackenzie, "The upper part rose in a turreted shape to a height of 20 ft (6 m), which was cased with bricks of unusual dimensions while the diameter at the top measured 30 yards [27 m]".<sup>23</sup> As is observed from the sculpted slabs, the drum part was somewhat vertical, which was decorated with three panel slabs, topped with triratnas and depicting the *stūpa*, the *cakra* and the tree or sometimes, a seated Buddha. This was further decorated on top by slabs with the *pūrṇaḥaṭa* motif. Considering the height of the slab decorations, the height of the dome may be estimated to be around 18m (60 ft).<sup>24</sup> The diameter of the dome is believed to be about 43 m (140 ft) on the basis of Mackenzie's study of the monument.<sup>25</sup> Just like the other *stūpas* of north India, surmounting the dome was the *harmikā* and in the middle of it, a short pillar was set into the dome.<sup>26</sup> This must have been mounted with a number of umbrellas, the depiction of which we find in many sculpted panels with *stūpa* decoration.

### The *Stūpa* Complex

The Great *Stūpa* at Amarāvati was the largest component of an extensive complex of religious buildings and *stūpas*

of varying sizes [Pl. 2.2]. This was a rich place with flourishing trade and a religious centre supported by the prosperity of the Buddhists of Dharaṇikoṭa and their rulers. Excavations have revealed the existence of the brick foundation of many small buildings and votive *stūpas* of 11 ft-20 ft in diameter. Slabs on a smaller *stūpa* depict the great *stūpa* in which each one is different in detail from the other.

### Plan of the Great *Stūpa*

The results of early excavations at Amarāvātī led to a variety of views about the plan of the Great *Stūpa*. Fergusson thought that it consisted of two railings surrounding a complex of monastery buildings and a central *stūpa*.<sup>27</sup> In 1942, Percy Brown reconstructed the *stūpa* showing a raised circumambulatory and dome and drum slabs of types not known in real life from the excavated evidence. It is however, generally accepted now that the main monument at Amarāvātī consisted of a single rail surrounding the *stūpa*. The evidence on the drum slab confirms this, as does the plan of all the other *stūpas* of Āndhradeśa and elsewhere.

The reconstruction of the *stūpa* follows the drawing in the 1954 catalogue of the British Museum, in which later researchers, like Robert Knox, added some more details [Pl. 2.3 & 2.4]. The Amarāvātī *stūpa* like others in the Āndhra valley had three distinctions:

- Chaste marble of butter-like yellowish whiteness known as Palnad marble
- Box-like (or like modern porticoes) projections on the four sides of the *Dhātugarbha*, known as *āyaka*, from which evolved the *rathikās* of the Brahmanical temples
- Profusion of sculpted forms and decorative motifs

The following are the survived parts of the *stūpa* with carvings and sculptures:

1. Railing (*vedikā*)—rail pillars (*stambha*), crossbars (*sūcī*), coping (*uṣṇīṣa*)
2. Drum — Drum frieze panels, drum slabs, drum pilasters
3. Dome slabs
4. Column fragments
5. Guardian lion figures

### Sculptures at Amarāvātī

The evolution of the Amarāvātī *stūpa* from about the 3rd century B.C.E., upto the 3rd century C.E., presents a heritage woven by the skillful master architects, sculptors, masons and the Buddhist faith that bound them together. A huge number of surviving sculptures and materials are now housed in Indian and foreign museums and there is no attempt made on the holistic study of the same.

On the basis of pioneering works of scholars such as C. Sivaramamurti, Douglas Barrett, V.S. Agrawala, Percy Brown, Robert Knox etc., for the purpose of easier study, we may roughly divide the sculptures into four periods as follows:

1. **Early or Archaic Period:** (c. 200 B.C.E.) Contemporaneous with the foundation of the *stūpa* (of which period several inscriptions in the Maurya-Śuṅga script have been found).
2. **Intermediate Phase:** (c. 100 C.E.) Contemporaneous to the period of the Sātavāhana Emperor Vāsiṣṭhīputra Puḷamāvi (116-19 C.E.); whose inscription is found at Amarāvātī.
3. **Mature Phase:** (c.150-200 C.E.) Contemporaneous to the period of Śrī Yājña Śātkarṇi (160-189 C. E.); whose inscription is found at Amarāvātī<sup>28</sup>.
4. **Last Phase:** (3rd century C.E.) Contemporaneous to the period of the Ikṣvāku kings.

## Material and Techniques

One of the main contributions of Buddhism in the history of Indian art is the use of stone in architecture. Indian architecture of the post Indus and pre-Mauryan period was largely wooden and continued to remain so, as is evident from the wooden facades and timber work of rock cut caves. Even the stone *torāṇas* and *vedikās* at Sāñcī reflect wooden prototype. Thus the use of stone in place of wood in religious architecture was a contribution of the Buddhists.

During the 500 years of sculptural and architectural activity at Amarāvātī, many hands and ideas worked and created magic in stones. With rudimentary chisels and the minimum of technology what worked was perhaps the undoubting faith of the donors and divine will imbibed in the artists. They experimented, evolved and perfected both the use of suitable material and the refinement of expression.

The stone used in decoration is a limestone known as Palnad marble, soft and easy to cut, particularly when the bedding planes of the stone are arranged vertically by the sculptor as was usually done by the expert artists of Amarāvātī. They engraved figures and decorations in different geometrical sections. Figures are more deeply cut and ornamented with fine aesthetic taste. The limestone for the *stūpa* sculptures was brought along the river Kṛṣṇa from Jaggayapeṭa.



Plate 2.6: Reconstructed great railing (*Vedikā*); Amarāvātī Site

## The Great Railing at Amarāvātī

As the development of *stūpa* architecture took place, there was an immediate thinking of enclosing it on all sides. This enclosure was called *vedikā*, a term that was taken from the architecture of Vedic *Yajña*. It was derived from sacrificial altars called *vedī* and seems to have originally signified the structure round the fire altar.<sup>29</sup> This enclosing became the regular feature of almost all the *stūpas* in India, the example of which we get from Bharhut, Sāñcī, Amarāvātī etc. These railings are fashioned out of stone but each is a copy of a wooden original which is evident from the joints of the railing (*vedikā*), tenons of the uprights (*stambha*) and the scarf joints of the copings (*uṣṇīṣa*). There is also the peculiar form of the triple crossbars (*sūcī*), the lenticular section of which was obviously derived from the bamboo rails of the village stockade.<sup>30</sup>

The *vedikā* or the railing [Pl. 2.5] generally consisted of a series of upright pillars (*stambha*, *thamba*, *thaba*); each pillar was fixed to the ground by inserting its lower part in the sockets of a stone basement (*ālambanapiṇḍikā*), buried under the earth to serve as foundation. Between each pair of upright posts were fixed three crossbars (*sūcī*) the ends of which were inserted in the sockets cut into the narrower sides of the pillar. These sockets were lenticular in shape and the

crossbars were of flat pillows on the basis of which they were later known as *takiā*. The top of the pillars was bonded together by a series of coping stones (*uṣṇīṣa*) which had on the bottom side socket holes (*culli*) to receive the tenons (*cūḍa*) of the upright poles.<sup>31</sup> The copings were round on the top and provided enough space on the two vertical sides for carving of decorative motifs and narrative scenes that became an integral part of the *stūpa*.

Since the monument was found in ruins the reconstruction of it was a difficult task and based only on the sculptural representations on the dome slabs, we can get some idea of the whole monument. In 1868, Fergusson speculated that the monument was surrounded by two sculptured stone rails enclosing a complex of wooden buildings and a *stūpa* thirty feet in diameter. But later on, Sewell from his own observation and careful study of Mackenzie's paper first pointed out that the two rails surrounded a vast, solid dome some one hundred and forty-eight feet in diameter. But Elliot and Franks reached to the conclusion that the inner rail was the decoration of the drum of the dome that was also accepted by Burgess who initially accepted Fergusson's idea. In 1932, Jouveau-Dubreuil<sup>32</sup> discussed the architecture of Amarāvati which was accepted by Sivaramamurti, Ramachandran and Gravely<sup>33</sup> until Percy Brown<sup>34</sup> in 1942, produced the reconstruction of the *stūpa* whose idea differed entirely from that of Jouveau-Dubreuil.

The outer railing of Amarāvati was one of the most elaborate and richly decorated creations by the artists of Āndhradeśa. It measured 198 ft in diameter and had four gates at each cardinal point. The upright pillars (*stambha*) are 9 ft high and 2 ft 10 inches wide, between which three circular crossbars (*sūcī*) about 2 ft 9 inches in diameter were inserted by the projecting tenons. The ends being lenticular in section were let into corresponding mortises cut into the edges of the upright slabs or pillars [Pl. 2.6]. The whole structure was supported by a coping (*uṣṇīṣa*) that was about 2 ft 9 inches high while a brick support

about a foot high ran along the lines of their bases. It is with the help of a woodcut<sup>35</sup> that we can judge the external appearance which shows lower part or the plinth outside, ornamented by a frieze of archaic sculpture of specific animals and boys, generally in ludicrous and comic attitudes. But Burgess believed that they once formed the coping stones perhaps to an earlier rail and had been split and trimmed to adapt them for a different purpose, probably to form this frieze. Each cardinal point of the railing had 26 ft wide openings, for the gateway while the quadrant of the railing having reached its terminal pillar projected outwards at right angles to a length of 16 ft and then with the same re-entrant device as at Sāñcī, turned inside at right angles to a length of 6½ ft, and then again turning outward at right angles to a length of 8 ft. Thus the entire length of the coping, crowning the four quadrants and also the re-entrants of the gateway, measured about 800 ft and the grand rail itself consisted of 136 pillars and 348 crossbars. This coping was in sections of varying lengths, the largest being about 11 ft, having carvings on both faces, throughout. A continuous garland emitting from the mouth of dwarfs or composite animals carried on the shoulders of young men who were sometimes accompanied by women, formed the decoration of the outer face of the coping while the spaces between these garlands were filled with various motifs (the tree, the *cakra*, the *stūpa* which symbolized the *Sambodhi*, the *Dharmacakrapravartan* and the *Mahāparinīrvāna* respectively). The railing (*vedikā*) comprises of the following parts:

### Outer Rail

The outer rail [Pl. 2.7] consists of the following parts:

- a) The Rail Pillars (*stambha*): These pillars represented octagonal shafts, almost in plano, ornamental in full discs in the middle, and half ones at top and bottom. The intermediate spaces, always divided vertically into three flutes, later filled with conventional sculptures of considerable variety: the lower



Plate 2.7: A section of the outer face of the railing as constructed in the Front Hall of the British Museum (Source: Knox, R.)

with dancing dwarfs or *ganas* between the borders of large leaves while the upper band had depictions of a small *stūpa* in the centre that was worshipped by two elephants approaching it from either side.

- b) The Crossbars (*sūcī*): The crossbars had full discs carved with the lotus motif but all possessing different rendering of it.
- c) The Coping (*uṣṇīṣa*): The coping was ornamented outside with a long wavy flower roll carried by men and with various symbolical figures carved on it.

#### Inner Rail

The inner rail [Pl. 2.8] consists of the following parts:

- a) The Rail Pillars (*stambha*): Each pillar was composed of a circular disc in the centre,

with two other, rather, more than half circles, above and below. There are bands of fluted areas in between the full and half lotus medallions. The central disc was carved with sculpted relief having scenes associated with the life of Buddha. The two half discs on both sides of the pillars were carved with creepers and below the lower and above the upper, were bands of animals and flowers.

- b) The Crossbars (*sūcī*): The crossbars had full discs carved with the lotus motif except for the central disc and the fluted space above and below were filled by the most varied sculptures, depicting scenes from the life of the Buddha, *jātakas*, *avadānas* of his previous births, from the history of the sect and the country.
- c) The Coping (*uṣṇīṣa*): The coping was rounded on the top and carved with *jātakas*, *avadānas* and life scenes. Although both sides of the rail were carved carefully, the sculptures of the outer side were more conventional and uniform in design.

#### The Drum and the Dome of Amarāvati

The drum is an enormous, low, cylindrical platform which supports the dome of the *stūpa*. The drum of Amarāvati was 48.75 m (162.5 ft) in diameter and 1.8 m (6 ft) high. The outer retaining wall of the drum was about 1.2 m (4 ft) high. The drum was elaborately decorated with sculptured frieze, slabs and pilasters which were further added by a feature i.e. the projecting platform (*āyaka mañca*) on each cardinal point. This platform measured about 9.6 m (32 ft) long and 1.8 m (6 ft) wide. These platforms were a feature that was quite unique and common in the *stūpa* architecture of Āndhradeśa which carried five pillars or *āyaka khamba*. It is known from depictions of the *stūpa* on the drum slabs, that these pillars were either decorated with a standing image of the Buddha or a combination of tree, *cakra*, and *stūpa*.<sup>36</sup> It is believed that the five pillars symbolized the five important episodes of Buddha's life i.e. the Birth of Bodhisattva, the Great Departure or



Plate 2.8: A section of the inner face of the railing as constructed in the Front Hall of the British Museum (Source: Knox, R.)

*Mahābhiniṣkramaṇa*, Enlightenment or *Sam̐bodhi*, First Sermon or *Dharmacakrapravartana* and Death or *Mahāparinirvāṇa*. Five crystal relic-caskets containing bones and gold flowers were discovered from slots made in the bottom slabs of the *āyaka-khamba* which surmounted the southern platform.<sup>37</sup>

Although there are platforms in the *stūpa* of Amarāvātī but no evidence of a stairway or *sopāna* on the drum is found as seen in the *stūpa* of Sāñcī. The decoration on the drum had a series of alternating slabs and pilasters. The slabs are generally decorated with *stūpas* which helps us to understand the architecture of the *mahā-caitya* in the absence of its original structure. The two drum slabs were separated by pilasters of different measurements, decorated with symbols (like-tree, *cakra*, *stūpa*, etc.). The slabs and pilasters were crowned with a continuous frieze with sculpted narrative decorations.

## Conclusion

The *mahā-caitya* of Amarāvātī was an example of one of the finest monuments of the Buddhist world displaying the highest level of creativity and skills of the artists. As far as the architecture is concerned, it had marked differences which distinguished the *stūpa* of Amarāvātī from those of north India. But at the same time, the sculptures that adorned the *stūpa* exhibited an unparalleled confidence and maturity that was rarely surpassed thereafter. While the *stūpas* of the first century B.C.E., were restricted to the decorations and embellishments on the railing (*vedikā*) and *torāṇas*, the artists from Amarāvātī left no space untouched with their sculptural decorations. The drum, which rose roughly 6 feet high, was faced with a set of large slabs (drum slabs or *stūpa paṭṭa*) separated from each other by a drum pilaster and surmounted by a drum frieze. These slabs were decorated with various themes (*jātakas*, *avadānas* and scenes from life of Buddha) making the *mahā-caitya* one of the grandest monuments in the history of Buddhism.

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*“Suganam̐ raje rājño Gāgi -putasa. VISA-DEVASA-pautena gotiputasa AGA -RAJASA putena vāchhi-putena DHANA – BHŪTINA kārītam toranam Śīla – kammata cha upa&na*
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# Tabo Monastery, Conservation, Challenges and the Climate Change

Virendra Sahai Verma

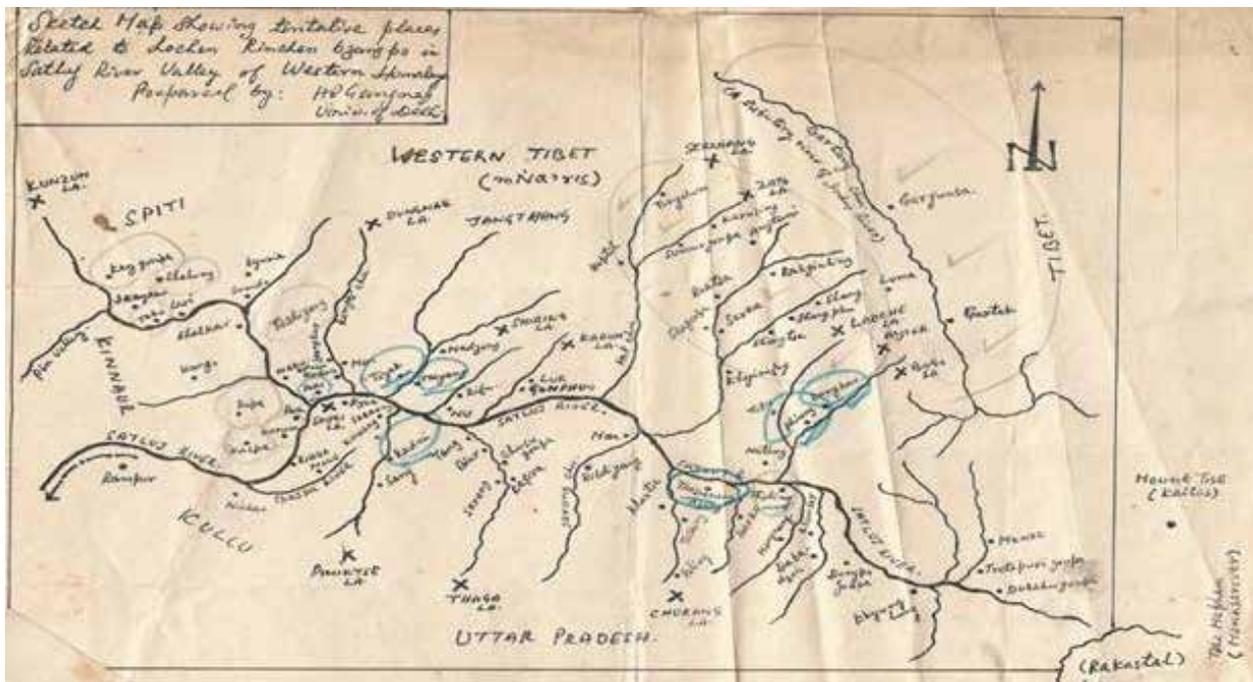
## INTRODUCTION

Tabo monastery, at 3280 m, is situated in a village of 600 people of the same name in the secluded Spiti valley in the district of Lahaul and Spiti of the state of Himachal Pradesh in India. Spiti had been a region of difficult access embedded between Ladakh, Kullu, Kinnaur (earlier Bashahr) in India and the western Tibetan regions of Chumurthy and Guge. The region is a semi-desert of sparse population and with its own

cultural heritage and own language, along the Spiti river. The valley is encompassed between Kunjum La (4590 m) in the west and a junction of the



peaceful River Spiti with the thunderous mighty River Sutlej in the east. The journey to Tabo can begin from Kullu/Manali over Rohtang Pass (3978 m) and Kunjum Pass which is 275 km.

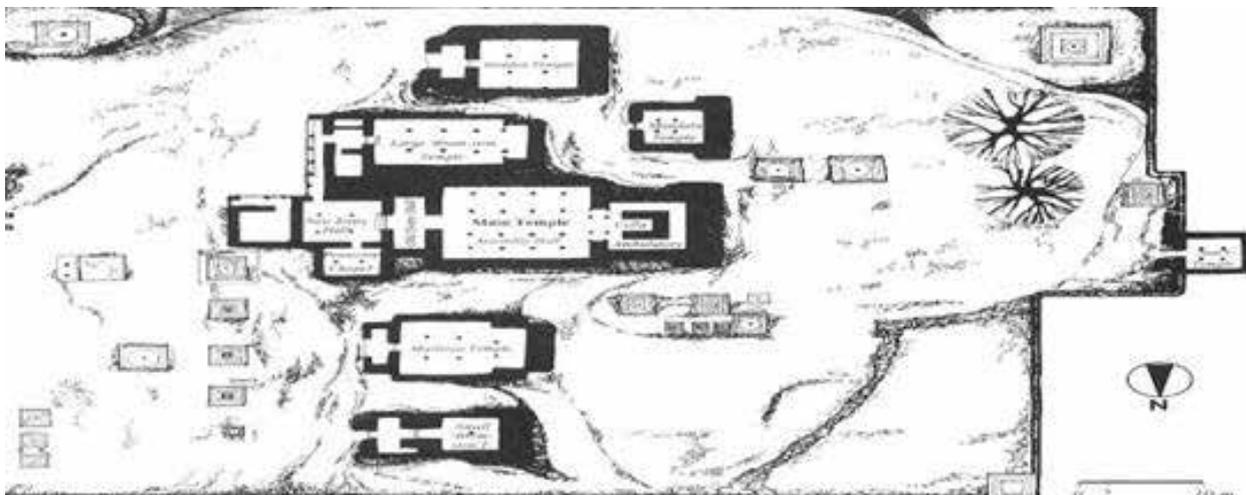


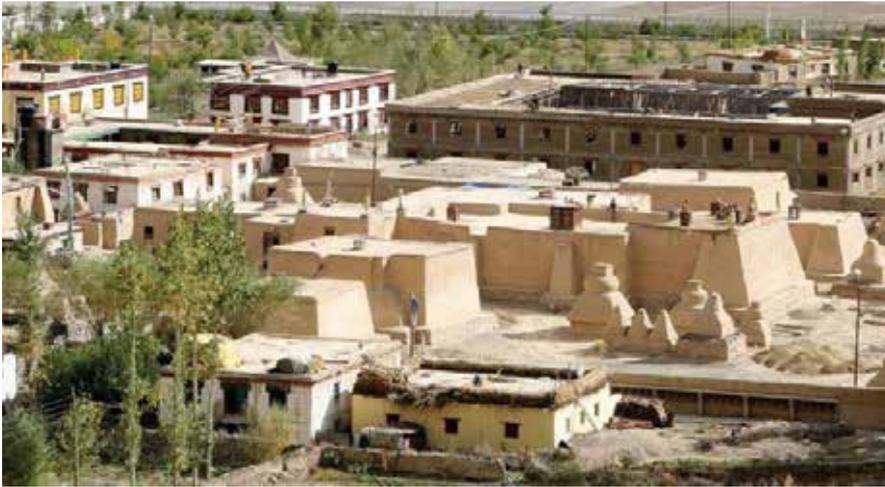
This route is shorter, devoid of vegetation and villages and can be covered in a day. The other route of 366 km is from Shimla, via Rampur, along precipitous Satluj river. The drive along the legendary Hindustan-Tibet Road reminds you of the marvel of engineering as it spans along the sharp cliffs of tunnels and half tunnels, the roar of the Sutlej racing several hundred feet below and at other time passing through apple orchards and villages till one reaches the border village of Puh. After Sumdo, the landscape changes to the dry desert of Lahaul and Spiti. Most of the people adhere to twin faiths — each person is a Buddhist as well as Hindu. Consequently, each person has two names from respective traditions.

The walled temple complex of Tabo blends itself into the surrounding village of mud and wooden beam buildings. The modest exterior of the ancient monastery hides the splendour of murals, stuccos and scriptures that are preserved inside for more than a thousand years. "Tabo monastery is of singular importance because of its art as well as its pivotal role in the transmission of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and culture to Tibet in the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century when it was degenerating in the country of its origin — India. Tabo is the oldest continuously functioning Buddhist monument in India and the Himalayas with its original decoration and iconographic programme intact."<sup>1</sup> The monastery has 50 residential monks.

A German Tibetologist August Francke,<sup>2</sup> who did an archaeological expedition through Ladakh and Spiti in 1909, and was the first to point out the great importance of the temple of Tabo.

It would be in order to understand the role of ancient monasteries like Tabo in the development of Tibetan culture by reliving in the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century west Tibet. Though, the Guge kingdom lasted only for two centuries, it sowed the seeds of what was to become norms of Tibetan Buddhism, such as a close interaction between the secular, political and religious populations. "While Muslim armies were advancing to the north and south and instability prevailed in Kashmir to the west, in the Guge area a succession of forward thinking leaders, both kings and priests, were focused on promoting a Buddhist renaissance to purify the degenerated practices in the region. This renaissance was initiated around 985 AD by King Yeshe O (959-1036 AD), third king of the dynasty known by his monastic name, who took monastic vows of renouncing war. Over a relatively short period, a sizeable monastic population was created and educated. Scores of temples were constructed and decorated with elaborate wall paintings. Teachers and artists were brought in copper statutes were produced and imported in large quantities from Kashmir; texts were translated, published and used to educate the clergy."<sup>3</sup> "These various sources





of cultural and artistic inspiration flowed like rivers in reverse up to the mountain passes leading to Lhasa and Yarlung valley, the first areas of Tibet to embrace the Buddhist faith...Hundreds of temples and shrines were constructed, their walls adorned with ornate frescoes, and thousand of statues were created to fill these edifices."<sup>3A</sup> King Yeshe O is credited to be the founder of the monastic complex at Tholing in Ngari ( Ali ) province in west Tibet. Tholing remained the spiritual capital of the kingdom for many centuries. There were close historical ties between Tabo and Tholing when the former came under the influence of the Guge kingdom. Tholing is in ruins now.



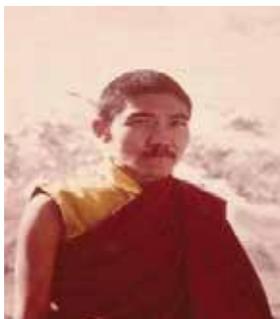
### The Patrons

Lama Ye-she-'od and Lama Byang –Chub-'od were the patrons of Tabo monastery as well as key figures in the establishment of Tibetan culture in this western Himalayan region and transmission of Indian Mahayana Buddhism to Tibet. The royal patrons were the kings of Purang-Guge. By the last quarter of the 10<sup>th</sup> century their territory stretched from Ladakh to Purang and included all of western Tibet, lower Spiti and upper Kinnaur.

Successive members of this dynasty built many monasteries along the trade routes in their kingdom and thus "skillfully integrated political, religious and economic institutions" and "throughout the 11<sup>th</sup> century these monasteries were unparalleled for their artistic, literary and philosophical achievements."<sup>4</sup> "A Buddhist renaissance would have been relatively expensive. It involved creating and supporting a large monastic community, the building of large temples and production of costly statues and books. Legend and histories such as the *The Blue Legend*, a historical survey completed in 1476, have suggested that the source of the Guge kings wealth was gold."<sup>5</sup> The local legend mentions an ancient gold mine at Khartse which also happens to be the village where Rinchen was born, in a family of priests.

### Rin-chen-Bzang-po

"Lotsava R., Tibetan lama from western Tibet, is without doubt one of the most important figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism and a man distinctly representative of the period in which he lived. A brilliant child, at the age of eighteen



he wanted to go to India to study Buddhism. He went to Kashmir where he studied under great masters for seven years. He then travelled to eastern India for further study. After 13 years, Rinchen returned home to begin his career as the Chief Priest of the region. He is understood to have undertaken a second journey to Kashmir and returned with 32 artists who decorated the numerous temples he had built. "In him converged and united the characteristics and spiritual needs of the people and his age."<sup>6</sup> He earned the title of the Great Translator (lo-tsa-ba-chen-po) Rin-chen-bzang-po because of translations he made of *Prajnaparamita* and numerous ancient treatises from Sanskrit into Tibetan. It was through the translations, explanations and elaborations that a great part of sacred literature reached Tibet. The teachings of Buddha were degenerated into tantric rituals and became ends in themselves. These were being merged with the Bon faith. The great masters and their disciples climbed inaccessible paths across the Great Himalayan Range into India assimilated and translated and returned back to Tibet following the same path, carrying with them the wealth of wisdom, translated treatises and texts, which were to transform and bring resurgence of Buddhism in Tibet. As it is known there was no dearth of translated treatises. These were available from Chinese, from the language of Gilgit, from Uigur, but Lotsava created his own style and language which had general appeal. In fact he had to create and give a culture to Tibet which never existed before. The religion had been introduced in Tibet three centuries earlier but had its own glories; its defeats. "The Lotsavas, then, were not simply literati; when they descended into India in search of a treatise to translate and make known to their country, they did not content themselves with understanding the literal sense; by means of the book. They searched for the mystical experience it contained, and relived in all its profundity its intimate and esoteric significance, which they possessed no longer as dead letters, but as living and vivifying spirit. Only in this way could they transplant it in Tibet and continue there that

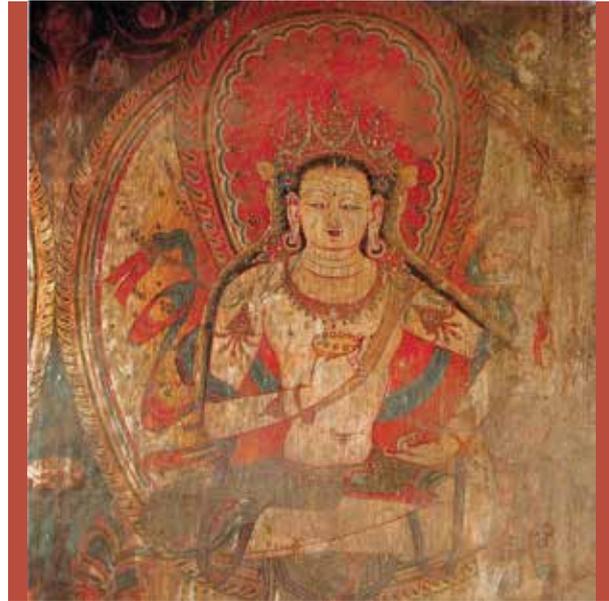
uninterrupted chain of masters and disciples, which if broken would remain incomprehensible and inefficacious words as happened to many texts.”<sup>7</sup>

The Lotsava is credited with not only being a great translator but is associated with great building activity which took place in and around 1000 AD. “In Ladakh, in Lahul, in Spiti, in Guge, in Purang, along the valley of the Sutlej there is not a small ancient temple that tradition still does connect with the great Lotsava.”<sup>8</sup> These monasteries (Tibetan *dgon pa*) which were constructed on caravan routes or more densely populated centres generated more building activity around them. Such was the case with the monastery at Tholing founded by Rinchen or Lamayuru not directly attributed to Rinchen. The primary source of information about life of Rinchen is his own biography probably written in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes it contradicts other information. For example the “biography tells us that Rinchen founded Tabo but inscriptions in the main temple do not confirm this.”<sup>9</sup> “Rinchen established many chapels (the auspicious number is 108) which spread from Mustang, in Nepal, to lower Kinnaur and to Lahaul and Spiti and Ladakh.”<sup>10</sup> “Many are of very small size except the main centres of Tholing, Nyarma, Kho-char (Khojanath) and the main temple at Tabo.”<sup>11</sup>

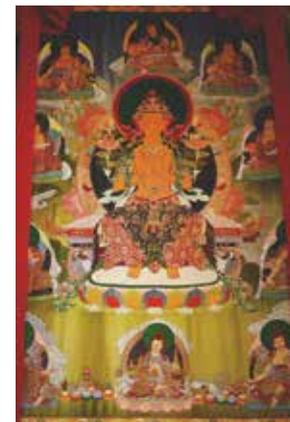
Debrah believes that it is clear that Yeshe-'od founded Tabo early in his missionary activity and before he had collaboration with Rinchen. The latter was at that time studying Buddhism in Kashmir. “However, the great translator may have been responsible for the stunning iconographic program which we see today in the assembly hall.”<sup>12</sup> The paintings of Tabo point out that Buddhism at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century was heavily influenced by Central Asian and local cult traditions.

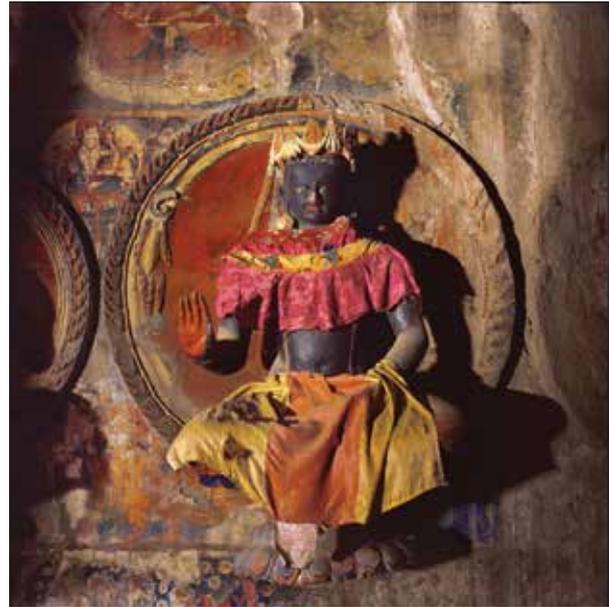
### Paintings and Sculptures

Debrah states that **Tabo was built in two phases both in paintings and sculpture. The 996 phase has regional and Central Asian inspired**



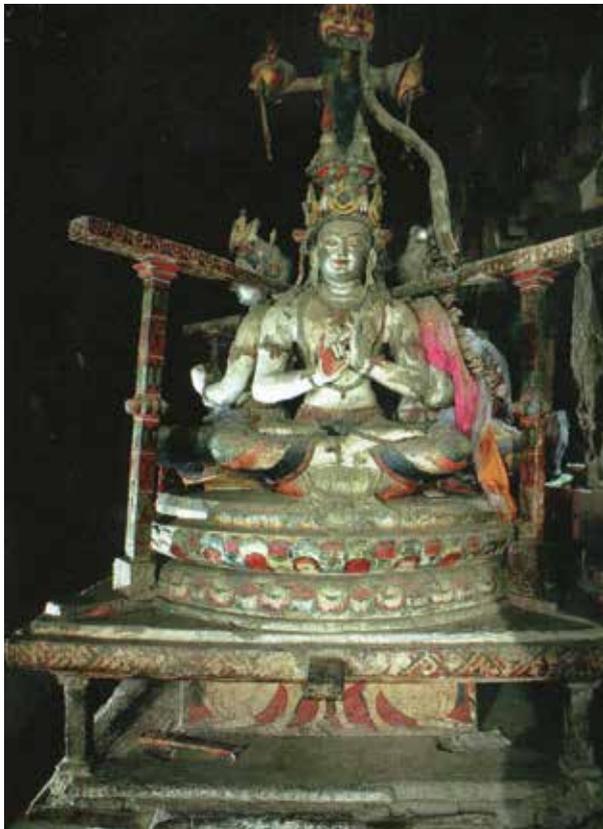
**paintings which are quite different from phase two which are Kashmiri inspired (11<sup>th</sup> century).** The majority of names (persons, clans and places) occurring in phase 1 in the Tabo entrance hall are non-Tibetan. It is likely that the language used is Zhang-Zhung as Spiti belonged to the ancient kingdom of the same name till it was conquered by Tibetans in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, though the influence of Zhang-Zhu culture remained. The presence of iconographic non-Buddhist themes in Phase 1 are unexpected. “Most important is the protectress of the temple, Wi-nyu-myin, a local deity, unknown in the Buddhist pantheon. The style and iconography of the other deities dating to this time reflect influences from Central Asia, particularly Dunhuang.”<sup>13</sup>





In phase 2, 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards a new aesthetic of single iconographic programme is introduced in the assembly hall and ambulatory. "Both the sophistication of the underlying philosophical

conception and the clarity of its expression in visual terms, testify to the presence of a unique and gifted personality or personalities. Not only was there a will to create a symbolically coherent



ritual space but also the means to gather artists and materials of the highest quality.”<sup>13</sup> A comparison of different iconographic themes in 996 and 11<sup>th</sup> century reflect social and political changes. The Indian (Kashmir) style of the religious images show the ideological change and support to Indian Mahayana culture. The cultural change, “reflect expansion of the provincial boundaries of this West Tibetan dynasty into the cosmopolitan world of Indian monastic Buddhism.”<sup>14</sup>

The modest exterior of this ancient monastery hides the splendour of murals, stuccos and scriptures that are preserved inside for more than a thousand years. The Tabo complex contains eight temples. The Group is enclosed by a wall of mud and stone. Each temple is a single storied, externally non-descript building.



## Du-khang

The Du-Khang, the main temple, can be certainly attributed to Yeshe od as per the inscription found at the chapel inside the Du-Khang. On rocks above the plain of Tabo are excavated caves which were winter residences of the monks. These hermitages are deserted and in ruins. As you enter the Du-Khang, there is a small temple to which monks have given a generic name 'entrance temple'.

The whole edifice is not so old and even the paintings are of a relatively later date. As you enter the Du-Khang, all round the walls are thirty-two life-sized stucco divinities. They are both feminine and masculine. Some of them are of a peaceful nature and others are of horrific colours in red, deep blue, yellow or green and simply covered with white paper. The stuccos are common features in the monasteries built by Rinchen Bzang-Po. They are of the same vintage as Du-Khang: Mahayana embassies on mediation rather on prayers. The concentration needs a vehicle or adhar or support. The abstract could be transformed into a visual image. The statues symbolize the uncontaminated essence and process of meditative ascent. The ascent is absorbing. The conclusions of tantric schools of medieval India have been elaborated and reflected at Tabo. It is clear that the paintings are inspired by Indian mythology and are far from the Chinese influence. There is a direct Kashmiri and Eastern India influence. The number of deities is 36 which is significant; 'dhatu' or elementaries are thirty-six in number.



The central deity is a magnificent image of Vairochana positioned at the head of the columns. The divinity is divided into four figures to indicate four directions of space. There are usual mudras of Vairochana when alone. The murals on the walls of the larger part of Du-Khang can be divided into three chapters. The bottom register around the entire Du-Khang contain narratives. On the middle register is seated thirty-two stuccos interspersed with finely painted goddesses.

The upper register contains a series of devotional paintings done in an elegant style. The paintings to the right reproduce the life of Buddha depicting twelve chief moments which have become traditional in iconography. We must not forget that we are dealing with the iconography of Mahayana Buddhism. It is an art which is symbolical. We have to put ourselves close to that period and Mahayana Buddhism that inspired the art. Then only can we relive that period.

In the Tabo library only scanty remains are available. It is possible these have been plundered



by probably Zoravar, a celebrated Dogra general, who passed through Kyi, Kaza and Tabo and to Western Tibet.<sup>15</sup>

### Social Responsibility

Besides being the Centre for study of Buddhist philosophy and culture under the name of 'The Institute of Studies in Buddhist Philosophy and Tribal Cultural Society', Tabo also strives to put the cherished values of universal compassion and altruism in practice by engaging in social welfare activities for the benefit of the inhabitants of the surrounding tribal region. One such endeavour is the residential Serkong School, in the name of the previous abbot, Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche which provides all-round good quality, free education, to local children specially from economic poor backgrounds. The school was set up in 1999, by the then Abbot of Tabo Monastery late Ven Geshe Dr Sonam Wangdai.

Besides modern education it keeps the values of local culture alive and from the fast dwindling state elsewhere. It has 300 students from nursery to class X. "The school has indeed lived up to its envisaged goal of acting as a beacon for imparting quality and relevant practical education to the local children. Several of its graduates have gone on to become doctors, teachers, engineers and other professionals with several coming back to help their community and region."<sup>16</sup> A solar panel recently donated enables continuity in classes even in winters when the area gets frozen.



A new hostel has been added recently with 50 rooms with attached baths. The monastery also runs a free hostel for the secondary level students of Spiti at Dharmshala, Himachal Pradesh. The monastery runs a library and reading room with 3000 books. The monastery also publishes research books in Tibetan on



paintings and ancient scripts. A training camp to promote tantric ritual dance and local traditional dance is organised by the monastery for the last twenty years. A mini museum has been set up in the monastery complex with rare ornaments, antiques available in the valley.

Tabo had the privilege of conducting Kalachakra<sup>17</sup> initiation by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1983. Again in 1996, when the monastery celebrated millennium years, the second Kalachakra initiation was conducted by His Holiness along with an international seminar on Buddhist culture. Keeping the age-old traditions of imparting sound education by its learned Geshelas and monks, the Government of India has decided to establish the Indian Institute of Boudh Darshan at Tabo, for which land is being acquired.

### Climate Change & Conservation Challenges

The Monastery, believed to be founded in 996 AD and renovated in 1042, is entirely made of earthen architecture topped with wooden ceilings. "It is interesting to notice that even to this day, the Tabo Monastery has preserved extraordinary frescoes (paintings) on its mud walls (over earth plaster work having canvas support) and wooden ceiling which make the monastery a representative place of most unique importance."<sup>18</sup> However, the actual status of the Tabo complex is not free from unwarranted conservation problems. "The very nature of its two basic architectural components — mud and wood — on the one hand, and their vulnerability before the vagaries of climate changes on the other hand, are critical factors which are potent threats to the survival of the monastery."<sup>19</sup> The increasing number of Indian and foreign tourists with ease of inner line permits is also a risk factor in conservation. Recently a wooden flooring has been done by ASI in all temples. It would be in order to reproduce the following paragraph from the Archaeological Survey of India:-

"In one recent study, by developing an annual (August-July) precipitation series back to 1330 CE for the first time, and using a tree ring data network of Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodara* (Roxb.) G. Don) obtained from the Lahaul–Spiti region (in the western Himalaya, India), it is revealed that the rainfall reconstruction showed a high magnitude multidecadal droughts during the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> centuries, and thenceforth a gradual increase in precipitation. The increasingly wet conditions during the 20<sup>th</sup> century are found consistent with other long-term precipitations reconstructions, which reflect a large-scale intensification of the hydrological cycle, coincident with what is anticipated due to global warming. The study, which is more or less also supported by the empirical data, needs to be taken in all seriousness and prepare ourselves for future course of action."<sup>20</sup>

"Regarding the deterioration in structure, wall paintings, and stuccos, it is not possible to say exactly, but with time it is deteriorating by the change of climate and the increasing number of the tourists. We have to work on how to make a water proofing on the roofs and wall, consecrating works."<sup>21</sup>

### Conclusion

Tabo Monastery had played a pivotal role in the advent of Buddhism in the western Himalayas and western Tibet in the 10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century when Indian and Tibetan monks had translated and interpreted together ancient literature from Sanskrit to Tibetan and vividly documented it in the wall paintings, sculptures and stuccos. These tangible remains of that era have contributed towards enhancing the cultural values of the distinct monastic complex which has set itself well in exceptional ecological settings so far, for a thousand years. Tabo Monastery contains the largest number and best preserved group of Buddhist monuments in Himachal Pradesh. The increasing wet conditions, of snow and rain, in Spiti, which was a dry desert even a few years

back, need coordinated and immediate actions by the state agencies, academic institutions and international organizations to save the precious treasure from the menace of climate change.

### Notes

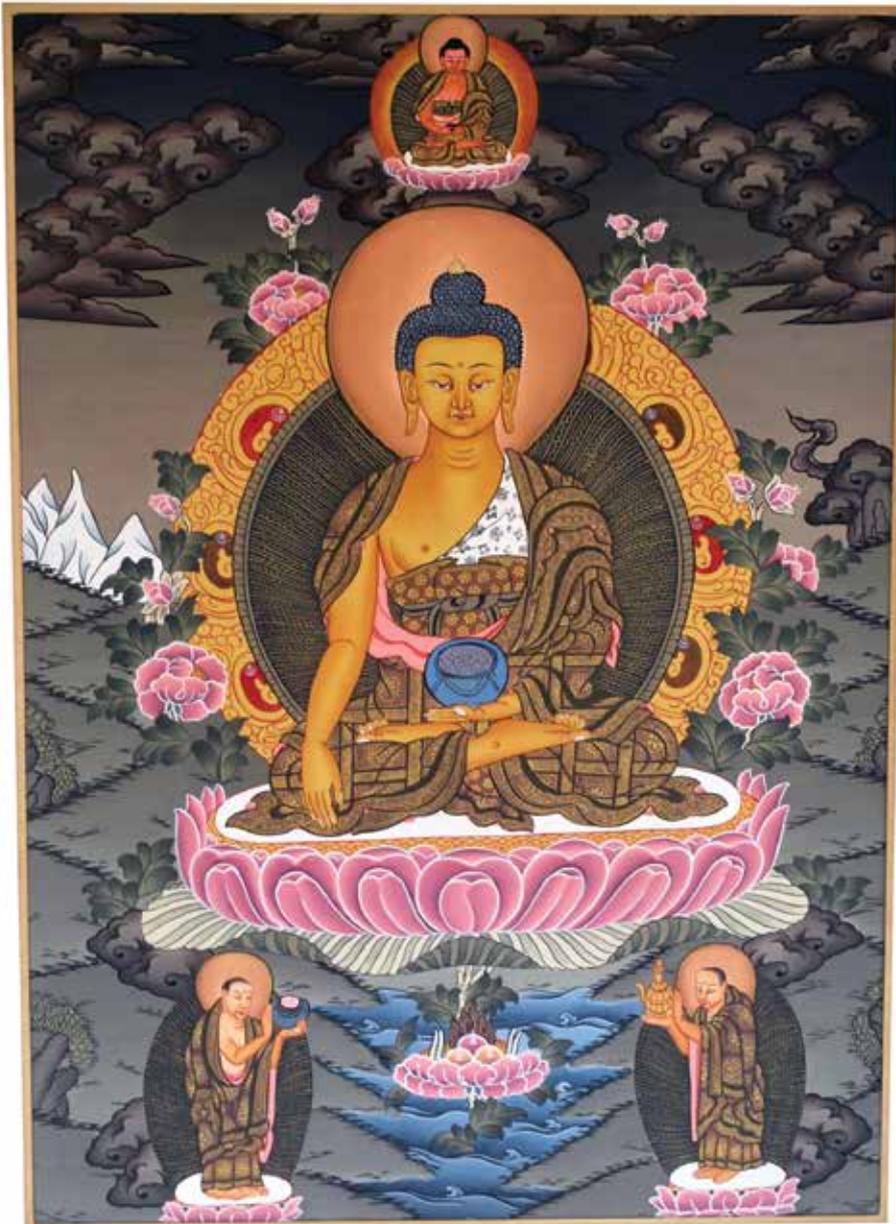
1. Deborah E. Klimburg Salter, University of Vienna, Austria *1000 Years of Tabo Monastery*, Project on 'Early Monastic Art in the Western Himalayas—10<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> Century, p 1
2. August Hermann Francke, a German Tibetologist, (1870-1930) He was a Moravian Church missionary in Himalayas in Ladakh. He travelled in 1909 to Satluj valley, Spiti and Ladakh for four months mostly on foot and sometimes on yak when rarefied air compelled him to do so as roads were rare and not roadworthy in these remote hill tracks. Later, he became Professor at Berlin. His works include '1901 A Sketch of Ladakhi Grammar, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*' and 'Antiquities of Indian Tibet-Vol 1 Personal Narrative of a Journey in 1910 from Simla to Srinagar.'
3. Pritzker Thomas, *The Wall Paintings of Nyag Lhakhang Kharpo*, Orientations, Hong Kong, (published by Orientations Magazine Ltd.) March 2008, p 102. Author came upon the cave temple while in his quest to find out more about early Guge kingdom\_in west Tibet.
- 3A. Daboom Tulku, Glenn 11, Mulin, 'Compassion and Reincarnation in Tibetan Art,' Tibet House, New Delhi, p2
4. Deborah, p 6.
5. Pritzker, p 102
6. Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica II*, Rin C'n Bzan Po, Roma Reale Accademia D'italia, 1933-x1, p 6 (translated under directions of Thomas J Pritzker, *Commentaries on Ta-Pho Monastery and the Works of Rinchen Zangpo*, 1988. (unpublished)
7. Do, p 9.
8. Do, p 10.
9. Deborah, p 7.
10. Do, p 7.
11. Do, p 8
12. Do, p 8
13. Do, p 10
14. Do, p 11
15. Celebrated Zorawar Singh (1786-1841) was the general of Dogra King Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu. The general invaded western Tibet in May 1841 and one of his column had passed through Kyi, Kaza, and Tabo.
16. Ven. Zangpo La, a senior monk at Tabo in conversation with author in March 2016.
17. Kalachakra Initiation is sacred teaching by a Vajra Master (senior monk normally by His Holiness the Dalai Lama) to his disciple (s) for reaching a pure inner world while still living in imperfect earthly world. During the 12 days' long process positive energy is released through a Mandala made by the monks and which purifies our mind, body and speech.
18. Concept Paper for a one day symposium 'Climate Change vis-à-vis Tabo Buddhist Monastery-Importance, Threats, Status and Conservation Challenges beyond 2014.' Govt of India, Archaeological Survey of India Shimla, F No 9-13/ACADEMIC/2014 dated 5 Feb 2015. P1
19. Do, p 2
20. Do, p 2
21. Ven Zangpo La, a senior monk at Tabo in e mail reply dated 19 April 2016.

(Virendra Sahai Verma, a retired army officer and an honorary fellow Institute of Chinese Studies, Delhi, has served in Spiti and Kinnaur and is closely associated with Tabo monastery since many years.)

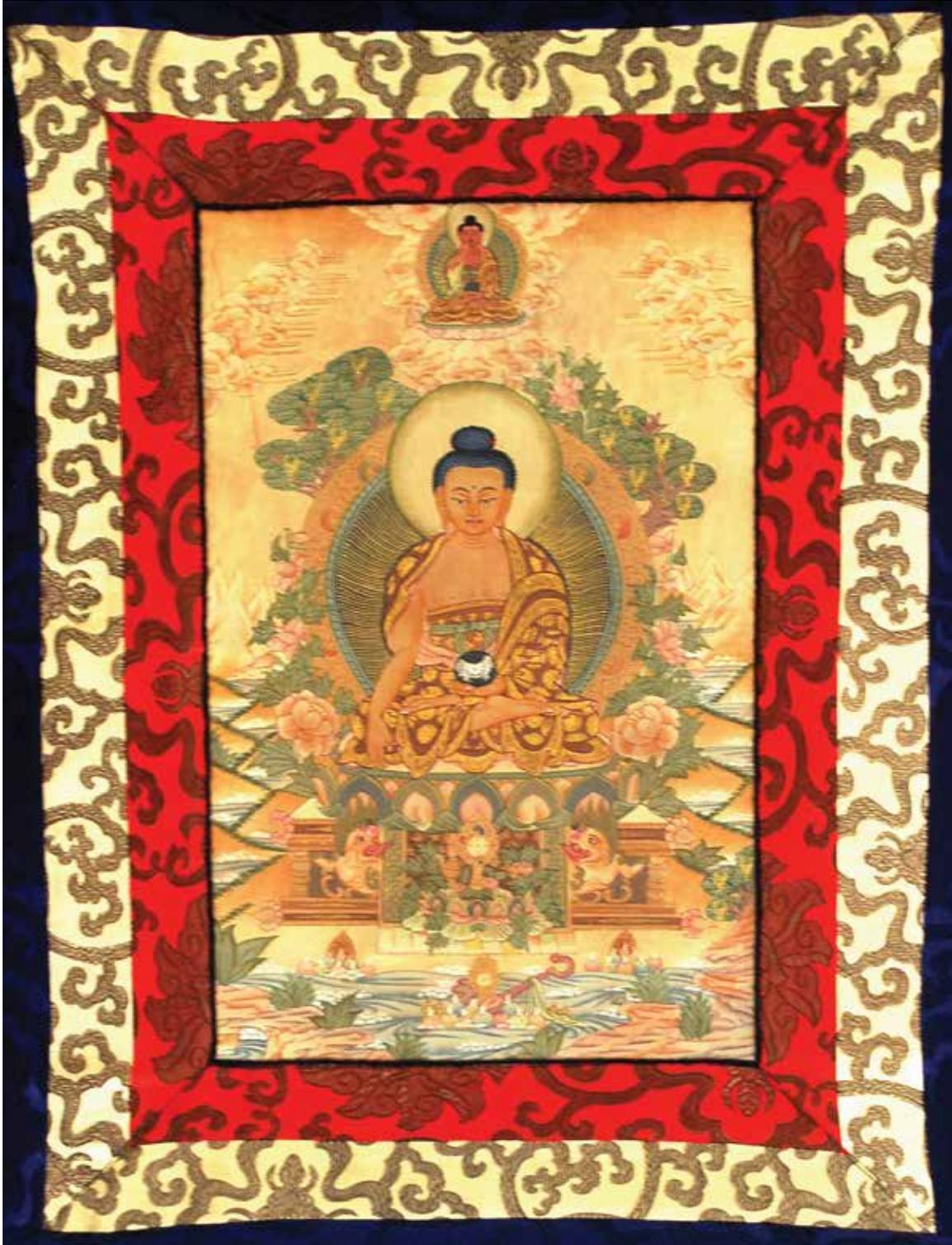
# Photo Essay

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Asha Chopra



**LORD SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA :** Shakyamuni Buddha was born in Lumbini (Nepal) in the 6th century B.C. as a prince and heir of the Shakya clan. According to one traditional interpretation, Shakyamuni achieved Buddhahood in the past, long before His descent to this earthly plane 2500 years ago as the Historical Buddha. Shakyamuni Buddha is shown seated in the full cross-legged posture known as the *Vajra* position indicating the firmness and unwavering strength of His concentration. His right hand is in the earth touching gesture symbolizing his victory over all interferences and defeat of Mara, while His left hand rests in His lap. The Shakyamuni Buddha cradles a begging bowl in His left hand one of the few personal possessions of a Buddhist monk—which is filled with the three nectars of wisdom, long life and freedom from disease. The artist has further decorated the bowl with pieces of a mythical fruit said to possess spiritual and medicinal potency.



LORD SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA



**LORD AVALOKITESHVARA** : Lord Avalokiteshvara is the patron deity of Tibet. It is He who looks with an unwavering eye. Avalokiteshvara is the Embodiment of all Buddhas. Avalokiteshvara vowed to His Spiritual Father Lord Amitabh to work unceasingly for the welfare of all beings and to relieve all misery from Tibet the Land of Snow or also know as Roof of the World.

Avalokiteshvara vowed to bring peace and happiness to all mankind. The Lord went into deep meditation for several years to achieve this. The legend goes that when Avalokiteshvara opened His eyes, misery was still around Him.

Lord Avalokiteshvara said to Himself though misery persists in the universe He could do nothing about it. The moment He pronounced these words His body was torn into one thousand pieces and His head into ten parts. His Spiritual Father Lord Amitabh took pity on His Son and restored His torn body into one thousand hands giving each hand a wisdom eye. His head was restored into ten heads so that He could look at the world with more compassion and foresight. Lord Amitabh then placed a replica of His own head on Avalokiteshvara's tenth head to lend a guiding hand and keep a loving eye on His son.



**LORD AVALOKITESHVARA**



**GODDESS WHITE TARA :** White Tara is specifically associated with practices designed to lengthen one's lifespan. The White Tara's special attributes are her Seven eyes the 'third eye' located on her forehead and the other four on the palms of her hands and soles of her feet. Her eyes allow her to look upon beings in every realm of existence with clear sighted wisdom, heartfelt compassion and great foresight. The Tibetans always pray to the White Tara for good health and longevity for their families.

**LORD AMITABH (Amitabh the Buddha of Eternal Life) :** Amitabh is the most ancient Buddhas among the Dhyani Buddhas. He is said to reside in the Sukhabati heaven in peaceful meditation. Lord Amitabh is red in colour. His vehicle is the peacock. He exhibits *Samadhi Mudra* with his two palms folded face up one on top of the other lying in His lap. His sign is the lotus. When represented on the Stupa He always faces West. Amitabh denotes Boundless Light and is worshipped by the Tibetans to attain salvation.





### MANDALAS

Mandalas or The Wheel of Life depict the various realms of cyclic existence and the beings inhabiting these realms. This is primarily a visual to help us gain a clear understanding of the working of our mind. The Wheel of Life represents the first two noble truths of suffering and its cause; the figures outside the Wheel represent the final two truths the cessation of suffering and the path of spiritual development leading to its cessation.



### MANDALAS



**RATNA SAMBHAVA** : The five Tathagatas, Celestial Buddhas, comprise one of the most important groups of Buddhist Deities. Each Deity is associated with a colour, direction, gesture and a vehicle. Ratnasambhava (Yellow, south, *vajra mudra*, horse). The Ratnasambhava is placed on a lotus seat, flanked by two standing Bodhisattvas and a group of seated Bodhisattvas. These comprise a chorus of listeners. The vehicle of the Ratnasambhava appear at the side or beneath the lotus seat. The Tathagatas elaborate garb, proclaims their elevated status. The jewellery includes a crown, armlets, necklaces, large earplugs, bangles and anklets. The Ratnasambhava has a group of auspicious and wealth giving deities. Ratnasambhava is one of the patron deities of Tibet and is worshipped with great reverence.

**MEDICINE BUDDHA** : According to a Mahayana Sutra the Buddha transformed himself into a deep blue Buddha emanating healing rays of light and taught a vast assembly of men and Gods the Science of Medicines. The Buddhist orders valued medicine to alleviate and prolong life, to improve the human opportunity to attain enlightenment. The Medicine Buddha (Bhaishajyaguru) was worshipped in many Buddhist countries as the patron of medicine and healing. The Tibetan people worship Lord Medicine Buddha with great reverence, love and respect.



# Basgo Gompa Across Time

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Sama Haq (Research Fellow, National Museum Institute of History of Art, Conservation and Museology, Janpath, New Delhi-110011)

## Introduction:

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Ladakhi terrain and its people were laid bare to the world through the paradigmatic curiosity of western scholars and explorers. In order to understand the religious development in Ladakh, scholars further linked the spatio-temporal landscape of Ladakh with the religious temperament of Tibet, beginning from the 7<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards. Around 11<sup>th</sup> century CE, the revival of Buddhist praxis from Western to Central Tibet created an inter-cultural context between the two kingdoms. Keeping aside the territorial conquests for supremacy, the religious and spiritual ascendancy in Tibet and Ladakh has been pretty parabolic in nature. The focus of this essay will be to study this convergence through Buddhist art and architecture in Ladakh during the reign of the Namgyal rulers (15<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> century CE) with special reference to Chamba Lakhang of Basgo.

Ladakh or (Tib.) *Maryul*<sup>1</sup> is home to a unique blend of some of the prominent ethnic groups of the Western Himalayan region. While the majority of the population follows Tibetan Buddhism, a sizeable amount of the population comprises of Kargil and Balti Muslims. Ladakh is divided into three sub-sections – the Upper, Central and Lower regions – adjoining the mighty Himalayan ranges in the west. The Upper region is strategically important since the effervescent river Indus (Tib.) *Senge Khabab* runs through it. The Indus

has been present throughout important historic centres and sites, such as Shey, Leh and Basgo.

After the assassination of the Bonpo King Langdarma (842 CE), Tibet was fragmented between two ruling factions of Central and Western Tibet. Under King Yeshe-Od (10<sup>th</sup> century CE) from Western Tibet (comprising the three kingdoms of Guge, Purang and Ladakh), the second transmission or (Tib.) *Bstan-pa-phyi-dar* of Tibetan Buddhism began with the efforts of two great teachers or (Tib.) *lotsaba*, Rin-chen-bzang-po from Guge and Lekpai Sherab, a disciple of Atisa and the founder of the Sangpo Neuthok monastery in Lhasa.

Rin-chen-bzang-po's arduous journey to Kashmir resulted in an ecclesiastical awakening for Western Tibet, which found a new meaning for the newly established monastic order or *lamaism*. The monastic settlement of Alchi (11<sup>th</sup> century CE) stands as a visual repository of religious and social interaction between Ladakh and Kashmir. This period marked a dynamic and productive phase for artists causing a surge of monastic wealth (art and architecture) in Ladakh, Guge, Purang and areas in Himachal Pradesh. The wealth of craftsmanship that travelled via Kashmir to Ladakh came to be known as the *Khache*-Tibetan style.<sup>2</sup>

## The Rising Supremacy of the Namgyal Dynasty:

By the 15<sup>th</sup> century CE, the smaller kingdoms of Ladakh were unified under the militaristic

guidance of Lhachen Bagan, who established the famous Namgyal Dynasty. This is also the time when two Islamic forces – the Mughals and the Mongol Turks – were threatening the royal lineage and religious suzerainty of the Ladakhi kings.

While Mirza Dughlat valorizes his military conquests, the extent of his account also mentions the Islamic proselytization during his military campaign since the 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, when the Mir Hamdani<sup>4</sup> order had already commenced a spiritual discourse among the Baltis and Ladakhis. This brings us to an important historical junction in the forging of a social and political alliance between Balti Muslims and Ladakhi Buddhists in the history of the Namgyal kings, resulting in a possible wedlock between the royal families. The famous love story of a Balti princess Gyal Khatun, daughter of King Ali Mir (fifteenth chief of Skardu), with an imprisoned Ladakhi king, Jamyang Namgyal, also finds a mention in *La-dvags-rgyal-rab* or *The Royal Chronicles of Ladakh*.

A.H. Francke, in *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, mentions the Balti king, dreaming of a lion disappearing in the body of his daughter, Gyal Khatun, who later came to be known as an incarnation of the Buddhist goddess, Tara or (Tib.) *gdrol-ma*. Francke has translated the following verse from the original manuscript as, “Yesterday in a dream, I saw a lion [emerging] from the river in front [of the castle]; And, jumping at Rgyal-Khatun, he disappeared into her body, At the same time also, that girl conceived. Now it is certain that she will give birth to a male child, Whose name ye shall call Sen-ge-rnam-gyal!”<sup>5</sup>

To the modern reader, the dream occurs as a carefully planted political foil against the social backlash waiting for the chieftain’s daughter. The child conceived was named Senge Namgyal. This is the first recorded incident in Ladakhi history

that chronicles towards a political and legitimate annunciation between the two powerful kingdoms. As a matter of fact, a number of Ladakhi Buddhists and Balti Muslims continue to co-habit Leh till this date, as a reminder of their shared history. Senge Namgyal (1590-1642 CE) grew up to be the prototypical ruler of the Namgyal dynasty.<sup>6</sup>

The long surviving palace complex, monasteries and watchtowers at Leh, Basgo and Hemis, stand as testimony to his expansionist and enterprising nature. Not only religious but also secular architecture was also built under the patronage of the king such as “a wooden bridge across the Indus was constructed under Senge Namgyal, at Alchi”,<sup>7</sup> and most prominently, the building of the famous *Khache Masjid* in Leh. Although, an inscription in the mosque dated to A.H. 1077 (1677 CE), mentions that it was built under the rule of Deleg Namgyal (heir apparent to King Senge Namgyal), perhaps the land was granted during the reign of his father.<sup>8</sup>

#### Historicizing Basgo: (Plate1)

Basgo was the capital from where the Namgyal rulers established their supremacy. Even before the construction of the Leh Palace, the fort area of Basgo was considered the seat of Namgyal apogee. It is a significant historical site in Ladakh along the river Indus, in between the Himalayan and Karakoram ranges, approximately 11,000 meters above sea level and nearly 35 kilometers from Leh on the Leh-Srinagar highway. It consists of a mud-brick fortress on the eastern side of the cliffs, also known as Basgo-Rabtan-Lhartsekhar, at the top of a hill with an adjoining Basgo Gompa. The fort and the temple are popularly remembered as being built by King Senge Namgyal during the 16<sup>th</sup> century CE in commemoration of the militaristic zeal of his father King Jamyang Namgyal. But, contrary to popular perception, the three temples of the Basgo complex were built in various stages under the supervision of various Namgyal kings.



Plate 1: View of the Basgo Complex.

The Basgo circuit consists of a palace (now in ruins), three *lakhangs* (temples) and vestiges of the fortification wall. The three temples within the ruins of Basgo are Chamba Lakhang, Serzang Lakhang, and Cham Chung Lakhang. The site itself is considered as the first political and royal centre of stronghold for the Namgyal Dynasty built between 1445-1650 CE. The construction of the temple took place during the reign of King Drakspa Bumlde in 1450-1490 CE and the remaining development around the reign of King Tsewang Namgyal during 1580-1600 CE. The fort and the temple were further renovated during the reign of King Senge Namgyal during the 17<sup>th</sup> century CE, in commemoration of the military achievements of his father, King Tsewang Namgyal.

Lozang Jamspal, patron of the Basgo Welfare Community, mentions an accurate genealogy of the Namgyal kings.<sup>9</sup> According to him, King Grags-pa-bum-lde (1450-1490 CE) laid the original foundation of the Maitryea Temple at Basgo, as also pointed by A.H. Francke, "it was probably also Dragspa who improved the ancient fortifications at Basgo, to make them a stronghold of the first rank".<sup>10</sup> King Tshe-dbang-rNamgyal (1580-1600) was the patron for Maitreya temple<sup>11</sup>, King Jam-dbyang-rNamgyal (1600-1615) started the construction of the golden image in the Serzang Lakhang and finally King Senge-rNamgyal (1616-1642 CE) completed the previous work undergoing in the Maitreya temple.

Like the important monastic centres at Shey and Thikse, Basgo, also finds a mention in the early works of Francke, Cunningham, Tucci, Hutchinson etc. From the fertile plains of Alchi to the arid

lands of Basgo, the ever-expanding plurality of the monastery culture of Ladakh has long fascinated scholars and travellers. In one such exploratory writing we find a descriptive account of the physical beauty of Basgo. "*From the plateau we descended to the Basgo hollow; it is a fertile and populous tract, and picturesque in the clusters of its Buddhist monuments and neatly-built dwelling houses amidst a general spread of fields and fruit trees.*"<sup>12</sup>

Even in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, artists like Nicholas Roerich, had been spiritually and philosophically inspired by the unsung glory of the Basgo monastery. Roerich who captured the picturesque travels across the mountain peaks in the Himalayas, painted the stark beauty of Basgo amidst the Ladakhi landscape during the 1930's (Plate 2).<sup>13</sup> In his memoirs, Roerich has recalled, "*An impression of majesty was conveyed by Basgo. Ancient half-ruined towers and endlessly long walls sat atop the peaks of rocks, where they mingled with present day temples.*"<sup>14</sup> Of these writings, *Trails to Innermost Asia – Five Years of Exploration with Roerich Central Asian Expedition*, mentions his journey crossing Basgo and witnessing the treasure trove of sculptures, wall paintings and the sublime beauty of its landscape.



Plate 2: Nicholas Roerich, Basgoo, 1932, from the series 'Stronghold of Tibet', Tempera, 74 x117.5 cm, © Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York, USA.  
Source: <http://www.wikiart.org/en/nicholas-roerich/basgoo-1932>

### The Rise of the Monastery-Fortress:

Besides its complicated historical lineage and various issues pertaining to safeguarding of cultural heritage, Basgo complex also recalls the *raison d'être* of monastery-fortresses in the Western Himalayan region. The monasteries built during the early period i.e. from 10th to 13th century CE were constructed in fertile plains, away from village settlements like the monastic complex of Alchi. The onset of an early traditional style is attributed to Rinchen bzangpo, which was a *mélange* of traditional building methods with an Indian influence of detailing and ornamentation. Furthermore, the style and architecture of the temples from Martand, Parihaspura, Pandrethan, Avantiswamin etc. bore a direct influence on early monastic architecture and artistic continuity from Kashmir to Ladakh.<sup>15</sup>

In the later period, beginning from 13<sup>th</sup> century CE onwards, the monasteries were constructed on a height and included palace fortifications and houses for people. Due to a politically charged climate and threats from the surrounding kingdoms, many monasteries were constructed on mountains or hilltops. *"The share-cropping role of the monastery was to bring to it tremendous wealth... This naturally made them a target of attack not only by iconoclastic invaders but others in search of booty. Basgo, for instance, was attacked and laid under siege for three years by a Tibetan army in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century and it was able to hold out successfully because of the reserves of food and valuables that were at its disposal"*.<sup>16</sup>

In order to create architecturally sound structures, the monasteries built on a mountaintop followed the ebb and flow of the landscape resembling the impenetrable mountain itself; hence the term 'monastery fortress'.<sup>17</sup> The tall and tapering architectural wonders of the religious and political might embodied the rocky outcrop of the desolate landscape. With time, the multistoried structures mushrooming along the hill became overtly complicated with the intricate networking of various rooms, alleys, storage house, libraries, kitchens, nunnery, etc. Even today, the isolated and dilapidated watch towers of Basgo's defence wall have withstood the ravages of time and stand as a testimony of its glorious past.

### Inside Chamba Lakhang:

The way to Chamba Lakhang or the Maitreya Temple is approached through a series of stairwells. Inside the monastery, the restored murals provide a visual delight for ardent devotees and art enthusiasts, even though the traditional Ladakhi technique of painting over the previous layer of murals has caused more problems to the conservationists than bring any respite. The assembly hall or *dukhang* at the temple faces east and is square in

plan, supported by richly decorated wooden pillars, beams and rafters from the inside. The illustrious wooden ceiling, painted with various decorative motifs and textile patterns bears a direct influence from the treatment of the ceiling at Alchi (Plate 3).

The central deity inside the temple is a 14 metre high sculpture of a seated Maitreya, the future Buddha, in clay and stucco, with a gilding of gold, adorned with colourful brocade and precious jewellery (Plate 4). He is making the *dharmacakra mudra* or the gesture of turning the wheel of law and he is seated in *bhadrasana*, his characteristic posture of royal ease. Maitreya's head looks out from a clerestory into the Basgo village, blessing the worldly realm.

While Gyal Khatun is considered as the patron of the Chamba Lakhang, it is also believed that she donated the ornaments for the Maitreya image in the second temple, Serzang Lakhang, as well. In the assembly hall, the colossal image of a golden-bodied, highly bejeweled Maitreya, in his *sambhogkaya* or celestial form, is flanked by two attendant bodhisattva figures, Avalokiteshvara and Vajrapani. The walls are adorned with illustrious murals of Buddhist gods and goddesses, religious leaders and events from the Buddha's life (Plate 5).

Stylistically and aesthetically, the Chamba Lakhang takes on heavily from its illustrious predecessor, the Alchi *choskhor*. The painting and aesthetic tradition forwarded by the lyrical style of the Alchi murals became a benchmark of the 'early Ladakhi style'. Due to the spread of Islamic forces from 13th century



Plate 3: View of the ceiling design.

CE onwards, the decline in Hindu and Buddhist art led to a decline in interaction with the Indian kingdoms. As a result, Ladakh looked to Tibet for a spiritual and artistic discourse. The schematic and iconographic style imbibed from Tibetan art was more sophisticated, partially sinocized and different from the previous blend of local and indigenous element. The Maitreya Temple of Basgo also bears a name of a Tibetan artist, Don-grub-legs-pa, which is also found in another monastery at Phyi-dbang, built in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>18</sup>

The iconographic and compositional scheme at the Maitreya Temple depicts an intricate yet elusive universe of the Vajrayana Buddhist pantheon painted on three sides of the wall. The entrance wall is marked with the auspicious presence of Avalokiteshvara or Chenrezig, a bodhisattva of compassion and wisdom and a patron deity of Tibet. He is surrounded by two consorts, Green and White Tara, who are also represented as his spiritual emanations. A blue-bodied Vajrapani surrounds this triad. He is embodied as a fierce emanation of Avalokiteshvara and a protector deity in Vajrayana Buddhism, thereby subverting the role of a passive bodhisattva into a wrathful aggressor.

Guardian deities of the four directions and other wrathful deities defending the sacred

realms further accompany the bodhisattva on the entrance wall. In the cosmological order of the sacred precinct of the temple, wrathful and beneficial deities heavily guard the entrance. Through the *samsaric* doors of the physical world, full of desire and affliction, a lay devotee is beseeched by the divine figures to enter the sacred, metaphorical and philosophical realm of the gods. The entrance doors marks the symbolic shift in the karmic balance for those who enter inside to purge their sins.

Inside the temple, Dhyani Buddhas of the different directions are richly adorned and eloquently represented in their *sambhogkaya* or celestial forms adhering to their different iconographies. The representation of head priests of a certain order also marks the religious affiliation of the



Plate 4: Maitreya sculpture, ChambaLakhang.

various monastic orders in Ladakhi and Tibetan monasteries. Some of the prominent murals on the northwest side of the wall are of White Tara, *dhyani* Buddhas like Amitabha in *dhyana mudra*, and Ratnasambhava in *varada mudra*; followed by Je Tsongkhapa, the religious head of the Gelug sect in his typical yellow pointed conical hat along with *dhyani* Buddha Akshobhya in *bhumisparsha mudra*.

Of the five Dhyani Buddhas, Amitabha Buddha is the cosmic Buddha of the west. He is iconographically represented in red colour and he holds a vase of ambrosia. Ratnasambhava is the cosmic Buddha of the south. He is yellow in colour and he dispels pride and ego through wisdom and generosity. Akshobhya Buddha resides in the east. He is blue in colour and his left hand holds an upright *vajra*.

On the southeast side of the wall are also equally vibrant murals of Buddhist gods, Bodhisattva figures and spiritual leaders. These are *sadakshari* Avalokiteshvara or the six syllabled forms of Avalokiteshvara, prominent in Tibet, Ladakh and Nepal. He is also known as the lord of the six-syllabled mantra. As mentioned in Buddhist texts such as *Karanda Vyuha* and in the sixth *sadhana* (prayer) of the *Sadhanmala*, this form of Avalokiteshvara is a ritual manifestation and deification of the seed syllable, *om mani padma hum*.

Next to him is a seated image of the great lama Padma Karpo (1525-1590 CE), the propounder of the Drukpa Kagyud sect in Tibetan Buddhism, which hails back to the Kagyu-pa lineage of the great Indian adept Tilopa (988-1069 CE). It is believed that the Maitreya temple was built in the honor of the teachings of Pad-ma-dkarpo. In Ladakh, the Drukpa Kagyud sect was reinstated during the reign of King Senge Namgyal when lama Tag Tsan Raspa gave an ordination to the royal family including the Balti queen, Gyal Khatun. At present, the Maitreya temple is

governed by the Hemis Monastery of Ladakh, which also belongs to the red hat sect of the Kagyud order.

Following the mural of the great lama is the mural of Amoghasiddhi Buddha in *abhaya mudra*. He is the transcendental Buddha of the north direction and he is shown in green colour. He represents mental and spiritual accomplishment. Next to him is Vajrasattva or the primordial Buddha. He is shown holding a *vajra* or a thunderbolt and a *ghanta* or a bell as his attributes. Vajrasattva is the adamant wielder of Adibudhha in the elemental creation of the void.

Apart from the sacerdotal depiction of monks and deities on the three walls, there is also a vibrant visual narrative of scenes of Buddha's life from texts like *Lalitvistara* and *Mahavastu*. The story unfolds as a continuous narrative on the bottom register with the auspicious dream of Buddha's birth on the right side wall. The narrative circumambulates in a clockwise movement inside the temple. Apart from various scenes related to Buddha's birth, his descent from heaven, great departure and scene of tonsure, enlightenment and post-enlightenment scenes; his *mahaparinirvana*, division of relics etc. elaborately adorn the walls.

#### Restoration Efforts at Basgo:

The heterotopic role of Basgo as a cultural repository, just like the other important architectural sites in Ladakh, was also seriously undermined. In fact, the World Monument Fund recognized the Maitreya Lakhang or Chamba Lakhang of Basgo, among one of the hundred most endangered heritage sites in the year 2000-2001. The murals and sculptures of *dukhang* and the rare manuscripts of *tangyur* and *kangyur* in the temple library exemplified a rich past and tradition, which was on the verge of being forgotten. A report prepared by INTACH in 2003, labeled Basgo fort within the "danger of disappearance".<sup>19</sup> The report further read,

*"The fort complex is in extremely dilapidated condition. Most portions have decayed beyond any reconstruction... The structure lies abandoned."*<sup>20</sup>

By 2004, with the effort of the Basgo Welfare Community, World Monument Fund, and the Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture, the two small temples were repaired and given a much-awaited face-lift. Restoration for the Chamba Lakhang was soon to follow with the help of an initiative taken by the Basgo Welfare Community along with foreign aids. In 2009, Chamba Lakhang won the UNESCO Asia Pacific Heritage Award for Excellence as a reminder of the ingenious hard work of the Basgo people.

Religious zeal and local activism on the part of the Basgo Welfare Committee, led to the task of reinstating the Chamba Lakhang to its grandeur.<sup>21</sup> Once the main temple was restored, the ordained priests reinstated the religious and spiritual importance of the temple by performing certain purification rituals for opening the temple for public worship and other rituals.<sup>22</sup> While the vestiges of the fort complex still lies in ruins without any hope of its preservation, its ramshackled walls stand as an ever-watchful guard overlooking the Basgo village.

To conclude, the archaeological site of the Basgo Gumpa represents the multifaceted aspect and life of a monastic establishment. From being the religious and political nerve centre of the Namgyal kingdom to housing the long-standing temples with colossal sculptures and sacred murals, Basgo has come a long way. With the effort of organizations like the Basgo Welfare Committee, UNESCO, World Monument Fund, Namgyal Institute for Research on Ladakhi Art and Culture and many others who have aided the conservation and restoration of the site, Basgo complex struggles to withstand the vicissitudes of history, memory and time.

## Notes and References:

- 1 Cunningham attributes this term as a derivative meaning *dmar* stands for 'red' and *yul* stands for 'country', meaning red land, whereas the original word for Ladakh as used in the *Royal Chronicles* is *La-dvags*.
- 2 G. Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, Vol II. (Thailand: SDI Publication, 1999).
- 3 Mirza Haider Dughlat, *Tarikh-al-Rashidi*, trans. E. Denison Ross, (London: Sampson Low, Marston and Co., 1984), 410.
- 4 K. Warikoo, "Shrines and Pilgrimage Places in Kashmir" in *Cultural Heritage of Jammu and Kashmir*, ed. by K. Warikoo (New Delhi: Himachal Research and Cultural Foundation, 2009), 154; Jigar Mohammad, "Mughal Sources on Medieval Ladakh, Baltistan and Western Tibet" in *Ladakhi Histories – Local and Regional Perspectives*, ed. by John Bray (Netherlands: Brill Publication, 2005), 147-160.
- 5 Francke, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet – The Chronicle of Ladakh and Minor Chronicles*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1992), 106.
- 6 A Mss. of *Rgyal-rabs* or *The Royal Chronicles of Ladakh*, no. 6683 in British Museum, London mentions a peculiar selection of kings even after the reign of Senge Namgyal recording the militaristic fervor of the Namgyal dynasty.
- 7 Francke, *Ladakh - The Mysterious Land* (New Delhi: Cosmo Publication, 1978), 100.
- 8 —, *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, 146-147.
- 9 Lozang Jampal, "The Five Royal Patrons and Three Images at Basgo" in *Recent Research on Ladakh 6, Proceedings of the Sixth International Colloquium on Ladakh, Leh*, ed. by Osmaston and Nawang Tsering, (Delhi: Motilal and Banarsidas, 1997), 140.
- 10 Francke, *Ladakh - The Mysterious Land*, 80.
- 11 He is also famous to have deflected the warring army of Mirza Haider Dughlat in the Nubra valley, thus unifying Nubra within the Namgyal rule. Nawang Tsering in "Historical Perspectives of Nubra in Ladakh" accessed on 01/03/2015 <<http://www.ladakhstudies.org/resources/Resources/RR0L3/11RR0L3shakspo.pdf>>
- 12 *Gazetteer of Kashmir and Ladakh*, (New Delhi, Vivek Publishing House, 1974), 22.
- 13 Nicholas Roerich, *Basgo*, 1932, from the series 'Stronghold of Tibet', Tempera, 74 x 117.5 cm, © Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York, USA
- 14 Ruth Abrams Drayer, *Nicholas and Helena Roerich: The Spiritual Journey of the Two Great Artists*. (Ireland: Theosophical Publishing House, 2005), 122-24; George Roerich, *Trails to Inmost Asia – Five years of Exploration with the Roerich Central Asian Expedition*. (USA: Yale University Press, 1931).
- 15 Pratapaditya Pal, *Art and Architecture of Ancient Kashmir* (Bombay: Marg Publication, 1989).
- 16 Romi Khosla, *Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalayas*. (Nepal: Ratna Pustak Bhandar, 1979), 77.
- 17 Peter Harrison, *Fortress Monasteries of Himalayas*. (London: Ofsprey Publishing House, 2011), 32-35.
- 18 Alberto Lo Bue, "The *Guru lah khang* in *Phyi dbang: A Mid 15<sup>th</sup> Century Temple in Central Ladakh*" in *Discoveries in the Western Tibet and the Western Himalayas*, ed. by Amy Heller and Giacomella Orafino (Netherlands: Brill Publications, 2007), 189.
- 19 Jhanwij Sharma, *Architectural Heritage: Ladakh*, (New Delhi: INTACH, 2003), 150-51.
- 20 *Ibid.* According to the documentation and assessment of the site prepared by INTACH in 2003, the fortification was in decrepit physical condition.
- 21 Sanjay Dhar, "Documentation and Emergency Treatment of Wall Paintings in the Chamba Lakhang (Maitreya Temple): Developing a Methodology to Conserve Mural Paintings in India's Ladakh District" in *Conservation of Ancient Sites on the Silk Route*, ed. by Neville Agnew (Los Angeles: Getty Publication Institute, 2010), 286-296.
- 22 Tara Sharma and Mark Webber, "Temple Guardians – A Communities Initiative in Conserving its Sacred Heritage" accessed on 12/10/2014 <[http://www.wmf.org/sites/default/files/wmf\\_publication/Basgo%20Context%20article%202011.pdf](http://www.wmf.org/sites/default/files/wmf_publication/Basgo%20Context%20article%202011.pdf)>

# Through the Eyes of Vasily Vereshchagin: Buddhist Monasteries of Eastern Himalayas

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Savita Devi

Vasily Vereshchagin (1842 – 1904) was one of the foremost Russian artists and travelers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to have gained international recognition. He was primarily known for his paintings centred on war, a theme that remained his main preoccupation throughout his life. In order to make authentic records of war and the trauma of its aftermath, he himself participated in wars as a soldier. A crucial junction in his artistic career was his visit to India, from 1874 to 1876. This was the period when he deviated from his main subject 'war'. His approach was of an Orientalist who wanted to capture the exotic east. He painted landscapes, people, monuments, flora and fauna which were also the popular genre of paintings patronized by the British in India during that time. It is evident from his travel account titled *Vassily Verestchagin: Painter, Soldier, Traveller* that he aimed to capture the unexplored aspects of India. Initially this was the vision which guided his journey through the difficult terrains of the Himalayas. He along with his wife travelled extensively to the eastern and western Himalayas which included regions of Sikkim, Kashmir, Ladakh and Tibet. He devoted himself to painting while his wife made notes on their travel. This essay will highlight, through select study of his depictions of Buddhist art and architecture of Sikkim, that how his subject matter, despite being inspired by the prevalent Orientalist idea of an exotic east, was essentially embedded in nineteenth century Russian Realism.

His emergence in the Russian art scenario was at a time when Russian society, like other parts of Europe, was undergoing a major transformation in almost every sphere. Born in 1842, in an aristocratic family, Vereshchagin graduated from the Sea Cadet Corps in Saint Petersburg where he was trained to be a naval officer, a career regarded in high esteem among the affluent class. In 1860, much against the wishes of his family, he entered into the Imperial Academy of Arts in St. Petersburg for pursuing his study in painting. His education at the Academy coincided with the time when there was unrest among some of the young artists against its academic precepts that focused on classicism in art and neglected the reality.<sup>1</sup> This discontentment led to the revolt of fourteen young artists in 1863 who resorted to Realism as a new direction in art and organized themselves later in a group called the Wanderers. The Wanderers considered, "art as a vehicle for social criticism and improvement".<sup>2</sup> Broader context for such enquiries in art was provided by the revolutionary writing of the time.<sup>3</sup> Though never a part of this group, Vereshchagin strongly believed in Realism and became its foremost practitioner. He adhered to this ideology even when it lost its momentum in Russia.

Apart from realism, his interest in the Orient was crucial in the development of his artistic oeuvre. He had exposure to Orientalist subjects during his three years' apprenticeship with the



Pl. 1 Buddhist Temple in Darjiling. Sikkim, 1874, oil, <http://www.tretyakovgallery.ru>

French artist Jean-Leon Gerome at the Ecole des Beaux Arts which he joined in 1864.<sup>4</sup> Influence of Gerome's technique and subject matter can clearly be seen in some paintings of his Turkestan Series (1869-1873). He had the opportunity to travel to Turkestan with his employee Major-General Konstantin von Kaufman.<sup>5</sup> It was in Turkestan that Vereshchagin was also to evolve his own distinct style, particularly in subjects depicting the horrors of war, social vices and women's condition in the region. He supported the Russian conquest of Central Asia as he firmly believed in the existing European notion of the duty of the West to civilize the east. His works, however, many times raised objections about the manner in which the conquest was carried out. His Turkestan series was first exhibited in London at the Crystal Palace in 1873. The exhibition was highly successful as it brought him critics' accolades from all corners.

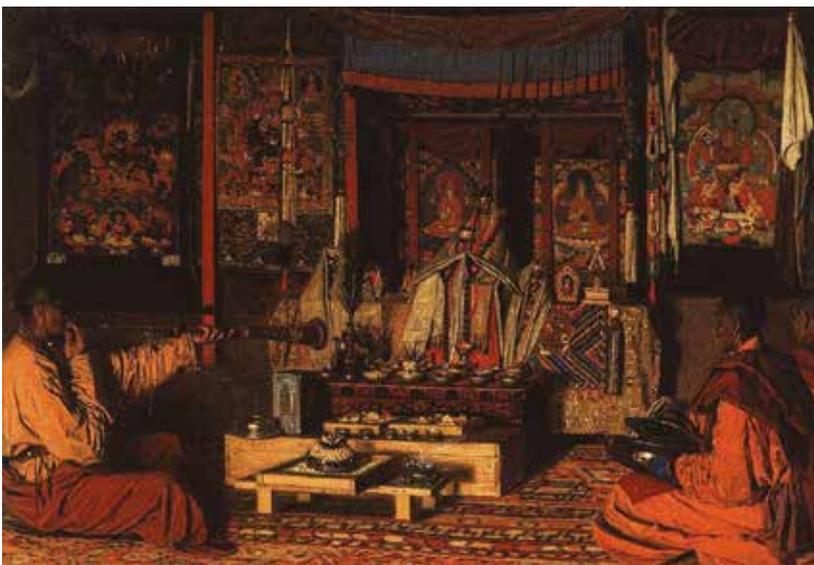
When Vereshchagin decided to visit India from the mid-1870s with his wife, his international reputation was already established. In India, he came in search of adventure and the exotic, like an Orientalist. He wrote in his accounts, "As India has already been often described, we will content ourselves with giving some of our impressions of Himalayas, beginning with Sikkim, the higher mountains of which we were the first after Hooker to visit in the month of January."<sup>6</sup> J.D. Hooker was a British botanist and explorer. Between 1847 and 1851, Hooker travelled to India. He took rigorous expeditions in the eastern Himalayas and documented the region in harsh climatic conditions. It was Hooker's record that he wanted to match.

Vereshchagin visited several north Indian cities before embarking on his journey in the eastern Himalayas. In fact, initially, he aimed at visiting Kathmandu and "to climb about a little on the sides of Mount Everest".<sup>7</sup> However, the couple dropped the idea on the advice of a British officer and instead of Nepal embarked on a journey to Sikkim in the eastern Himalayas. On the way to Sikkim, Vereshchagin halted at Darjeeling. There he painted among other subjects a Buddhist temple, made of indigenous material and crowned by a thatched roof (pl. 1). From the painting, it can be discerned that the main shrine was entered through a vestibule consisting of a wooden façade painted in green. Divided in three parts, this façade had a door in the centre flanked by balustrade balconies with chick curtains. Each door and balconies had its own eave. Above the wooden façade was a string of banners. Madame Vereshchagin in their travel account wrote, "These little banners have prayers written all over them, and by this means, according to the belief of the people, the prayers are wafted straight to God."<sup>8</sup> The wall above the wooden façade was made of brick and was plastered by lime white and red ochre. Vereshchagin, a realist, did not hesitate to show the exposed surface of brick where plaster had flaked off, or the loose chick of the balcony. The series of religious poles with



Pl. 2 Buddhist Trinity, Tchangatchelling (Sanga Choeling), 1875, oil, <http://www.wikiart.org>

banners were painted on the right side of the temple beyond which the exquisite snow mountain could be seen. The Buddhist temples in Darjeeling region had undergone a major change in due course of time and in this context the record by Vereshchagin is an important document to understand the Buddhist temple architecture of the 19<sup>th</sup> century in Darjeeling. The Vereshchagin couple extolled the people, "the Buddhist are a peaceable people; good also, and very hospitable...".<sup>9</sup> Admiring the jewellery of the women in the region, Madame Vereshchagin wrote, "it is only fair to say that the females of this country are not so devoted to glittering ornaments as to



Pl. 3 A Kalmyk Temple, 1869-1870, oil, <http://veresh.ru>

wear, like those of the plain, glass beads and all kind of valueless trinkets. They have ornament only of gold, silver, turquoise, malachite, and especially of yellow amber."<sup>10</sup> In his sketches, Vereshchagin recorded people and their costumes and his wife wrote accounts on the same. His approach was different from those of the British travelling artist who intended to capture the picturesque in art. He, a devout realist, carefully recorded the monument in context of the landscape and sensitively rendered people in its vicinity.

In Sikkim, Vereshchagin and his wife visited Sanga Choeling (Tchangachelling) monastery of Nyingma sect<sup>11</sup>. Dated to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery was rebuilt several times since then. In this context, the artistic records left by Vereshchagin is very significant. In the sanctum of this monastery were monumental sculptures of Buddhist deities (pl. 2). His wife wrote, "At the end are three colossal statues of the three persons of the Buddhist Trinity. In the middle is the Creator of the world; to the left the chief apostle of the Buddhist faith in these regions, elevated to the rank of the saint; on the right Buddha. They are all seated, their feet hidden with the holy flowers of the lotus, and a perpetual and immovable smile on their lips. The apostle is

represented as quite black, thus indicating his tropical origin. The ears of the Buddha are pierced, but without earrings, as a symbol of the aversion in which this celebrated prince held all worldly ornament."<sup>12</sup> In his painting, Vereshchagin made a detailed study of these sculptures through which one can identify the Buddhist deities. The central deity is Vajrasattva identified by the *ghanta* (bell) in his left hand and *vajra* (thunderbolt) in his right hand. His youthful bright face has a benign smile and his downcast eyes are shown in meditation. He wears an elegant crown with seven lotus petals. He is flanked by Sakyamuni, the historic Buddha to his right and Guru Padmasambhava, to his left.

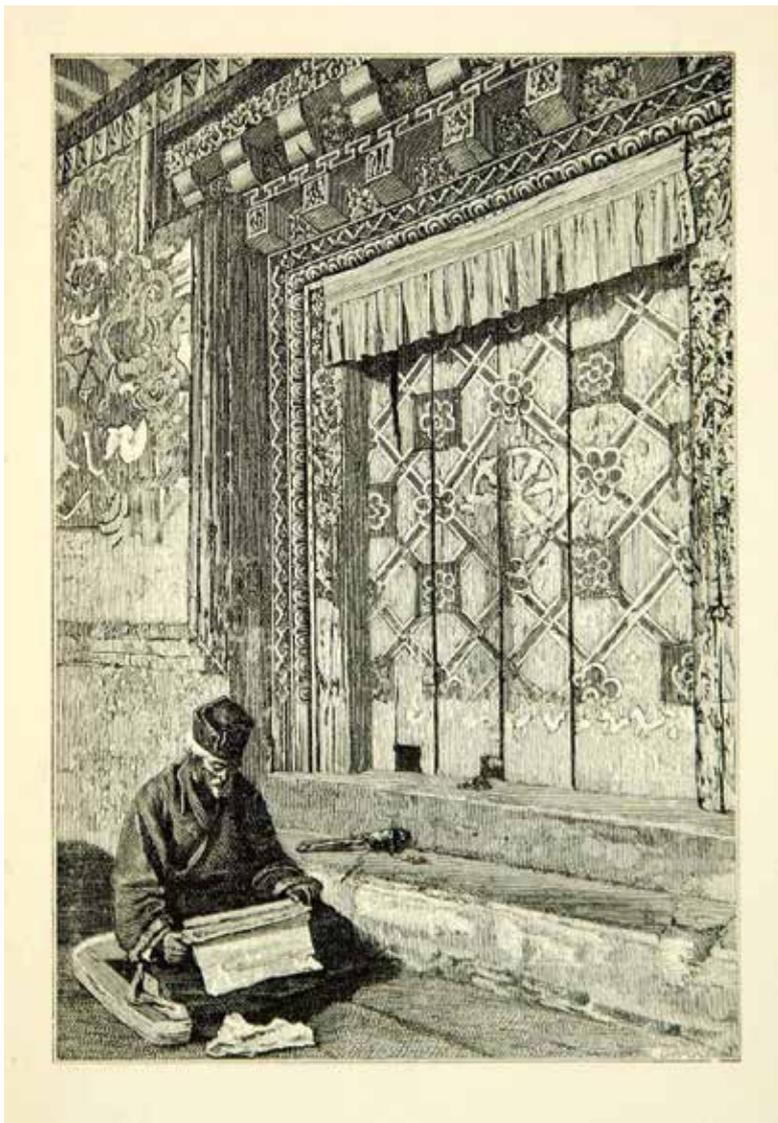
Sakyamuni is shown with a begging bowl in his left hand and his right hand is in *bhumisparsha mudra*. He has graceful curls on his head. There is a gentle smile on his face and his eyes are wide open in compassion. Vereshchagin took care to depict the *mahapurusha lakshana* such as the *urna* mark and the lines of his neck. He is flanked by his two principle disciples, Shariputra and Maudgalyayana. The third prominent sculpture is of Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. In the Nyingma sect, Padmasambhava is considered as the founder. Here, dark complexioned, Padmasambhava is shown with a wrathful smiling face. His wide open eyes have a piercing gaze. In his left hand, he holds a dagger and there is a *vajra* in his right hand. Vereshchagin painted in minute details his layered monastic robe and elaborate headgear. Padmasambhava is flanked by his two consorts: Mandarava and Yeshe Tsogyal. All three sculptures are provided with elaborate *prabhamandala* which

Vereshchagin painted with dexterity. Also, noteworthy, is Vereshchagin's understanding of the colour palette of Buddhist art.

In fact, prior to coming to India, Vereshchagin had a brush with Buddhism during his encounter with Kalmyk people in Central Asia. His painting of the Kalmyk Chapel (pl. 3) dated 1869-70, is a good example in this context and has a strong affinity with the *Buddhist Trinity* painting of Sikkim. Kalmyk Chapel was also dedicated to Tibetan Buddhism. From the painting, it can be discerned that the temple was highly decorated. The rear wall was provided with a series of Thangka paintings of Buddhist deities with discernable iconography. The centre of the temple was occupied by a wooden pavilion decorated with banners. It consisted of a high altar at the back with the sculpture of the main Buddhist deity decked with offerings. Preceding this altar were three other tables with heights in descending order and were also provided with offerings. In the painting, one can also see two monks, in their monastic robes, performing ritual music with traditional musical instruments. While documenting the Buddhist heritage of the eastern Himalayas, Vereshchagin would have been reminded of the art of Kalmyk people. The painstaking rendition of these paintings reflect on how Vereshchagin was deeply



Pl. 4 Monastery of Tassiding (Tashding), Sikkim, 1887, Wood Engraving of the painting by Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin, <https://www.periodpaper.com/>



PL.5 Door of a Temple at Tassiding (Tashding), Sikkim, 1887, Wood Engraving of the painting by Vasily Vasilyevich Vereshchagin, <http://www.ebay.com/>

involved in understanding the Buddhist religion and art. It was much more than depicting glimpses of new exotic countries. His representation of the Orient was different from others. In the context of central Asia, Maria Chernysheva points, "The ways in which the Turkestan series differs from the French Orientalist painting tradition, set out above, result from the fact that Vereshchagin showed the East not only from the Western point of view, as the West was used to seeing it — and wished to see it. This was due not so much to Vereshchagin's own individual approach as to the nature of Russian orientalism itself. For Russia — in contrast to European lands — the East was not

something external and alien or "other", but something internal and part of Russia itself."<sup>13</sup>

From Sanga Choeling, Vereshchagin and his wife visited Pemanyangtse (Pemiontsi) monastery and participated in a Buddhist festival. Through their art and writing the couple documented the various aspects of the festival in great detail.<sup>14</sup> From their account we also come to know about the ever-changing nature of Buddhist art in the region. Madame Vereshchagin wrote, "In their desire to celebrate the fête with great solemnity, they have repainted the whole convent, and the elegant frescoes on the entrance door are now covered with a fresh and abominable coat of paint."<sup>15</sup> This explains, among other reasons, why at present, the monasteries have significantly changed.

After Sanga Choeling monastery, Vereshchagin visited the Tashding (Tassiding) monastery. Built in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery is among the most sacred Buddhist pilgrimage sites of the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism. J.D. Hooker, the English botanist also wrote a detailed account of the place and made a rudimentary sketch of the temple. It was natural for Vereshchagin to visit this site for he was following the footsteps of Hooker. Unlike Sanga Choeling where the Vereshchagin couple were received with warmth by the lamas, here, they distanced themselves. This was because they were misunderstood as Christian missionaries who had come to convert them.<sup>16</sup>

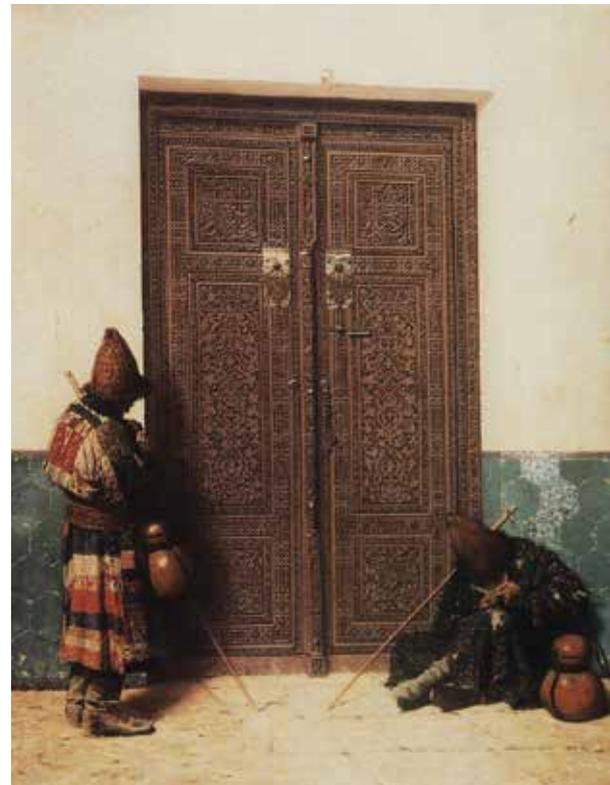


Pl. 6 The Doors of Tamerlane, 1872, Turkestan series oil, <http://www.wikiart.org>

The Vereshchagin couple reached Tashding just before the commencement of the sacred water festival called Bumchu, which is still celebrated today with great veneration. A detailed account of the festival was provided by them.<sup>17</sup> A wood engraving of the monastery of Tashding (pl. 4) suggests that despite renovation the original style of the building is retained. Rectangular in plan, the building had a thatched roof and preceding its front façade are a series of chorten which still exist. His engagement with Tashding monastery is evident in yet another wood engraving of the door (pl. 5) which he painted there.<sup>18</sup> Vereshchagin also painted in great detail the door of the Sanga Choeling monastery. The 'Door' as a subject fascinated Vereshchagin and this theme also connects his Central Asian series with that of India.

The dexterity with which Vereshchagin painted the decorated jambs and lintels of the entrance

of the Tashding monastery, including the cloth banner, is worth admiring. Carefully delineated geometrical and floral ornaments painted on the closed wooden door as well as the attention paid to the mural on the left wall of the temple, speaks of Vereshchagin's interest in refined craftsmanship of this region. What is important to notice is that the door is closed. The subject of the closed door was significant for Vereshchagin. During his expedition to Central Asia he painted two such works: *the Door of Tamerlane* (pl. 6) and *At the Door of the Mosque* (pl. 7). In these paintings also Vereshchagin paid great attention to the details and his admiration for their fine woodcarving is evident. The Central Asian works have, however, political connotations, "to emphasise the contrast between the Orient of the past and present: one shows the majestic, untouchable Orient of Tamerlane, the other the impoverished, weak and all too accessible modern Orient, with beggars picking their fleas by crumbling walls.



Pl. 7 At the Door of the Mosque, 1873, Turkestan series, oil, <http://www.wikiart.org>

Vereshchagin presents the pitiless will or irony of history that has brought a once-flourishing and powerful culture to a state of degradation.”<sup>19</sup> On the contrary, the door of the Tashding Monastery communicates of a religious place dedicated to knowledge and learning, as here, before the door is shown a seated monk engrossed in his holy text. His prayer wheel is kept on the first step of the door.

From Vereshchagin’s representations of the Buddhist monasteries of the eastern Himalayas and other subjects, it is evident that the artist’s engagement was not only with the physical structures but their function attached value for the community. Similarity in his compositions of the Central Asia and the eastern Himalayas underscore the unity of Asian art, despite being separated in time and space.

#### Endnotes:

- 1 John Bowlit, “Art and Architecture in the Age of Revolution, 1860-1917” in Robert Auty, ed., *An Introduction to Russian Art and Architecture (Companion to Russian Studies 3)* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 112.
- 2 Ibid., 114.
- 3 Ibid., 112.
- 4 Maria Chernysheva, “*The Russian Gérôme*”? *Vereshchagin as a Painter of Turkestan* <<http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2014/2014-jul-sep/chernysheva-vereshchagin>> (accessed on May 7, 2016)
- 5 David Schimmelpenninck van der Oye, *Vasilij V. Vereshchagin’s Canvases of Central Asian Conquest*, <<http://asiacentrale.revues.org/1196>> (accessed on May 12, 2016)
- 6 F.H. Peters, trans., *Vassily Verestchagin: Painter, Solider, Traveller (Autobiographical Sketches), vol. I* (London: Richard Bently & Son, New Burlingtons Street, 1887), 206.
- 7 Ibid., 209.
- 8 Ibid., 220.
- 9 Ibid., 222.
- 10 Ibid., 224.
- 11 In Tibetan Buddhism, there are four major schools: Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug. Of these Nyingma (a red hat sect) is the oldest tradition.
- 12 F.H. Peters., 259-60.
- 13 Maria Chernysheva, “*The Russian Gérôme*”?
- 14 F.H. Peters., 264-286.
- 15 Ibid., 265.
- 16 Ibid., 274
- 17 Ibid., 275, 278-280.
- 18 Ibid., 276
- 19 Maria Chernysheva , “*The Russian Gérôme*”?

# *Sadharmapundarikasutram* and the Cultivation of Skillful Means: A Study of Text and Image

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Prof. (Dr.) Anupa Pande

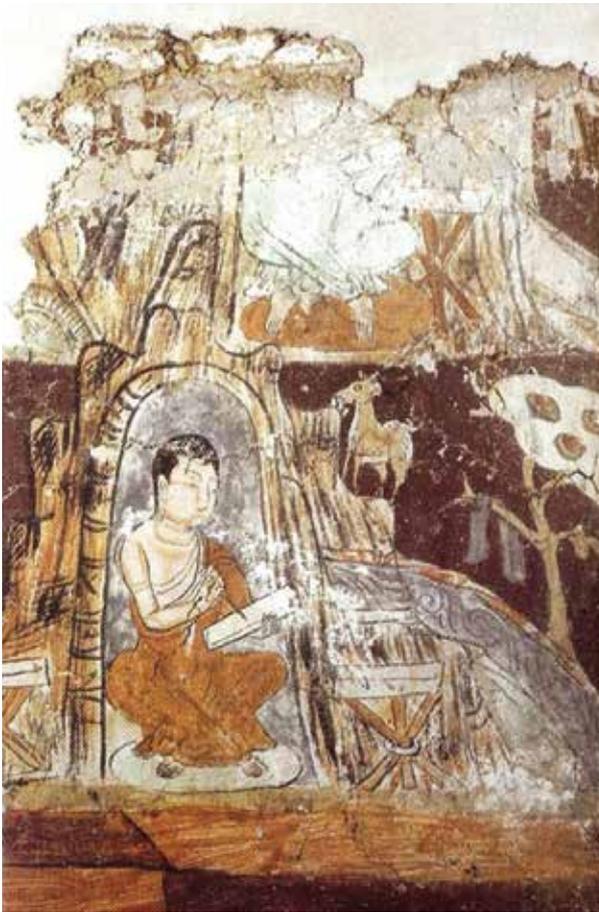


Plate 1: Writing of Sutras, 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century CE, Shorchuk, Uyghur Period. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 5.5.

The *Sadharmapundarikasutram* or the *Lotus Sutra* is a highly devotional Mahayana Buddhist text where the aim of the text is to enlighten and liberate all the suffering beings of the world. This essay focuses on the aspect of *upayakaushalya* or skillful means, by referring to various passages from the Sanskrit version of the *Sadharmapundarikasutram*. The first part of the essay discusses the devotional aspect of the worship of Buddha and the merit achieved by Buddha as mentioned in the text. It deals with ritual practices and discusses various aspects such as writing and reciting of the texts to earn merit, burning of different kinds of lamps, offering a garland of flowers, etc. The second part deals with *deshna* or preaching in context of the mural paintings of Central Asia, with special reference to Dunhuang. The subject of the painting is based on various passages from the text painted in order to preach to the monks and the laity. In this section, an attempt has been made to co-relate the textual and the visual viz., the dissemination of religious values through an artistic and aesthetic medium as seen in Central Asian art.

*Upayakaushalya* or the skillful means, as mentioned in the text, includes the miraculous efficacy of the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* itself,

such as reading, writing, copying the *sutras* and the merits attached to such tasks. This emphasis on the writing of the manuscripts now supplements the earlier practice based on a purely oral tradition. An important refrain found in almost every chapter is the unlimited merit attached to reading, writing and copying the *sutra* itself (Plate 1).

कः पुनर्वादी य इममेवंरूपं धर्मपर्यायं शृणुयाच्छ्रावयेत् वाचयेद्  
धारयेद्वा लिखेद्वा लिखापयेद्वा पुस्तकगतं वा स्कुर्वात्,  
गुरुकुर्यान्मानयेत् पूजयेत् सत्कारयेद्वा  
पुष्पधूपगन्धमाल्यविलेपनचूर्णचीवरच्छत्रध्वजपातकाभिस्तै-  
लप्रदीपैर्वा घृतप्रदीपैर्वा गन्धतैलप्रदीपैर्वा,  
बहुतरं पुण्याभि संस्कारं प्रसवेद् बुद्धज्ञानसंवर्तनीयम्।

*He who hears and causes to hear such Dharma text,*



Plate 2: Writing and Reciting of Sutras, 8<sup>th</sup> -9<sup>th</sup> century CE, Shorchuk, Uyghur Period. Source: National Museum Institute Slide Library

*reads aloud, wears (on the body as talisman), who writes or causes it to be written in a book, honours it, gives primacy to it, reveres it...*<sup>1</sup>

The *Sadharmapundarikasutram* is called *Sutraraja* or king of *sutras*.<sup>2</sup> Those who write it themselves will obtain the heavens of the thirty-three gods and be waited upon by 84,000 *apsaras*.<sup>3</sup>

या इदं सूत्रं लिखिष्यन्ति, ये च अस्यार्थमनुभोत्स्यन्ते, लिखित्वा च ते भगवन्निदं सूत्रमितश्चयुत्वा त्रायस्त्रिंशतां देवानां सभागताय उपपत्स्यन्ते, सहोपपन्नानां चैषां चतुरशीतिरप्सरसां सहस्राण्युप-संक्रमिष्यन्ति।

This textual reference finds due mention in various murals in Central Asia. A painting from the Shorchuk, Uyghur period represents a head monk preaching to younger monks (Plate 2). The scene depicts a senior monk sitting on a high wooden stool with a parasol on top. He is shown wearing an embroidered orange robe with red florets. He holds a manuscript and reed pen in his hands. Gathered around him are four monks who are equally involved in writing and reciting the text. On top, is a celestial appearance of an *apsara*. She, too, is holding a text and pen in her hand.

Writing this scripture is said to be equivalent to the worship of the Tathagata and held the merit of building a monastery.<sup>4</sup> Hence the work of a scribe was not just a paid task but one of great merit. A complete ritual is associated with the writing and copying of this *sutra*. Further, the role of offering garlands of flowers and burning fragrant oils to invoke the blessing of Buddha, is also treated as an important aspect of devotion in the text.

कः पुनर्वादी य इममेवंरूपं धर्मपर्यायं शृणुयाच्छ्रावयेत् वाचयेद्  
धारयेद्वा लिखेद्वा लिखा लिखापयेद्वा  
पुस्तकगतं वा स्कुर्वात्, गुरुकुर्यान्मानयेत् पूजयेत् सत्कारयेद्वा  
पुष्पधूपगन्धमाल्यविलेपनचूर्णचीवरच्छत्रध्वजपातकाभिस्तैल-

प्रदीपैर्वा घृतप्रदीपैर्वा गन्धतैलप्रदीपैर्वा, बहुतरं पुण्याभि संस्कारं  
प्रसवेद् बुद्धज्ञानसंवर्तनीयम्।

*If a man writes it down himself or causes another to write it, then no limit can be found to the merit he shall obtain. If having written down this scriptural roll he makes offerings with flowers, incense, fragrance, garlands, unguents and powders, banners and parasolsetc...<sup>5</sup>*

The above said would lead to great merit. Apart from a list of various offerings, burning of lamps is mentioned in great detail in the *sutra*. Even fragrant lamps are further defined in terms of variety.

घृतप्रदीपैर्वा गन्धतैलप्रदीपैर्वा चम्पकतैलप्रदीपैर्वा सुमनतैलप्रदीपैर्वा  
पाटलतैलप्रदीपैर्वा वार्षिकतैलप्रदीपैर्वा नवमलिकतैलप्रदीपैर्वा  
बहुविधाभिश्च पूजाभिः सत्कारं कुर्याद् गुरुकारं कुर्यात्  
माननां कुर्यात् पूजनां कुर्यात्, बहु स नक्षत्रराजसंकुसुमिताभिज्ञ...

*Lamps burnt with an exotic variety of perfumed oils as part of this ritual are of oil lamps, lamps of butter (ghee), fragrant oils like that of the flowers champaka, sumana, patala, varsika and navamalika or jasmine.<sup>6</sup>*

The devotional aspect of the text can be understood not only by the act of offering but also by the skillful means of worshipping the text by monks, nuns and lay people. The *Lotus Sutra* refers to a ritual that was practised for three weeks with single-minded concentration.

भिक्षवो वा भिक्षुण्यो वा उपासका वा उपासि वा एवं सूत्रान्तधारका  
एवं सूत्रान्तलेखका एवं सूत्रान्तमार्गका एवं सूत्रान्तवाचका...  
धर्मपर्याये त्रिसप्ताहमेकविंशतिदिवसानि चक्रमाभिरूढा  
अभियुक्ता भविष्यन्ति...।

*If a monk, nun, member of the laity who seeks, accepts and wears, reads and recites, copies or wishes to cultivate and practice this sutra, then for three weeks i.e. for twenty one days he must single-mindedly pursue this task sincerely.<sup>7</sup>*

On the completion of three weeks, the reward or merit for the practitioner promised in the *sutra* is the coming of Bodhisattva Samantabhadra, on his white elephant, to pay homage to the devotee.<sup>8</sup>

तमेव श्वेतं षड्दन्तं गजराजमभिरूढ्य बोधिसत्त्वगणपरिवृतः  
एकविंशतिमे दिवसे तेषां धर्मभाणकानां चक्रममागमिष्यामि।

The *Sadharmapundarikasutram* is completely devotional in character and both the visual and performing arts are adopted for expressing this devotion. Chapter Two of the text in Sanskrit i.e. *upayakaushalyaparivarta* or Fang Pien Pin in Chinese, describes the many ways one may offer *dharma dana*. A person may erect *stupas* using four types of materials, viz., (i) metals or jewels: gold, silver, *sphatika* and various jewels; (ii) different types of wood, for example, *chandana*, *devadara* wood and other timbers; (iii) stone, brick or clay; (iv) by merely heaping earth.<sup>9</sup>

ये चाश्मगर्भस्य करोन्ति स्तूपान्  
कर्कतनामुक्तामयांश्च केचित्।  
वैडूर्यश्रेष्ठस्य तथेन्द्रनीलान्  
ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥७१॥  
ये चापि शैलो करोन्ति स्तूपान्  
ये चन्दनानामगुरुस्य केचित्।  
ये देवदारुस्य करोन्ति स्तूपान्  
ये दारुसंघातमयांश्च केचित्॥८०॥  
इष्टामयान् मृत्तिकसंचितान् वा  
प्रीताश्च कुर्वन्ति जिनान् स्तूपान्।  
उद्दिश्य ये पांसुकराकशयोऽपि  
अटवीषु दुर्गेषु च कारयन्ति॥८१॥  
सिकतामयान् वा पुन कूट कृत्वा  
ये केचिदुद्दिश्य जिनान् स्तूपान्।  
कुमारकाः क्रीडिषु तत्र तत्र  
ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥८२॥

It is clear that the *stupas* of precious metals studded with jewels may denote small votive *stupas*. There may have been wooden *stupas* or



Plate 3: Worship of Stupa, Cave 23, Dunhuang, 712-781 CE, High Tang Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.1.

*devadara* wood in mountain and forest regions (there is a clear reference to *shaileshu* and *atavishu*). These seem to be of a temporary nature. Wooden votive stupas may also have been made. The third type of *stupas*, built of stone and brick, are well known. The fourth type, merely piling up earth as by children,<sup>10</sup> to make a *stupa*, indicates rudimentary, rural *stupas*. The meaning that underlies this is that people of different classes and of different economic status, built *stupas* according to their means and affordability.

Sculptures of the Buddha (*bimba*) were also to be made. These were to be endowed with thirty-two *lakshanas*, made of different materials such as copper, bronze, alloys of different metals, clay, wood and studded with jewels.<sup>11</sup>

रत्नामया बिम्ब तथैव केचिद्  
 द्वात्रिंशतीलक्षणरूपधारिणः।  
 उद्दिश्य कारापित येहि चापि  
 ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥८३॥  
 ये सप्तरतनामय तत्र केचिद्  
 ये ताम्रिका वा तथ कांसिका वा।  
 कारापयीषु सुगतान बिम्बा  
 ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥८४॥  
 सीसस्य लोहस्य च मृत्तिकाय वा  
 कारापयीषु सुगतान विग्रहान्।

ये पुस्तकर्माय दर्शनीयांस्ते  
 सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥८५॥

The Sanskrit text mentions *pustakarmanaya* or model work. This is an extremely interesting reference as *pusta* indicates model work, used as stage properties for shows or perhaps even for static tableau. According to *Natyashastra*,<sup>12</sup> *pusta* or model work was of three kinds. The first was *sandhima* which included productions made from joining pieces of bamboo or birch (*kilinja*) and covering them with cloth. The second was called *vyajima*. Here, some mechanical means (*yantra*) were used for moving the model, such as a string. The third was *vestima*, where a covering of lac was used. In general, mountains, vehicles, *vimanas* or *pagodas*, banners, *nagas*, etc. were included in *pusta*. Does this mean that some sort of Buddhist shows or static tableaux (*jhanki*) were shown before the people? One is reminded of Rock Edict IV of Ashoka, where he says that he showed divine spectacles (*divyanirupani*) of pagodas, elephants and masses of fire to the people. The pillar relief of the eastern gate of Sanchi Mahastupa shows the seven *vimanas* of the gods and the *aggikhandani* is a recurrent motif at Amravati.

In Central Asia, such tableaux could be easily credible as paintings often showcased

performances of the stories from the *sutras*, accompanied by dance and music. That the worship was accompanied by musical instruments and dance is seen in many paintings of Dunhuang. The *Sadharmapundarikasutram* mentions at least fourteen types of musical instruments, percussion (both membraphonic and idiophonic), wind and string as also the *jalataranga (jalamanuka)*, which one should play or cause to be played, for the worship of the Sugata.<sup>13</sup>

वाद्या च वादापित येहि तत्र  
 भेर्याऽथ शंखाः पटहाः सुघोषकाः।  
 निर्नदिता दुन्दुभयश्च येहि  
 पूजाविधानाय वराग्रबोधिनाम्॥६०॥  
 वीणाश्च ताला पणवाश्च येहि  
 मृदंग वंशा तुणवा मनोज्ञाः।  
 एकोत्सवा वा सुकुमारका वा  
 ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥६१॥  
 वादापिता झल्लरियोऽपि येहि  
 जलमण्डका चर्पटमण्डका वा।  
 सुगतान उद्दिश्यथ पूजनार्थं  
 गीतं सुगीतं मधुरं मनोज्ञम्॥६२॥

The *Natyashastra* mentions three different types of musical instruments. The Chinese text of the *Lotus Sutra* refers to the beating of drums, blowing the conch, playing the flute, panpipe,

lute (q'in), harp (kong'hou), p'ip'a, small and big cymbals.

In Cave 23 of the Mogao Caves, there is a beautiful illustration of the *dharma deshana* and the *upayakaushalya* of the Buddha (Plate 3). The upper part of the painting shows heavy clouds, rain and harvesting being done. This relates to the fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, *Aushadhipravarta* or the parable of medicinal herbs. This parable states that the clouds pour down rain equally, though the vegetation receives it in accordance with their distinct aptitudes and capacities. The teaching of the Buddha (*dharma deshana*) is itself compared to this rain from heaven. This teaching, though fundamentally the same in essence, operates differently for different people. The artist has given a panoramic view of the rural life surrounded with fields, mountains and charming landscapes. However, the figures are rendered in a minimalist style. The farmers are shown tilling their land while the children are casually playing. The use of turquoise green adds an unusual touch to the vast green landscape of the mural.

एतादृशी काश्यप धर्मदेशना  
 मेघेन वा वारि समं प्रभुक्तम्।  
 बह्वी विवर्धन्ति महौषधीयो  
 मनुष्यपुष्पाणि अनन्तकानि॥४२॥  
 स्वप्रत्ययं धर्मं प्रकाशयामि



Plate 4: Burning House, Cave 98, Dunhuang. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig.2.2.



Plate 5: Burning House, Cave 420, Dunhuang, 581- 618 CE, Sui Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.3.



Plate 6: Burning House and Three Carts, Cave 420, Sui Dynasty, 581- 618 CE. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig.2.4.

कालेन दर्शमि च बुद्धबोधिम्।  
उपायकौशल्यु ममैतदग्रं  
सर्वेष चो लोकविनायकानाम्॥४३॥

*Such, O kasyapa, this is the teaching of Dharma. It is similar to the rain, which falls from the clouds. Many great plants grow thereby and numberless human-flowers. I manifest the Dharma which is self-dependent and in time I show the enlightenment of the Buddha. This is my highest upayakaushalya, the upayakaushalya*

*of the lords of all, the teachers of the world (the Buddhas).*<sup>14</sup>

The lower part of the painting relates to the *upayakaushalyaparivarta* or the *Fang Pien* chapter. It depicts the *stupas* which have been erected and their worship by dance and music. It also depicts children building *stupas* in the sand. The idea conveyed is that the teachings are received by people according to their capacity as also that the people express their faith in diverse ways.

Wall paintings (*chitrabhittishu*) should be made. The figures painted should be auspicious and endowed with the plasticity of limbs.

ये चित्रभित्तीषु करोन्ति विग्रहान्  
परिपूर्णगात्रान् शतपुण्यलक्षणान्।  
लिखेत्स्वयं चापि लिखापयेद्वा  
ते सर्वि बोधाय अभूषि लाभिनः॥८६॥

Such painted images should be worshipped with flowers and incense. In this second chapter, we see that the scribe, the architect, the sculptor, the painter, the musician and performer can all be the recipients of immeasurable merit. Ultimately, however, one may worship a painted or sculpted Buddha image only by a single flower.<sup>15</sup>

पुष्पेण चैकेन पि पूजयित्वा  
आलेख्यभित्तौ सुगतान् बिम्बान्।  
विक्षिप्तचित्ता पि च पूजयित्वा  
अनुपूर्वं द्रक्ष्यन्ति च बुद्धकोव्यः॥६४॥

There are some basic ideas which underlie the parables of different chapters of the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* and these stories are well illustrated in Dunhuang.

- The concept of the compassion of Buddha: the idea of the Buddha as a loving father, using various expedients. This is well illustrated in the story of the Burning House
- The use of illusory means, as for example, in the parable of the Conjured City
- The supreme power of devotional surrender, illustrated in the chapter of Avalokiteshvara or Kuan Yin
- The doctrine of universal redemption, illustrated in the chapter of Devadatta

#### The Parable of the Burning House:

The idea of the Buddha as a loving father is expounded in more than one place. In the third chapter of *Sadharmapundarikasutram*, we have the story or parable of the Burning House (Plate 4). There is a rich man with many children. They live in a spacious but decaying house, with all sorts of reptiles and animals infesting it. A fire breaks out. The children, playing games, ignore the cries of their father (Plates 5 and 6). He resorts to expedient means to induce them to come out. The father shouts to them that he has three kinds of carts that they had long wanted, a cart pulled by a goat, pulled by a deer, and by an

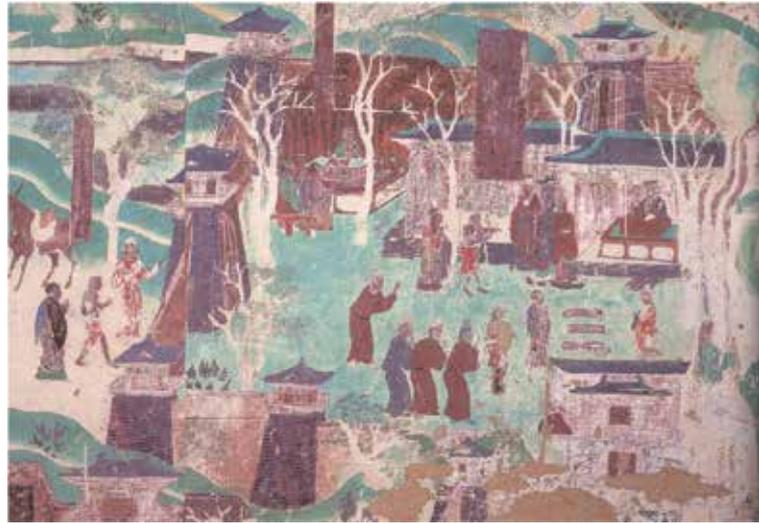


Plate 7: Parable of the Conjured City, Cave 217, Dunhuang, 712-781 CE, High Tang Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.5.

ox. Immediately, they race outdoors. Having coaxed them to safety, he gives them a much finer carriage, adorned with many jewels and drawn by a white ox.

The burning house of the parable is comparable to the burning *samasara* or world as described in the second sermon at Gaya.<sup>16</sup> The flames are the suffering of birth and death. The rich man is the Buddha who appears in the troubled world to save the people. The children are all the living beings and the games in which they are absorbed are worldly pleasures. The three kinds of carts originally promised represent the three vehicles or provisional teachings and the great white ox carriage symbolizes the supreme vehicle of Buddhahood. Even though the mural is rendered in a compact fashion with box-like compartments, the overall depiction is conceived as a controlled design. The depiction of the figures and animals is in a natural and life-like manner.

In another set of paintings from Dunhuang, we see a similar depiction but it lacks the charming quality and harmony of the previous style. There is a limited colour palette. One can see that the panoramic view and sophistication of style is not present here. The parable is represented with a set of dogs and other wild animals in front of the house. This follows the exact text-image coordination. This is a continuation of the same scene with three carts drawn up. The three children are standing outside the narrow door of the burning house.

The application of thick blue, green and white colour over the congested spaces brings out an element of chaos and fear as also expounded in the parable.

### The Parable of the Conjured City:

The Buddha imparts grace, but in the world of illusion, he sometimes utilizes illusory means. In the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* this is illustrated in the chapter of *Purvayoga* i.e., the parable of the Conjured City (Plate 7). Some people wish to travel to a treasure land but the path is difficult. Their leader, seeing them tired and dispirited, conjures up a magical city for their rest with lofty towers and splendid city gates. Thereafter, when



Plate 8: Bodhisattva Leading the Way, Cave 17, Dunhuang, Late Tang period, colour on silk, 80.5 x 53.8 cm. Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogao\\_Caves#/media/File:Anonymous-Bodhisattva\\_Leading\\_the\\_Way.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mogao_Caves#/media/File:Anonymous-Bodhisattva_Leading_the_Way.jpg)

they are refreshed, he dissolves the city and leads them to their destination. The panoramic view continues to be represented in a natural manner. The city is circumscribed with boundary walls and bastions topped with watch towers. Inside the city, there are a number of Chinese-styled pavilions and other buildings (as also mentioned in the text). The human figures are dressed in traditional Chinese robes.

The parable can be understood as, the guide is the Tathagata, the path is the path of *dharmma*, the treasure is the attainment of *bodhi* and the liberation from suffering in the world, the illusory city is *maya* or worldly distractions. The group of people are tired because the path of *dharmma* is arduous. Thus, Buddha, whose ultimate nature is *dharmakaya* manifests himself as *nirmankaya* for instructing common mortals. He, also, sometimes creates phantom beings (*mayapurusha*) to give instructions to the monks as in the *Shatasahasrikaprajnapamita*.

### Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara

Of all the Bodhisattvas mentioned in *Sadharmapundarikasutram*, Avalokiteshvara is the most significant as he is blessed by the Buddha for his compassion towards the people in suffering. 'Avalokiteshvara' means "the lord of the compassionate glance". In Chinese, it seems, that the word Avalokiteshvara was broken into three different syllables *Ava+loka+ishvara* or *Ava+loka+svara* which becomes *svara* here. The meanings of the words indicated were joined together. *Ava* is *avaloka* here, meaning to 'observe', then *loka* is world and *svara* is sound. Thus, we have *kuan* to observe, *shih* or world and *yin* sound. Therefore, Kuan Shih Yin or "He who observes the sounds of the world". In the silk painting of Kuan Yin from Dunhuang, the bodhisattva is seen leading the soul of an aristocratic lady to his paradise (Plate 8). We can see the aesthetic ideal of the Tang period wherein the face is depicted with layered rounded chins, the facial features and overall rendition of the



Plate 9: Prayers to Kuan Yin for protection from robbers, Cave 303, Dunhuang, 581- 618 CE, Sui Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.7.

body is represented in a supple manner with a natural sway.

Avalokiteshvara is the *trata* or saviour. The concept of his love and grace finds its culmination in the twenty-fourth chapter dedicated to Avalokiteshvara in the Sanskrit text of *Sadharmapundarikasutram*. When in crisis, one should call out to Avalokiteshvara or Kuan Yin and the power of chanting his name will rectify any situation. The crisis may be of two types, viz. external or physical calamities that befall one, or struggling with the demons of one's own internal self. If there are robbers with knives, one should cry out loudly (*akrandeta*)



Plate 10: Prayers to Kuan yin for freedom from passions, Cave 303, Dunhuang, 581- 618 CE, Sui Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.9.



Plate 11: Prayers to Kuan Yin for birth of sons and daughters, Cave 303, Dunhuang, 581- 618 CE , Sui Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.10.

the name of Avalokiteshvara and the knives of the robbers will break (Plate 9). We can see a forest setting with pine and willow trees wherein two monks are praying to Avalokiteshvara when attacked by a group of thieves.

Similarly, one can pray to Avalokiteshvara for help when a ship is delivered by a black wind to the land of *rakshasas*. We see a set of three emaciated demonic figures troubling a group of people traveling on a boat. The element of fear and chaos has been added by strong ripples and waves in the water. A person wanting to meditate and be rid of sensual pleasure must pay obeisance (*namaskarakrtva*) to Avalokiteshvara. He will then become rid of passions (*vitraga*) (Plate 10).

Avalokiteshvara is also important for pregnancies. People desirous of sons or beautiful daughters must remember him to get their wishes granted by praying for sons and daughters (Plate 11). Set within the beautiful environment of a Chinese landscape showing several pine trees and some willow trees, Avalokiteshvara is shown seated twice in two Chinese pavilions. He is attended by male and female devotees. Similarly, because of his *upayakaushalya*, he can assume any form to give sermons to his devotees like the form of an official, Brahma and a dragon is assumed here by Avalokiteshvara to save people from suffering (Plate 12).

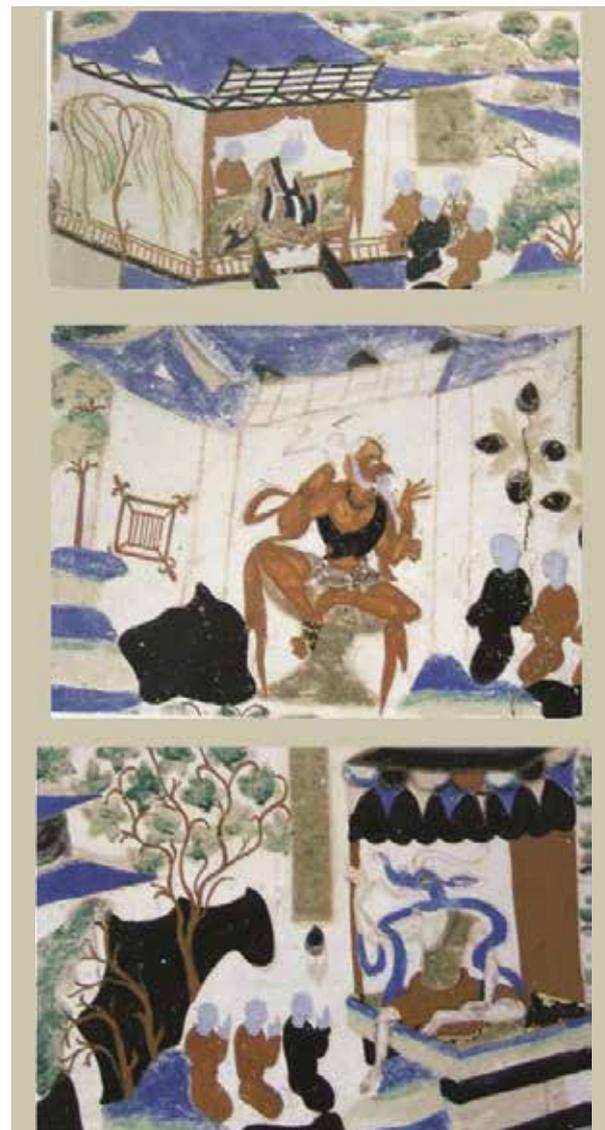


Plate 12: Various forms of Avalokiteshvara, Cave 303, Dunhuang, 581- 618 CE, Sui Dynasty. After Pande, Anupa, ed. *The Art of Central Asia and the Indian Subcontinent in Cross-Cultural Perspective*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2009, Fig. 2.11.

## The Concept of Universal Redermption

The twelfth chapter of Kumarajiva's version is entitled *T'i-p'o-ta-topi'n* or the Devadatta chapter. This is an independent chapter in the Chinese version but in the Sanskrit version, it is part of the eleventh chapter *StupaSannidarsana*. One of the important stories here is that of the *naga kanya* (serpent maiden) attaining Buddhahood. The enlightenment of women represented by the *naga kanya* illustrate a significant aspect of worship and a universal possibility of Buddhahood that the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* teaches. The *naga kanya* first transforms into a man perfecting the bodhisattva practices, then sits on a jeweled lotus flower, and attains enlightenment to expound the true dharma in the ten directions.

It is widely known that in all his past births, the Buddha was never born as a woman. The story of the serpent maiden refutes the idea that women could never attain enlightenment. It reveals that the power of the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* enables all people equally, to attain Buddhahood, in a single birth, without undergoing *kalpas* of austere practices. In fact, in the chapter of the *Bhaisajjarajapurvayoga*, it is said that if a woman who hears this spiritual canon, practises it as preached, at the end of this life she shall straightaway go to the Sukhavati paradise. We see here the idea of universal redemption in the *Sadharmapundarikasutram*.

### Endnotes :

- 1 *Sadharmapundarikasutram*, edited by Nalinaksha Dutt (Calcutta: Asiatic Society, 1953), ch.16. It may be noted that the Sanskrit of the *Sadharmapundarikasutram* is not in chaste, classical Sanskrit, but is near what has been termed *Buddhist Hybrid Sanskrit*.

- 2 Ibid., ch.26.
- 3 Ibid., ch.26.
- 4 Ibid., ch.22.
- 5 Ibid., ch.16 &22.
- 6 Ibid., ch.22.
- 7 Ibid., ch.26.
- 8 Ibid.,ch. 26.
- 9 Ibid., ch.2.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 *Natyashastra* of Bharatawith the commentary of *Abhinavagupta*, edited by M. Ramakrishna Kavi (Baroda: Gaekwad's Oriental Series, 1956-1964), 21.5-9.
- 13 *Sadharmapundarikasutram*, ch.2.
- 14 Ibid., ch.5.
- 15 Ibid., ch.2.
- 16 Here, all the *dharmas* or phenomena are said to be burning:  
*Sabbam, bhikkhave, adittam.Kim ca, bhikkhave, sabbamadittam? Cakkhuadittam, rupaaditta... manoaditto, dhammaaditta, manovinnanamadittam... upayeshiadittamtivadami. Mahavagga, Adittapariyayo*, edited by Bhikku J. Kashyap (Bihar: Nav Nalanda Mahavihara Publications, 1956), 34.

### Photo Credit:

- The photographs are from *The Art of Central Asian and the Indian Subcontinent – In Cross-Cultural Perspective*.
- The Complete Collection of Dunhuang Grottoes, vol.7, The paintings Illustrating the *Saddharmapundarika Sutra*, Dunhuang Academy (Hong Kong: Hong Kong Commercial press, 1999).

# Scholasticism and its Nalanda Connection

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In the history of scholastic endeavour, Nalanda has been one of the premier academic Institutions in India. It played a very crucial role in shaping up Asian civilization to a larger extent. In the Central Asian countries Tibet is not an exception that has been influenced by the glorious tradition of Nalanda. Its glory and grandeur has been well documented by Chinese and Tibetan travellers. Though Nalanda was a Buddhist University, many other secular subjects were also available for study here. In the Buddhist tradition it was known as Shri Nalanda Mahavihara where thousands of students came for Buddhist learning from different parts of neighbouring countries.

Out of the many disciplines at Nalanda, Buddhist philosophy and logic were one of the sought — after subjects taught in Nalanda. Scholars from all over the Indian subcontinent and neighbouring countries came here. Tibetans took a keen interest in Buddhist philosophy and logic and took it back to their homeland and further developed and preserved it for posterity. They have meticulously translated the sacred teachings with the help of Indian masters in their own languages and preserved them in their monasteries.

Since its inception, Nalanda has been one of the most wanted destinations of pilgrimage and learning for Tibetans. In the contemporary world of academia, this monastic institution has excelled in three major areas of scholastic activities. The scholastic hallmark of Nalanda has been its investigative and critical learning in philosophy, esoteric teaching and practice and a strong bond of a teacher-taught relationship.

His Holiness the Dalai Lama keeps reminding his students and followers about how Tibetan scholarship is indebted to those great Buddhist masters of Shri Nalanda who have shaped Tibetan understanding of Buddhist teachings and spiritual practice in its pristine form. Expressing his gratitude and appreciation for this glorious legacy of those Madhyamika and Ygacara philosophers he has composed invocative verses for each of the seventeen great adept scholars and spiritual masters associated with this ancient monastic institution of Shri Nalanda.<sup>1</sup> He has also commissioned a composite thangka painting depicting those seventeen masters of Nalanda. It is thought that it would not be out of place to include its brief summary here as given below.

The thangka painting of course begins with the Buddha Shakyamuni followed by the Acarya Nagarjuna (first century BC-AD) who had propounded the Madhyamika system of thought and elucidated the meaning of emptiness.

The lineage continues with the accomplished master Aryadeva who advanced Nagarjuna's Madhyamaka tradition.

The one who had further crystallised and explained Nagarjuna's profound thought was the arya Budhhapalita.

The learned master Bhavaviveka followed Nagarjuna, 'and accepted the shared perception of valid cognitions and external objects'.

The acarya Chandrakirti eliminated the idea of duality of 'appearance and emptiness' and 'expounded the profound and vast Middle Way System'.

The acarya Shantideva paid obeisance to his skilful teachings on compassion and its profound meaning.

The one who was well versed in expounding both 'the Middle Way and valid cognition' the Mahaupadhyaya Shantarakshita, is adored for his sacrifices for introducing Buddha's teachings in Tibet.

The Master Kamalshila is remembered for his thorough explanation on Shamath and Vipashyana and his guidance on how to meditate upon the 'Middle Way thought, free from extremes' to the people of Tibet.

The great master Asanga is praised for his propagation of Mahayana and the formulation of the 'Mind Only System' in the Buddhist tradition of spiritual learning.

The acarya Vasubandhu is saluted for he is the second omniscient (kun mkhyen gnyis pa), the elucidator of 'philosophical theories' and holder of the seven treatises on Abhidharma.

The distinguished disciple of Vasubandhu, logician par excellence, who through his discerning logical reasoning of the scripture and teaching becomes luminous master, the acarya Dignaga, is venerated with utmost devotion.

Well versed in the subtle differences in the logical implications of both Buddhist and non Buddhist philosophical views and he who holds profound conviction on the 'Sautrantika and Chittamatra' is the eloquent Acarya Dharamkirti.

Arya Vimuktisen is praised as he had mastered the Perfection of Wisdom, its subtle meaning and practice as 'the Middle Way System' in accordance with the Asanga and Vasubandhu tradition.

The Acarya Haribhdra is known for his contribution towards making a lucid explanation of the Prajnaparamita 'in line with Maitreynath's pith instruction'. The esteemed Gunaprabha is one of the celebrated disciples of Vasubandhu who has explained Pratimoksha and integrated the Vinaya 'in accordance with the Mulasarvastivadin system' which is followed by the Tibetans.

Acarya Shakyaprabha is the renowned Vinaya holder who has explained in detail 'the flawless Vinaya teaching'. He insisted on the practice of precepts in purity and entirety.

Last but not the least is the Rev. Atisha Diapmkara Shrijnana who, for the cause of Buddhism had gone to Tibet and taught how to bridge sutra and tantra and showed 'the paths of the three individuals' complete in its meaning and practice.

In the Gelugpa Buddhist tradition these seventeen masters are highly venerated as individuals and as manifestations of Buddha-hood. But besides them there have been many more celebrated siddha-acaryas like Guru Padmasambhava, Naropa and others who belonged to the Nalanda tradition of scholarship. Their lineage and legacy is well preserved and continued by the Nyingma and Dugpa Buddhist traditions even to this day not only in Tibet but also among the entire Himalayan Buddhist communities. The Dalai Lama himself has imparted enmass Kalacakra initiation, on many occasions in many places in these remote areas, a tradition that has its close affiliation with Nalanda.

According to the historian Padmakarpo (1526-1592) while Tsi Lu pa is the great Kalacakra, Naropa is the lesser Kalacakra; when Tsi Lu pa went to Nalanda from south India, Naropa, the presiding abbot, entered into disputation and was vanquished; and thereafter Naropa studied Kalacakra under Tsi Lu pa and was initiated in the Kalacakra tradition. Naropa wrote a commentary on the Sekoddesa and initiated Atisha into its secrets. Atisha later systematised a new chronology starting with 1027 AD, the year of the introduction of the Kalacakra in Tibet. Padma Karpo himself was also reputed to be the author of a commentary on Kalacakra.<sup>2</sup>

The tradition of Guru-disciple relationship has been handed down to us from ancient times in India as we see from the texts. The Tibetans took over this practice from the Indians and to this day they faithfully follow it in a traditional manner.

This close relationship has not only been a means of passing on moral teachings to the disciple, but also of preserving the continuity of it by personal example.

A classic example of Naropa, the abbot of Nalanda monastery can be cited here. His quest for spiritual learning under the Tilopa has become the standard yardstick for evaluation of the teacher-taught relationships. Naropa is regarded as one of the patriarchs of the Kagyupa lineage. He is equally recognised and respected by other religious traditions as an exemplary disciple. Here at Nalanda, the selection of a disciple was done with rigorous testing of his capability in grasping knowledge and endurance in facing hardships. Patience was judged by exposing the disciple to a bet of rough and shock treatments. Such endless trials made his disciple swing between success and failure. Success was supposed to make him complacent and failure to make him realise where he had gone wrong and gave him chance to start it again. During the course of such oscillation things were seen afresh. For an intelligent disciple, a mistake is a lesson and success is mere by accomplishment of a task. The master Tilopa brought up his disciple Naropa with practical experiences of Buddhist teachings and made him well accomplished and adept and it is because of him that the tradition continues. Here emphasis was not much on the textual study of the Buddha's teachings but on the realisation of it through practice on the ground, along with the reality of life. Thus the teacher occupied supreme place in the spiritual life of the disciple and became the first refuge for the disciple.

"At a certain point the teacher transmits entirety of his understanding to a disciple. But the disciple must be worthy and brought to a state of complete receptivity is one of the messages of Naropa's life. And so, in his turn, Naropa led his disciple through the same preparatory process, and Marpa led his disciple Milarepa. Milarepa's biography tells us that Marpa had him build a house out of stone. He had hardly finished the house when Marpa told him to tear the house down and begin over again. This happened again

and again. We need not ask ourselves whether this is a historical fact. The symbolic message is quite plain. Marpa asked him to do something and the Milarepa reacted with pride, feeling that he could do it. Milarepa did it his way without waiting for any instruction. Naturally, the results were not satisfactory and there was no alternative but to have him tear down and build again from the beginning".<sup>3</sup>

Yet another person who has left on everlasting impression on the scholastic system was the Atisha Dipamkara. He too, like Naropa, belonged to a royal family. For the period, that he was at Nalanda and later when he shifted to Vikramshila monastery as the Vikramshila, both Vikramshila and Nalanda were interrelated monasteries. Vikramshila as a centre for Mantrayana did include in its syllabi philosophy and pramana teaching. Most of the scholars associated with Vikramshila embodied all these disciplines in their education and in their writings.<sup>4</sup>

The six outstanding scholars (Pandita) known as the 'gatekeepers' were responsible for maintaining a high standard of education at the Vihara. Likewise, at Nalanda the purpose of the gatekeepers was to guard the door of admission. The gatekeepers were responsible for specific disciplines. Students seeking admission were expected to demonstrate their capabilities by engaging with at least one of them in a debate.<sup>5</sup>

Similarly Somapuri, a single largest monastery planned on a Vishwavajra, was closely related with Nalanda. Atisha (980-1054) lived here and helped Tsondui Senge and Nagtsho in translating Bhavaviveka's commentary on Madhyamakaratnapradipa into Tibetan.<sup>6</sup> According to Taranath, Atisha became an Upadhyaya at Vikramshila and also monitored the teaching programme of Odantapuri.

"According to tradition, one of the principal masters who brought Vajrayana teachings from India was Atisha Dipamkara. Atisha prepared the ground by teaching surrendering. In fact he was known as the 'refuge' teacher because of the extent to which he emphasised taking refuge

in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha. Taking refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma and the Sangha is a process of surrendering. Tremendous emphasis was laid by Atisha on surrendering, giving, opening, not holding onto something”<sup>7</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Nalanda has been closely associated with the evolution of Buddhism. Since the seventh century AD, it profoundly impressed every walk of life and spirituality. The monk, monastery, education and healthcare were all in one way or the other directly associated with it. It was during the seventh century when Tibetans first crossed the Himalayan passes and opened their boundaries for outsiders. The role of the benevolent king Srongtsan Gampo (617-650) added a new dimension to history and culture. Srongtsan Gampo besides going for territorial expansion of his kingdom, had also shown interest in taking Buddha's message to the roof of the world. To create a strong and effective system of communication for his state administrative affairs and to cater to the need of a writing system, he sent Thonmi, the son of Anu to India. Thonmi during his six-year stay in India learnt Buddhist tenets and diligently brought out a writing system for better and efficient communication that later became a wonderful medium of translation for Buddhist works for its neighbouring Buddhist communities and Thonmi became 'Sambhota' to his beloved Indian friends. He was one of the illustrious alumnus of Nalanda. It is believed that both Xuan Tsang and Thonmi were at Nalanda during the middle of the seventh century but there is no evidence available that might shed some information about their interaction.

It is considered that Thonmi, son of Nangdak of Lhonyal, was the incarnation of the wisdom deity Manjushri. Both the king Srongtsan Gampo and Thonmi were of the same age. Thonmi was chosen to be sent to India for studying Sanskrit and learn Buddhist scriptures and he left Tibet for India in 633 AD at the age of fourteen, when the king Srongtsan Gampo was just seventeen. King Srongtsan Gampo sent gifts for the Indian King

and in return the Indian King sent Ratnameghsutra and Saddharampundarika — Buddhist texts — as presents. He was in India for six or seven years. During these years he studied under the Lipikara and the Devavid Sangha.<sup>8</sup>

During the eighth century when the king Thisrong detsan turned down Sangshi's request for permission to visit India in search of good law, the king observing his interest in righteous law appointed him as an ambassador (kha blon) of the Mangyul. Later without caring for his commitment he paid a visit to the Mahabodhi temple at Bodhgaya and offered worship and offerings at Shri Nalendra which caused rain during winter.<sup>9</sup>

The Thi Tsugdetsan (Ralpacan) consolidated the translation works carried out by his predecessors and generously supported Indian Buddhist masters and the lotsabas for their collaborative activities. While doing so, Ralpacan caused modifications in the existing literary language, standardised Buddhist terminology and revised the old translations into this system.

Odantapuri Mahavihara was a major centre of the learning for Parajnaparamita and Guhyasamaj teachings. This monastery was constructed on the model of the cosmos with Sumeru in the middle with four islands spreading around. Thus Upadhyayas Shantarakshita and Padmasambhava conceived that this auspicious and spectacular design could be the model for the first monastic complex, called Smaye (bsam yas).

In due course of time numerous Indian Buddhist masters, beginning with Shantrakshita to Smrtijnana Kirti of Nalanda Mahavihara visited Tibet at the invitation of Tibetan rulers. With them important Buddhist scriptures also went. Many young monks, like Thonmi, Rinchen Zangpo, Dogmi, Marpa and Chaglo Chojjepal etc. descended to the Indian plains and braved the hostile climate and fought with mosquitoes and returned back with the treasure of Buddhist texts and learning. Thus, scholasticism owes much to Nalanda for its prized possession of Vajrayana Buddhist learning and advancement of its spiritual practices.

There was a marked shift in the centres of Buddhist learning from Indian plains to the high Himalayas during the beginning of the twelfth century AD. Bakhtiyar Khilji's invasion on Magadh and his subsequent seizure of the great monasteries further accelerated the process. It certainly proved the last blow to Buddhism which was losing ground due to its own inner weaknesses. Pan chen Shakya Shri who visited Magadh and Orissa when Bakhtyar Khilji conquered Bihar was present at the time of the sacking of the monasteries of Odantapuri and Vikramshila in 1203 AD and from there he retired to Tibet.<sup>10</sup> Yet another monk pilgrim Chag Lotsaba Chojepal (1197-1264) has left a vivid description about Magadha immediately after the ransacking of Buddhist monasteries by Bakhtiyar.<sup>11</sup>

Passion for higher scholarship and spiritual learning was so high that anyone even with a meagre resource and courage undertook the long, perilous pilgrimage towards the roof of the world. On the lines of Nalanda legacy later on, the Himalayan scholar-practitioners have historically shown enormous enterprise in their search for good teachers and teachings, and have been willing to travel great distances to contact them.<sup>12</sup>

The well trained disciples of these great Indian Buddhist masters rekindled the inner strength of Buddhism by transplanting the Nalanda scholastic legacy to their fertile land of spiritual quest. This has yielded the desired result and today it has seen a worldwide diffusion of Buddhism due to the assistance and initiative taken by such scholarship.

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# The Molla of Kinnaur and Lahual Spiti in Himachal Pradesh

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**T**he Buddhist oratorical cultural tradition or Buddhist narrative account is based on both textual and oracle knowledge in Spiti and Kinnaur in Himachal Pradesh. This cultural tradition is widely put into cultural practice in Kinnaur and Lahual Spiti. In the Tibetan language it is known as 'Molla' which means in its most basic sense to say, "to speak". Oratorical cultural tradition is concerned mainly with the folklore of the area.

## **The origin of the word 'Molla':**

'Molla' is a word that is derived from different Tibetan-English dictionaries. Molla, in Islam, also means 'God' but, in the context of Buddhism it means 'narrative accounts' wherein it means 'to say, to speak' with regard to historical sources. In general, 'Mol' is used in Tibetan to create or form the word meaning, in the reciprocal types of speech or narration where it engages in back-and-forth discussion. In other words, it is an account given by the speaker to a listener or group of listeners.

## **The place of Molla in Tibetan ritual practices:**

There is a religious connection between the Molla and Tibetan culture. Molla in fact, refers to rituals. The occasion for their recitation is through Buddhist ceremony is considered as a formal exchange of cultural practices between the communities.

In Buddhist traditions, primarily the work of the lay community is to provide the material support that allows the monastic culture to exist. In return, the monastic community is expected to teach the lay community from time to time through various forms of advice. When a certain disaster occurs, the lay patrons commonly ask the monastic community to intercede on their behalf. The patrons make their request for help in formal ways, accompanied with offerings. This request is directly made to the leader of the monastic community while being seated on a throne as head of an assembly of monks. Nowadays, in Tibetan monasteries in India and Nepal, the supplicant prostrates three times before the assembly and shrine.

## **Dedication of Merit in Molla**

In spite of differences of structure, and physical form, at the end of the Molla in all of them, is a request in writing by patrons, which includes a request of offering and dedication in the religious assembly. Many of the lay patrons probably had no idea of the exact process by which these benefits were supposed to be achieved; they simply made their offering and relied on the religious community to do the rest. The learned patrons and religious masters consider it to be one of the main tasks for achieving the desired ends. Therefore, in Tibet and Nepal it is called as "dedication of merit". This practice is important in

Tibet and Nepal and is widely known as “speech making”.

**Molla in Kinnaur and Spiti:**

Kinnaur has a number of Buddhist historical and narrative accounts. Kinnaur’s historicity goes back to the Mashu region of Shimla, on 1 May 1960. Earlier, it was known by different nomenclatures i.e., ‘Kanawar’, ‘Kanaur’, ‘Kanauring’, ‘Koonawar’ etc. Kinnaur shares its eastern boundary with Tibet towards the north eastern part of Himachal Pradesh. The historical evidence reveals that during the independence of India in 1947, Kinnaur had been part of Rampur Bushahr state. The people of this area belong to a mixed race of Khash, Kirat and Munde races. In this area, both Hinduism and Buddhism have prevailed from ancient times but the cultural practices are heavily Buddhist. Different sects of Tibetans are scattered in the upper and lower regions of Kinnaur. Even though, the narrative traditions in Kinnaur are influenced by the Bon religion, this influence can be seen in the Himalayan region before the 7th century CE.

Today, the Molla tradition has gained immense popularity. Spiti, as we know, lies on the basin of the Spiti River, including that of its main affluent,

the PIN Valley, down almost to its confluence with the Satluj, with an area of about 2,931 square miles. Earlier, Spiti was pronounced as, “Piti”. This area is ruled by Rajas, bearing the surname or suffix “Sena.” Some scholars describe Spiti as the “Middle Land”, because it lies between the border of Ladakh and Tibet. Spiti seems improbable since the copper plate referred to may have been granted by one of the earlier Rajas, bearing the name of Samudra-Sena. Spiti was invaded by the Tibetans and the pre-Buddhist Hindu dynasty was then probably overthrown. It seems that the rulers of Spiti were “nonos” from the very beginning, they were also rulers of Ladakh. It was an autonomous area until nominally attached to Ladakh. In Spiti, the prevalent region is of Tibetan Buddhism.

**These are various types of oratorical cultural traditions in Spiti and Kinnaur:**

The cultural traditions of Spiti and Kinnaur are similar. Therefore the historical narratives are categorized in different forms of Molla.

**1. Folk songs**

The ancient tradition of Spiti is the tradition of storytelling and singing of songs. The long snowy



Fig 1: local deity of Kinnaur(Nagas) in the festival of Kinnaur



Fig.2: People of Kinnaur celebrating the festival "fulyiach"(festival of flowers).

winters provide the people a great amount of leisure for festivals, of which songs, dances and dramas are a part and parcel of the festivities. The study of this tradition shows how ancient and how rich is the culture of Spiti. There are Buddhist folk songs, which venerate the great Buddhist abbots and their story. In Kinnaur, songs are also related to women and cultural history. Some songs provide a glimpse of women in the development of household chores, etc. The songs are sung in the local dialect of Kinnaur and Lahul-Spiti. The songs, in Spiti, are a form of Molla (narrative account). These songs are put into practice by creating a strong bond between people and monasteries. While folk songs are sung on special occasions or festivals in Kinnaur like Ukkayang (Fig.2) and in Spiti like Changka, they are also sung in the monasteries on special occasions. Through these songs, one can ascertain the importance of songs in their daily cultural practices.

## 2. Deity speech

In Kinnaur and Lahaul Spiti, an unusual phenomenon of deity possession on humans is seen during many ritual and cultural ceremonies. While there is a confluence of Buddhist and Brahmanical deities in Kinnaur and Lahaul Spiti is one place, which solely consists of Buddhist religion and ritual, in the context of Kinnaur, a few deities are named by the Brahmanical tradition, but ritual practices in that area are totally Buddhist. Buddhist deities are named as Dabla, Naithak, Devu dum etc. Other Brahmanical deities are Nagas (Fig. 1), Kothi devi, Usha devi and Kali etc. All these deities of Kinnaur and Lahul Spiti have their own stories. The Buddhist deities in Kinnaur and Spiti play a significant role during festivals. The possessions of the deity on humans are also seen in Kinnaur and Spiti. The ritual ceremony of this possession includes recitation by the man or woman possessed, narrating the origin of the deity and where he comes from (Fig.5).

## 3. Local narrations

This includes discussion on issues at the village level. It usually begins with greeting one another in the gathering. The local narrator is asked to start the agenda of the assembly, where the person begins to explain the purpose of the assembly. This narration is widely seen at all places of Kinnaur and Lahul Spiti. The local Molla refers to the speech and narrative account or information made among the local people in the village. It could also be storytelling, agenda of the meetings, or special talk on religious issues, or the issues inside the village. For this speech of Molla no expert is required; even local people can start the Molla. This Molla, as already mentioned, is in the local dialect. From region to region, the local dialect keeps changing but the narrative remains the same. For instance, in Spiti a sister is called by the word 'ache' and in the upper region of Kinnaur she is called 'eji', but the meaning is the same. In a general meeting or assembly, one who starts the Molla, begins by paying respect to the senior people of the assembly. Then, the people of the village ask the speaker to start the agenda of the assembly. The speaker sits in the middle while the rest of the assembly sits around him.

## 4. Textual narration

In the upper regions of Kinnaur and Spiti, the Buddhist textual tradition forms an important part of their cultural practice. The text is known as *Molla Rinchen Tawa* or "Molla" in Spiti and Kinnaur. When the text is being read, out of sheer respect, the people listen in pin drop silence. This textual tradition of Molla is practised even till date in the upper regions of Kinnaur i.e Pooh, Namgai, Chulling, Chango, Nako, Hango and Spiti.

### Molla – Text and Context

- a. The text starts with the praise of the goddess of wisdom i.e. Manjushri.
- b. It begins with prostrating for the kings of Tibet, bodhisattvas and the three jewels of Buddhism.
- c. Kings of Tibet.



Fig. 3: Women in traditional dress at Spiti during the marriage ceremony called as "Changka". The name of the dress is 'Sulma'. The women in this attire are ready to perform the tradition called the 'Tashi'.



Fig 4: Traditional dress of Spiti known as 'Rakgo'. This dress is worn during the ceremony and traditional dance called as 'Ghar'.

Further, this text is divided into six parts called "*Molla ka chin*" or things required during the recitation, which includes:

1. A mention of certain countries like Nepal, Bhutan, Mongolian, Tibet and India. Kings, queens, great lamas and ministers are also mentioned in this text.
2. Different styles of prostration in different Buddhist countries.
3. Mention of the administrator of the kingdom.
4. Types of carpets used. Sitting arrangement of queen, king, abbot, law minister and lay people and names of particular sitting styles.
5. Ritual objects used in recitation and its origin.
6. Liquids used in ritual practices.

#### Prostration as given in Molla is defined as

Prostration (Pali: *Panipata*, Skt: *Namas-kar*) during the ritual is meant to show reverence to the Tri Ratana symbol (which means the Buddha, Sangha and Dhamma) and other objects of veneration.

Buddhists believed in the benefits of practising prostration, such as:

1. Provide an experience of paying veneration.
2. Act as to purify defilements, especially conceit.
3. A preparatory act for meditation.
4. Perform an act to gain merit (*karma*).

In western Buddhism, teacher and disciple use prostration as part of the sacred practice itself, while other teachers use or relate to it as a customary liturgical ritual, ancillary to meditation. Prostrations may also subsume *Sadhana* repetitions and *Vinyasa* forms of yogic discipline, such as *Trul Khor*, etc. In Tibetan Buddhism, prostrations are done to purify oneself against delusion, negatives and bad karma. To counteract our bad karma or actions, one can engage in recitation of mantras or the making of offerings through prostration.

#### Prostration Styles in Tibetan Buddhism

- *Gyangchag* or full prostration: In Tibetan *gyang* refers to "reaching out" and *chag* relates to the act of prostration.

- *Kumchag* or partial prostration: It also means prostrating from the knee. In Tibetan *kum* refers "to contracting your body, as opposed to reaching out".
- Symbolic Prostration: Through the motion of hands, generally performed when sitting and standing; often there is no need of space in this prostration.

Each motion of the hand during prostration begins with joining the hands and touching the three places:

- *Ku* - crown of your head (Body)
- *Sung* - Mouth or throat (Speech)
- *Thuk* - Heart (Mind)

The Molla text describes prostration as a kind of greeting and showing respect to the senior or older people. Prostration also depicts the behavior of an individual. In Molla texts, there are also a few names of places or countries with different kinds of prostrations. These are the following:

- In India: *Salam* (Raising hand above forehead and giving salute to others).
- In Tibet and Tawang: *Tashi Delek* (Just folding the two hands and greeting each other politely).
- China: *Nihow* (Holding two folded hands in front of the chest and bending the upper body in greeting the other).

These prostrations are considered to be part of religious customs to show reverence and take respect from others.

### **Sitting during Molla recitation according to the Molla text**

According to the Molla text found in Nepal, there is also an adequate sequence of sitting. The physical proximity with regard to people sitting is

meant to be respectful to the elder people of the clan or a community. Over the years, one finds a great divide between the old practices and new/modern customs.

1. **From an ancient perspective:** The king, queen, abbot, law minister and local audience were the main persons during a general assembly in ancient times.

- The King sat in the middle of the assembly to address the people with his speech.
- The Queen sat beside the king.
- The Abbot sat face to face in the direction of the king to help him solve any pressing issue or problem.
- The Law minister sat on the left side of the king in order to assist him in making an important decision and also to present the laws and regulations of administration to the king.
- The audience sat around the king, queen, law minister and abbot to listen to their speech.

In earlier times, it was necessary for at least one member of the family to be present in the assembly. If any one of them was absent, the king punished him and the punishment was to work as a maid or servant in the administration of the king.

There is a slight change in current Molla rituals when compared with ancient practices. Here, the textual Molla is recited only on special occasions. There is no kind of kingdom administration, but there are a few people who are designated equivalent to the king's administration, like the head monk of the village such as, *Rinpoche* (Extraordinary monk), *Mol ba* (narrator), and senior people of the villages.

- Head Lama: He is the head monk of the village. He sits on the top of the row. His presence is necessary on every occasion or assembly.

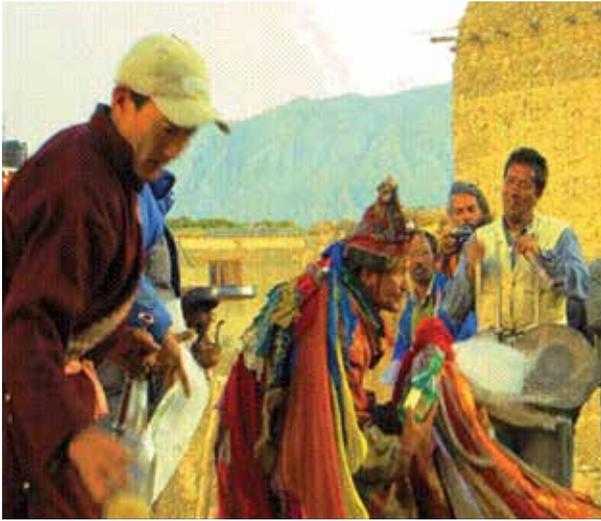


Fig. 5: Oracle deity in Kibber (courtesy by: Pranshu)

- *Rinpoche*: He is the supreme extraordinary person. His presence is mandatory on any occasion and he sits next to the head lama. He helps in performing ritual practices with the head lama in assembly.
- *Molba*: He is the narrator and a very important part of the assembly, without whose presence, the inauguration of the occasion or assembly is not possible. It is not necessary for the narrator to be a monk. Anyone who is familiar with Tibetan reading and recital can initiate the assembly. He is in the middle of the assembly in a standing position.
- Senior or Older People: They sit next to the head lama and *Rinpoche*. They act as advisers to the assembly.
- Villagers: They sit below the senior people just to show respect to them. These people listen to the Molla speech with utmost sincerity and silence.

#### Ritual objects and liquids which are depicted in the textual Molla

- Ritual objects are Vajra (thunderbolt), Rosary, Drums and Plates used during the

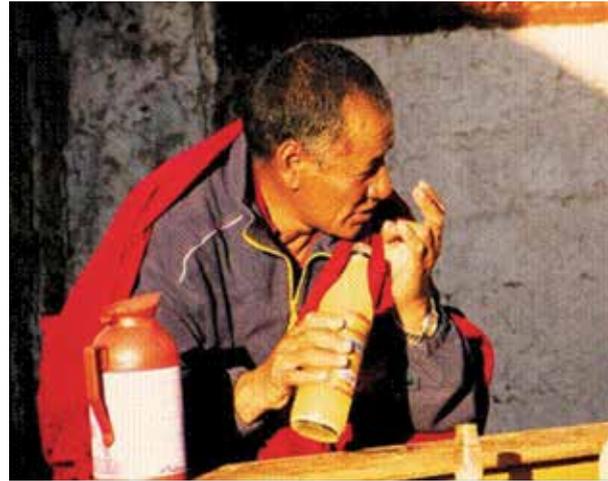


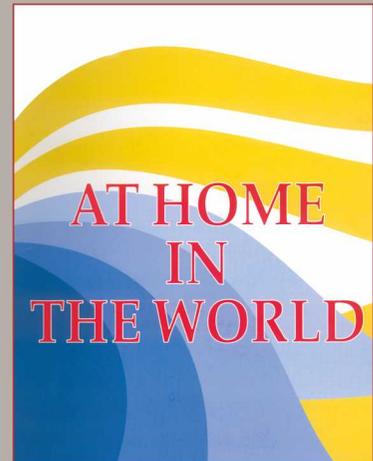
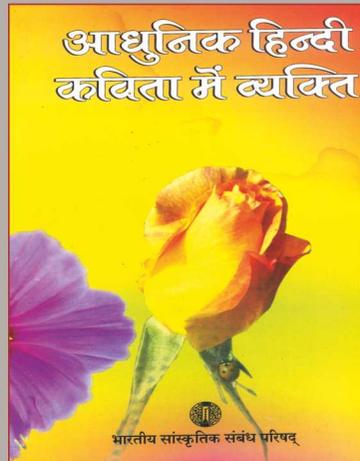
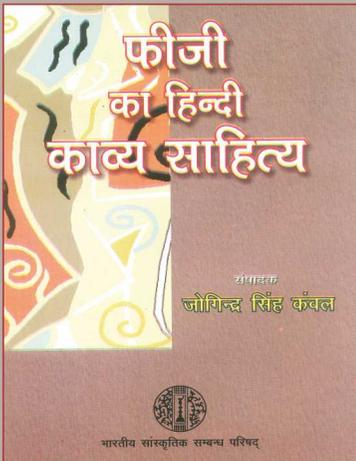
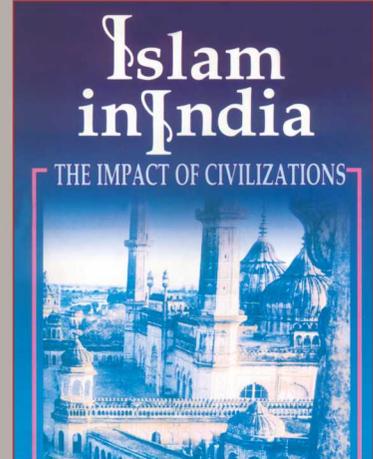
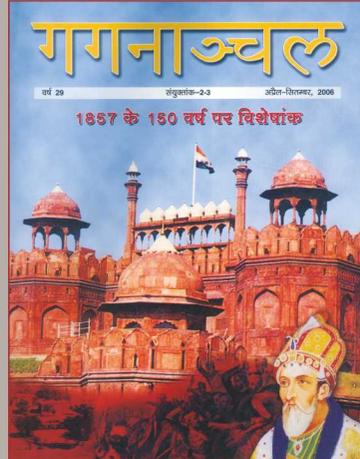
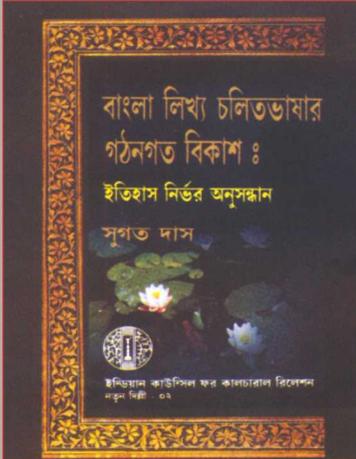
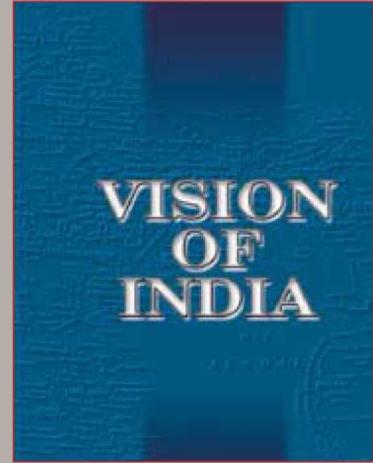
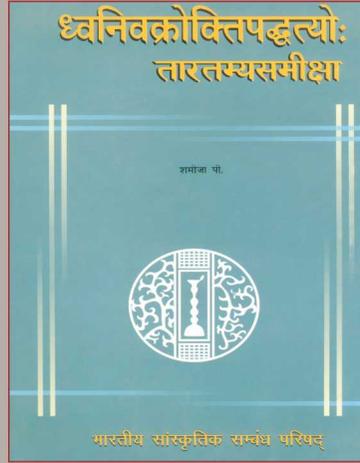
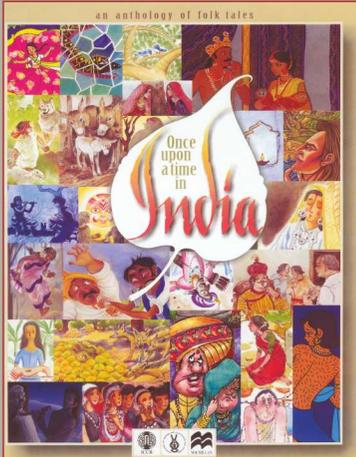
Fig. 6: Lama practising the Molla ritual in Spiti during a marriage ceremony (Courtesy: Pranshu)

performance of the ritual practices. These objects are an important and sacred part of the various rituals and ceremonies.

- Liquids comprise of rice wine, grain wine and grape wine. These are used during ritual performances in Buddhism. (Fig. 6)

#### VI. Conclusion

While comparing the Molla culture of Nepal and textual Molla found in upper Kinnaur and Spiti one finds many differences. The Molla of Nepal is read during the death as well as other occasions, but the textual Molla are read only during the marriage ceremony. In some instances, the people of Spiti, also call it as 'Marriage Recitation'. This text is majorly read during the marriage ceremonies, wherein the genealogy of the bride and groom are narrated. The one who narrates this genealogy is honored with a Tibetan scarf. This is how upper Kinnaur and Spiti put textual Molla into practice. These practices are an important aspect of Himalayan tangible and intangible cultural heritage and it is in dire need of preservation and revival.



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