

## Glimpses of Buddhism in Ladakh

**Dr. Sanjeev Kumar Gautam**

(Lecturer in History)

Central Institute of Buddhist Studies

(Deemed to be University)

Leh Union Territory of Ladakh – 194104, India.

Email: [skgautamcibsleh@gmail.com](mailto:skgautamcibsleh@gmail.com)

**Contact no: 9622026202**

**Abstract:** *Lord Buddha's disciple Arhant Manjhantika visited this Ladakh land and blessed it. Whereupon, the teachings of Lord Buddha reached, aroused a new consciousness in the mind of people. The Buddhism of Ladakh is a fully comprehensive account of history and culture of this remote Himalayan region known as Ladakh. The various aspects of the Buddhism played a very significant role in the daily and social life of the Ladakhi people. In the midst of the ignorant Ladakhis, who were full of superstitious veneration and fear of Lama was a universal man, the servant par excellence. He was the best doctor, astrologer, educator and the best teacher further, by segregating or large proportion of young manhood into monks and enforced celibacy, It checked the increase in population. This social consequence indirectly led to economic prosperity of the Ladakhis. High Lamas often participated in the affairs of Ladakh region. Presently, the 14th Dalai Lama is a supreme controller of spiritual, and he charismatic appeal for sympathy of the humanity in Ladakh.*

**Key Words:** Celibacy, Superstitious, Aura, Ritualistic, Enthusiastically, Ge-lugs-pa sect, Indignant, Paucity Chhagzot, Himis monestery, Alchi monastery.

**Introduction:** The Ladakhi chronicle<sup>1</sup> and available historical records provide fairly adequate information about the Buddhism in Ladakh. Ladakh was known as 'KIE CHHA' and MARYUL<sup>2</sup> in earliest times and then had special position in western Himalayan region as a strong hold of Buddhism. According to the Ladakhi legend: Lord Buddha's disciple Arhant Manjhantika visited this land and blessed it. Whereupon, the teachings of Lord Buddha reached, aroused a new consciousness in the mind of people.

***My purpose of this research paper is to find out how far Buddhism influenced the cultural development of Ladakh region, to judge this impact of Buddhism with some details about the origin, different organization of Buddhism in Ladakh. monastic sects and organization of Buddhism in Ladakh.***

Some scholars have such conjecture that the Buddhism was first introduced to Ladakh during the reign of the emperor Ashoka, the greatest emperor of the Mauryan dynasty, Ashoka succeeded to this great empire in 273 BC. Even during those days Kashmir was a great learning centre and it is said that Buddhism spread rapidly in India from Kashmir to Ceylon.<sup>3</sup> It penetrated into Nepal and later reached Tibet, China and Mongolia. In 263BC, Ashoka sent

Buddhist missionaries into Ladakh, where they propagated the peaceful doctrine of Shakyamuni and the religion of the Ladakh became Buddhism; as it prevailed in India.<sup>4</sup> The first Buddhist temple in Ladakh is said to have been constructed in the Suru valley (Kargil district) during the reign of Ashoka.<sup>5</sup> Ancient stupas built of stone from the time of Ashoka can still be seen in the village of Sumda and Tire in upper Ladakh.

During the Kushan period, Buddhism was further strengthened in Ladakh, and from here it spread into China about the beginning of Christian era.<sup>6</sup> According to Ladakhi legend, the "Kanikastupa" at Sani in Zangskar, was constructed by King Kanishka,<sup>7</sup> the greatest king of Kushan dynasty, because he had one time annexed Ladakh and Baltistan as a part of his empire. Remnants of the Kushan period, such as the 'Avalokitesvara' statue carved on a rock at 'Mulbek' (Kargil District in Ladakh region) and various stone statues in Baltistan and the Suru valley.<sup>8</sup> It was under Kanishka that Buddhism proliferated and became popular religious culture in the western Himalayan region.<sup>9</sup> Kanishka was not only a religious propagandist, but an avid economist also, He devised his foreign policy by combining religion and trade together, and joined hands with the neighbour powers: the Roman in the west, the Chinese in the far east and the Indo-Parthian in the middle to the end. Those entire four powerful, prosperous and ambitious emperors have a consistent policy to expand their trade and commerce beyond their realms. It was in furtherance of that policy that network of Caravan routes had been defined by that power in their territories.

Buddhism continued to flourish for many centuries in Ladakh, and this Himalayan region remained under the deep impact of Indian religion and culture. This is proved by the numerous inscriptions of religious nature found in Ladakh.<sup>10</sup> However, after the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Indian influence in the religion of Ladakh began to abate in the Himalayan region under the influence of 'Guge' the great religious centre. But, as we shall see soon after, with rise of the Yellow hat sect or the 'Gelugpa' in Tibet in the fourteenth century, and coming into existence the institution of Dalai Lama there, Guge influence declined and Ladakh became under the religious impact of Lhasa (capital of Tibet). Buddhism in its Lamaist form was the popular religion in Ladakh.<sup>11</sup>

Some scholars have such view that Lamaism was perverted from the Buddhism. The simple creed as propagated by Lord Buddha was first clothed in mysticism by the Tantrists, Later on, the Lamas impregnated it with the ancient God and spirits of former inhabitants, thus making it a medley of superstition, wild beliefs and contradictions.<sup>12</sup> The doctrine of metempsychosis was curiously blended with tenets and precepts very similar to those of Christianity and with the worship of grotesque divinities.<sup>13</sup>

The number of Lamas<sup>14</sup> was very quite and large. because the giving one Lama to five members of the laity. The strength of the Lamas was maintained by a custom, under which almost every Ladakhi family having more than one son or daughter, sent one of the younger ones to a monastery.<sup>15</sup> The sons of the kings, generally entered the Himis monastery. All the Lamas were ordained to lead a life of celibacy. Women also took to monastic life and became Nun and lived in the monasteries. They are also called Chomos.<sup>17</sup>

The general bulk of the people did not clearly understand about religion but were under influence of the monks. They have believe in reality, the laity took a conveniently lax view of their religious duties.<sup>18</sup>The monks are present on the occasion of birth, marriage and death ceremonies. They administered medicine and saved the laity and some times from the evil designs of bad spirits.<sup>19</sup>They were looked upon as saviors from the pangs of suffering and liberators from the evil of transmigration. In fact, these monks acted as advisors and guide to the laity in every matter and in lay life, there was too much respect for these monks and unquestionable obedience to their wishes. Thus these monks played a very significant role in society and their influence pervaded in every phase of the Buddhist Ladakhi`s life.

## **Findings:**

### **Prayer- Wheel, Manis and Chortens**

In the religious services, prayers occupied on important part, which was entirely the work of the Lamas. Prayer was also performed through mechanical operation i.e., with the help of a prayer wheel. It was made all sizes, from the pocket wheel to be turned on the hand as one walked along, to the common wheel of the villages which was turned by water, and prayed for the community in general.<sup>20</sup> The prayer wheel consisted of a cylinder in which were arranged, one on the top of the other sheets of paper inscribed with the sacred formula and the sheets were wound on the axis. The prayer wheel was to turned in a particular direction doing contrary was considered as Sacrilegious.<sup>21</sup> The Buddhist secret formula “Om Mani Padme Hum” means “Oh, Thou Jewel in the Lotus” was uttered by the laity and the monks alike. The formula seems to have originated in India, and was addressed to “Avaloketeshvara” or Padmamani<sup>22</sup> and had been popular as far back as fourth century AD.<sup>23</sup> Flags inscribed with prayers were fixed at the top of the houses and monasteries: as the fluttered in the wind, they were considered offering prayers for the community in general.<sup>24</sup> In every village and often along the road side in the uninhabited area, there were constructed Mani Walls or stone dykes which varied in shape and size. The Mani Walls were sometimes half a mile long, on which were sometimes a half mile long, on which were flung small pieces of slate or flat stone, inscribed with mystic formula. These slabs were votive offering from all classes of people for the attainment of some particular object.<sup>25</sup> While walking these Manis were to be left on the right hand,<sup>26</sup> people often made considerable detours in order to do so. In large villages there were Chortens or dedicatory pyramids erected in honour of ‘ShakyaThubba’ or of some holy Buddhas.<sup>27</sup> These Chortens consisted of a square basement, surrounded by some steps, on which stood the dome or principal part of the edifice, which in shape was like an inverted truncated cone. The dome was surmounted by a lofty pinnacle, crowned by a sacred crescent-shaped implem.<sup>28</sup>Sometimes on many big rocks on the road side, colossal figures of some deities were carved. All those Manis, Chortens and stone inscriptions represented signs of the people thought for Buddhism.

### **Monasteries and Monastic Organization**

There are sixteen large monasteries in the Ladakh region, But the Archaeological survey of India has taken 11 monasteries, palaces and a stupa including Alchi monastery as protected

monuments of national importance<sup>29</sup>. A process is under way to make Alchi monastery (Vihara) an international monument recognized by UNESCO.<sup>30</sup> A monastery or gompa means a solitary place, Most of monastery are located on mountain sides and secluded. Some perch precariously on the peaks of hills and some are built inside mountain caves. A few monasteries have been built on level ground as well, these include the 1000 year old Alchi monastery. The monasteries are imposing, impressive and spacious buildings. They are heralded by Stupas, Mani walls and prayer wheels. Each monastery has dwelling for its resident monks. These monasteries contain exquisite paintings, gold coated and copper gilded images as well as rare collection of pieces of art, priceless Thangkas (scroll paintings), superb wood work and religious scriptures. Every big monastery has one or more assembly halls, where monks or Lamas perform Pujas. The main assembly halls and temples have images<sup>31</sup> and paintings of Dhyani Buddhas, Buddha Shakyamuni, Budhisattva, Maha Siddha, Arhats, sages, saints, Head lamas of particular monasteries and the celebrities of the Buddhist hierarchy.

Every monastery has a Gonkhang a temple dedicated to Dharm Pala, the guardian of the law. The murals of the monastery depict freely deities. Every monastery has a head Lama, the successive incarnation of the hierarchy, who is held in high esteem by the Lamas as well as the common people. The verandahs of the majority of monasteries are adorned with the murals of Samsara Chakra (The wheel of life), the ‘Lords of four garters’ and the ‘‘Old man of long life.’’ All these big monasteries celebrate their annual festivals regularly. The Lamas present Chams (religious dance dharma) symbolizing of the victory of Truth over evil.<sup>32</sup>

From early times, the kings had made numerous grants of lands to monasteries,<sup>33</sup> and some, like Himis, the monastery of the royal house, held extensive properties. The lands of the monasteries were cultivated by the working Lamas<sup>34</sup> and often these were given a farmer on material basis, that is the tillers handed over half the produce to the monasteries and were exempted from taxation and beggar or free carriage<sup>35</sup> In order to maintain the large establishment of monks and pay the expenses of ceremonials, these monasteries had various avenues of income. Its own endowment lands were the primary source of income.<sup>36</sup> It received alms from the laity and also derived a good income by engaging in trade, and advancing money and grain on loan to the laity.<sup>37</sup> Though sometimes the poor classes were heavily in the debt to these religious institutions, yet they were not harsh creditors. The editor of the Imperial Gazetteer of India remarked:

‘‘When the debtor is hopelessly involved, the monastery take possession of half of his land for a period of three years. The land of restored to the debtor and the debt written off. The monastery will never sue the debtor, nor is land permanently alienated from debt.’’<sup>38</sup> But it is infect, not quite right.

In each big monastery, there were two kinds of Lamas, who worked under two different head Lamas. In spiritual matters ‘‘Kushok’’ was the head. To assist him there was a Lupon or abbot, one Chos Timpa or a controller of the Lama meetings and chhomspun to the director of the religious dances.<sup>39</sup> There spiritual monks devoted their time to prayer, and in holding religious congregations and ritual dances. In temporal affairs, Chhagzot or Chagzot was the managerial head.<sup>40</sup> He was assisted by a Nyerchen or a steward, a Nyerpa or a store-keeper and Phi- Nyer or

a farm steward. Chagzot had good business powers and to some was also entrusted the administration of a small district around the monasteries. These working monks attended to the temporal interests of the community, they cultivated land, carried trade, collected rent from the tenants of the monastery, travelled through the villages to beg alms for the brotherhood.<sup>42</sup> In addition to these administrative duties, the working monks performed some other duties also. Sometimes the high Lamas participated in the affair of state.<sup>43</sup> In 1848 AD, when lieutenant Henry Strachey visited Ladakh. Then, he found the whole district “Under the secular control as well as religious ministration of the prior and his monks.”<sup>44</sup> The paucity of information available makes it impossible to tell how and by when these working monks were appointed, what was their tenure of office and to whom were the responsible.

### Monastic Sects

A group of monasteries with a common organization and doctrine formed one monastic sect. Each sect acknowledged one master as founder and interpreter of its doctrine. There are four monastic sects of Tibet’s Mahayana Buddhism<sup>45</sup> in Ladakh. The Ge-Lugs-pa (the model of virtue), and the Ka-rgyud-pa (the school of oral tradition) are two most dominant monastic sects.<sup>46</sup> The Ge-lugs-pa sect is represented by some large monasteries including spituk, Thekse, Rezang and Likir. This is reformed monastic sect founded by Tsongkapa in the 14<sup>th</sup> century AD. Lamayuru and Phiang monasteries belong to the Drigungpa monastic sect and Himis, Stakna to the Drugpa, these are two monastic sub sects of the Ka-rgya-pa school. Other monastic sects are the Sasyapa, Nyingmapa and Karmapa, which belongs Kargyudpa which are represented by Matho, Tak-Tak and the Tibetan monastry in Choglamsar at Leh<sup>47</sup>

The ka-rgyu-pa or Red sect Lamas considered the Dharma or great Lama of Bhutan, as their head wore red clothes. It controlled majority of the monasteries including richest and most influential Himis monastery in Ladakh. The followers of this sect were less ascetic then the Ge-lugs-pa or yellow sect Lama. All the monasteries belonging to their sect, in whichever country they were situated, looked to the Dharma Raja of Bhutan as the spiritual head.<sup>48</sup> As this dignitary headed the mother monastery, all these abbots of the monasteries of this sect were appointed by a sect given in his name.<sup>49</sup> The monasteries of the same sect were also linked by what may be called the chain of affiliation. For instance the abbot of the Guru Ghantal Monastery in Lahul sent a yearly tribute of about thirty rupee, half in cash and half in goods to the abbot of the Stagna monastery in Ladakh, who forwarded it with other tributes on his own account to that of KangriDorjan near the lake Mansarowar in Tibet, whence it went in the same way to the head monastery of PangtangDechinling in Bhutan. Generally, the kings of Ladakh were the patrons of this sects.<sup>50</sup> For this patronage, sometimes they paid a heavy price. The chronicle of Ladakh described that one of sources of the Tibetan-Ladakhi- Mughal war (1681-1684AD), In which Ladakh lost all the territory to the west Mayun pass was religion.

The Ge-lugs-pa or the yellow sect was founded in Tibet by TsongKhapa (1357-1417 AD), He was a monk of exceptional intellectual attainments, religious devotion ability. Being indignant at the vice and corruption of the monks of his time, at the superstitious practices and the rites of sorcery, which degraded Lamanism, TsongKhapa undertook to purify it and restore the primitive cult as profounded by Lord Buddha.<sup>51</sup> He sent a mission to Ladakh, where it was enthusiastically

received by the Ladakhi king. Probably, as a result of this mission, the king gave respect to the doctrines of the reformed sect and issued the Mulbek edict aiming at abolishing the ritualistic practices of the Dards, especially animal sacrifices. In 1578 AD, SonamGyatso, the reincarnate Lama of the Yellow Sect and a zealous missionary received the title of 'Dalai Lama'<sup>52</sup> from Altan Khan of Tumed, the leading prince of Mongolia. Hereafter, the followers of this sect began to look to the Dalai Lama as their spiritual head and organized to lead a life of celibacy and asceticism. The austerity, discipline, and spiritual quality of the Dalai Lama attracted the attention of some influential nobles of Tibet and kings of neighbouring states. The last king of the first Ladakhi dynasty is also said to have sent rich presents to the first Dalai Lama.<sup>53</sup>

The aura of religious supremacy of the Dalai Lama spread in all the neighbouring lands such as Ladakh, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Burma, western China and Mongolia. The Lhasa came to be recognized as the 'Rome' of the Buddhist World. When NawangLobzangGyatso, the great Dalai Lama (1642-1682AD), assumed temporal and religious powers, his religious supremacy, as well as his government appears to have been vaguely recognized by other Lamaist sects and governments of the neighbouring Tibetan speaking states. The spiritual supremacy of the Dalai Lamas, sometimes influenced the policies of an immediate neighbouring country. Both Ladakh<sup>54</sup> and the settlement of their ruler's royal succession. I also find that the members of royal family of Ladakh, performing the funeral rites of the kings at Lhasa.<sup>55</sup> The abbot of Himis monastery in Ladakh, through a follower of the red sect, many times visited Lhasa and TashiLhunpo in connection with receiving ordination for a batch of novices.<sup>56</sup> This recognition of religious supremacy of the Dalai Lama by the independent rulers of the neighbouring states has often been called, though quite erroneously, political supremacy of the former over the later.

To *conclude* The Buddhism of Ladakh is a fully comprehensive account of history and culture of this remote Himalayan region known as Ladakh. The various aspects of the Buddhism played a very significant role in the daily and social life of the Ladakhi people. In the midst of the ignorant Ladakhis, who were full of superstitious veneration and fear of Lama was a universal man, the servant par excellence. He was the best doctor, astrologer, educator and the best teacher further, by segregating or large proportion of young manhood into monks and enforced celibacy, it checked the increase in population. This social consequence indirectly led to economic prosperity of the Ladakhis. High Lamas often participated in the affairs of Ladakh region. Presently, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama is a supreme controller of spiritual, and he has a charismatic appeal for sympathy of the humanity in Ladakh.

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