

Monasteries in Zanskar

Abstract

With the gracious deeds and blessings of many kings and Lamas, numbers of monasteries were constructed in the Zanskar province in the pre-independent India. I have tried to highlight some of these monasteries of Zanskar Region through this article. From the view point of culture and religion, Zanskar region is highly rich. In olden times, numbers of monks from Zanskar went to Tibet for studying Buddhism and its philosophy, and they returned as renowned scholars. Zanskar is called the spiritual land, because more people were inclined towards knowing Buddhism and its philosophy. They constantly devoted themselves to the practices of Buddhism in comparison with people in other parts of Ladakh. With the blessing of such great and incomparable gurus, many historical monasteries have been founded in the Zanskar region, such as at Phukthar, Karsha, Rangdum, Stoday, Bardan, Zongkhul, Stakrimo, Mune Gonpa etc.

Key words: *Zanskar region, Geography, monasteries, Buddhism, History, Culture,*

Paper for Presentation

Geography: Zanskar covers an area of some 7,000 square kilometers (2,700 square miles) at elevation of 3,500-7,135 meters (11,500-23,409 feet). It consists of the country lying along the two main branches of the Zanskar River. The first, the Doda, has its source near the Penzi-la (4,400 m/14,450 ft) Mountain-pass and then flows in the south-east direction along the main valley towards Padum, the Capital of Zanskar. The second branch is formed by two main tributaries known as the Kargyak river, with its source near the Shingo la (5,091 m)(16,703ft), and the Tsarap river, with its source near the Barlacha-la. These two rivers unite below the village of Purney to form the Lungnak river(also known as the Lingti or the Tsarap river). The Lungnak river then flows in the north-west direction along a narrow gorge towards Zanskar's central valley (known locally as Jung-khor), where it is united with the Doda river to form the Zanskar river. The Zanskar River then takes a north-eastern course and joins the Indus in Ladakh.

Zanskar is a region divided into several valleys, ¹like Stod, Sham, Lungnak and Jung-khor etc. With the gracious deeds and blessings of many kings and Lamas, many monasteries were constructed in the pre-independent India in this region. I have tried to highlight some of these monasteries of Zanskar through this article. As we know from the view point of culture and religion, Zanskar is a rich region. In olden times, numbers of monks from went to Tibet for studying Buddhism and its Philosophy, and they returned as scholars. Zanskar is very popular since ancient time as land of spirituality, because more people were inclined towards knowing Buddhism and its philosophy. They constantly devoted to the practice of Buddhism in

¹“Preface” in The History of Monasteries in Zanskar,

comparison with people in other parts of Ladakh. With the blessing of such great and incomparable gurus, many historical monasteries have been founded in Zanskar such as Phukthar, Karsha, Rangdum, Stongday, Bardan, Zongkhul, Stakrimo and Mune etc.

1. **Phukthar Galdan Zangpoling:** This Monastery is located in the most backward area of Zanskar region in Lungnak valley. It was founded by Zanskar Lotsawa Phakpa Sherab in²1070 AD. Since the day of its inception to the 14th Century AD, one or the other great³ Yogi visited this place and blessed the land with meditation.

In 14th Century AD, Chansem Sherab Zangpo introduced the tradition of the practice of ⁴*trivastu* and monks living like other monastery. He built the Mahakala Temple, the Shrine of Silver Stupa and the Dukhang or Assembly Hall. He introduced the tradition of learning-teaching of Buddhist philosophy. He also introduced the practice of tantric tradition. He contributed greatly to the construction of Phukthar monastery and he passed away in the same monastery. His injunctions are being practiced this time also. His mortal remains are preserved in a stupa amidst the inner cave of Phukthar Monastery. On certain auspicious days, it is realized that sweet smell of coolness comes out from this stupa. After the death of Lama Changsem Sherab Zangpo, the incarnation of Nagri Rinpoche, the present brother of His Holiness Dalai Lama has been the head of Phukthar Galdan Zangpoling Monastery. All the activities of this monastery are carried out as per his instructions. Phukthar Monastery is built inside a natural cave. An important aspect of this cave is that it was located much below, but when the stupa for the mortal remains of Lama Changsem Sherab Zangpo was placed inside it, the cave rose above to the present height by itself because of his spiritual power. The devotees believe in this very much. They also believe that the ⁵spring water appeared itself in the cave due to Lama Changsem Sherab Zangpo's spiritual power, and the water level never changes. People remained open-mouth, when they heard about it. However, it was the truth upto fifteen years ago. After that unfortunately the water level of the spring is decreasing day by day. About fifteen years ago around 80 monks were regularly staying in this monastery, but at present only thirty five monks are regularly living this monastery.

In this monastery devotees can visit five temples such as Gonkhan (the Mahakala Temple), Nguldung (The Kangyur Shrine), Stonpa Lakhang (The Shrine of Buddha), Changsem Tuphuk (The Lama Changsem Cave) and Dukhang (Worship Hall), and Zeem Chun (Head Lama's Bedroom)

2. **Karsha Galdan Chambaling:** This Monastery is located at a distance of 10 kms away from Padum, the headquarters of Zanskar valley, on the bank of the Zanskar River in north-east direction. It was constructed in about ⁶1080 AD by Zanskar Lotsawa Phakpa Sherab, the translator of Zanskar.⁷ According to popular sayings, on the nearby precipices of the monastery, self-emerged image of Gyalwa Chamba or Jina Maitreya is found. Besides, in the midst of the

² དཔོན་རབས་ཀྱི་གསལ་ཉི་ལྷང་། ཞོག་གངས་།

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³ Himlayai Bodh sanskriti kosh, page no 621,

⁴ The history of Monastery in Zanskar, page 2

⁵ The specialty of Phukthar monastery is that it is built in a deep cave amidst the rock, where a strange spring is available. This is called Changsem Drupchu or the spring of Changsem, because it is believed that the spring appeared there because of the spiritual power of Lama Changsem.

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⁷ The History of Monasteries in Zanskar, page no 18: the self-arising image of Gyalwa Chamba or Jina Maitreya is found on the near by mountain on both sides of this monastery. In the midst of the mountain, there is the clay statue of Maitreya Buddha. So the monastery is called Galdan Chambaling.

mountain, a sculpted statue of Maitreya Buddha is there. So, the Monastery is called Karsha Galdan Chambaling. On the mountains to the right side below the monastery, there is a very attractive and beautiful self-emerged image of Chamba or Maitreya Buddha. Currently, a shrine has been constructed on the spot by beautifying it with whitewashing. Similarly, inside the flowing stream to the left below the monastery, there is the image of Je-tsun Chamba or the Saviour Maitreya for the *darshan* of fortunate and virtuous devotees. When the translator Phakpa Sherab established this monastery in earlier time, he spread the teachings of the Great compassionate Buddha and the scriptures of Buddhism to a great extent for the benefits of the sentient beings. ⁸In 1443 Stod Changsem Sherab Zangpo renovated this damaged monastery and introduced the tradition of trivastu or tri-adhara. He was a contemporary of rJe Lama Tsongkhapa. Dungpa Dosdey Rinchen had preached and spread the teachings of Tsongkhapa here. As a result of which, the strength of monks increased in the monastery.

After Changsem Sherab Zangpo, his disciple Dungpa Dhodey Rinchen developed this monastery. So the Red Stupa (Mardung) has been constructed after his death and the same has been kept in the Wall Stupa to the right of Dukhang. His statue is installed in the shrine of Dusshod Lhakhang. Tears welled up in the eyes of this statue, when Minister Zorawar Singh invaded Zanskar, the mark of which could be clearly visible in those days. However, when the statue was colored again, the marks got covered. On the 18th day each year as per Tibetan calendar, the activities in connection with the death of Dosdey Rinchen and the Skangsol Puja of all Dharma protectors are done on regular basis.

In this monastery the devotee can visit four temples such as Gonkhang (The Mahakala Temple), Zeemchun (The head lama's bed room), Dukhang (The worship hall) and Dukhang yokma (The second worship hall) etc.

Each year many festivals are celebrated in Karsha Monastery according to the Tibetan calendar such as Synenas and snyungnas (fasting), Memory puja for Panchen Lobzang Chosygan, Getsa (The root of virtue), Skangsol (Dharma protector puja), yarnas (living in rainy season), Guhya Samaj Bhumi and Dubchod (Siddhi Puja), Galdan Namchod (The Death of Anniversary of Tsongkhapa). The biggest festival of this monastery is⁹ karsha Gustor, which is celebrated on 28th and 29th days of the sixth month of Tibetan Calendar.

3. **Stongsde Marpaling Monastery:** Stongde Monastery and the village are located to the east of Padum, the headquarters of Zanskar, at a distance of 10 kms. According to history,¹⁰ Lama Marpa riding a pota (vehicle) from Zongkhul had arrived at this place. That pota or vehicle is still preserved today in this monastery. According to the aforementioned lama, on a mountain, noticed the vehicle raised a little up. He thought it to be an auspicious sign and beneficial. So he prayed for stong (1000) families to settle at this place. Then he thought it would not be right to say stong (thousand) . So he added sde (families) with stong and deemed it to be auspicious. So the village is called as Stongde or the village of 1000 families.

This monastery was established around 1055 AD by Lhodak Marpa Choskyi Lotus. So the monastery is called Stonde Marpaling. After Marpa Choskyi Lotus, this monastery was developed by ¹¹Rev Shakya Zangpo and Lama Gyaltsan Lhundup who introduced the tradition of

⁸The History of Monasteries in Zanskar, page no : According Buddhism, that cannot be called a monastery, where there is no tradition of having trivastu or tri-adhar. Because of this reason, in 1443 AD., Stod Changsem Sherab Zangpo introduced the tradition of trivastu here.

དགོན་རབས་ཀྱི་གསལ་ཉི་མཱ་། རྒྱ་གར་གྱི་མཱ་། 820
¹⁰Himalayi Bodh Sanskriti Kosh, page no 633,

¹¹The History of Monasteries in Zanskar page no 22, Initially, this monastery was related to Kagyud sect, later, Lama Gyaltsan Lhundup introduced the tradition of Jamgon Lama tsonkhapa.

Jamgon Lama Tsongkhapa in this monastery. The most famous festival of this monastery Stongde Gutor is held on the 18th and 19th days in the sixth month of the Tibetan calendar. On the day of the festival, the monks perform the sacred dance in the monastery.

4. **Bardan Monastery:** The full name of this monastery is Bardan San-nags Chosling. This monastery is located approximately 12 kilometres south of Padum in Zanskar at the side of the Lungnak river. It belongs to the Drugpa-Kargyud monastic order. It is the first monastery of this sect to be established in Zanskar. According to the legends, ¹²Siddheswar Lama Barawa from Tibet came to Zanskar valley in 13th or 14th century AD. He came to Bardan after having visited the great Graveyard of Sani and Zongkhul. He did meditation at this point for some time. Later a small monastery was built at this place. With the passage of time, this monastery was developed into a big monastery. Due to that reason this monastery is known as Bardan monastery. After Lama Barawa, this monastery was developed by ¹³ Mahasiddha Deva Gyatso. During his time, mainly Gonkhang (The Mahakala Temple) Labrang or the residential quarters for the monks and Zeemchun (Bed room for the Head lama) etc., were constructed. In this monastery a devotee can visit four temples and get blessed. Which are Dukhang or Worship Hall, Gonkhang or The Temple of Mahakala, Jabs-drang Rinpoche's Zeemchun and Guru Tsangyad Lhakhang etc. The two main religious festivals in the monastery are Bardan Gustor and ¹⁴ Bardan Getsa. Bardan Gustor is celebrated on 28-29 days of the 12th month of the Tibetan calendar and Bardan Getsa is celebrated on the 10th day of the fourth month of the Tibetan calendar.
5. **Zongkhul Monastery:** This monastery is situated on the crest of a large rock in the mountains to the right bank of a tributary river in the Zanskar valley. Zongkhul monastery is founded by Mahasiddha Naropa in 11th century. As per the legend said by the local people, ¹⁵ Mahapandit Siddheswar Naropa did deep meditation after receiving abhishek from his Guru Tilopa. He did meditate in various caves and at many places during his journey for his spiritual uplift. While doing meditation at the great graveyards like Dechandal and Zongkhul etc., he meditated in Mon-lung valley near Ating village. There he has saw a cave amidst the precipice opposite the stream. In order to find out a holy perfect cave, he shot an arrow, which struck the crack on the roof of the cave. This pious arrow is still visible today at that place. After that Naropa went into the cave and started chanting the seven-lettered mantra of his tutelary deity Chakrasambhara. This cave is famous as Phukmoche or the Great Cave, which has the capacity to accommodate 30-40 people at a time. However, the cave has been made into small compartments as per the necessity. The cave is warm in winter and cool in summer. Initially, it was a habitat for the meditator, but it has been expanded with the passage of time. In this monastery, a devotee can visit four temples, which are Phukmoche, Namthar Sgo-sum or Shrine of Bimoksha, Dukhang Gongma or the Upper community Hall and Dukhang Yogma or the Lower Community Hall etc.
6. **Rangdum Shadrup Zamling Gyan:** The Rangdum Monastery is located on the main road from Kargil to Padum in Zanskar. This monastery is about 100 kms away from Kargil and it is

¹² The History of Monasteries in Zanskar page no 31

¹³ Himalayi Bodh Sanskriti Kosh page no 610,

¹⁴ The History of Monasteries in Zanskar page no ; The preparations for the celebration of Bardan Getsa commences on the 10th day of the fourth month of the Tibetan Calendar. On the 13th day of this month, the monks of Stakrimo monastery come to Bardan monastery, and on the following two days, all the monks together perform mask dance putting on the masks of Kagyud deities and their retinue. The monks of Bardan monastery perform a yajna in the morning of the full moon night of Vaishakh for the betterment of all sentient beings. The monks of Stakrimo monastery complete the process of Gustor in the Gonkhang of Bardan monastery. After this the mask dance takes place.

¹⁵ The History of Monasteries in Zanskar page no: 45,

situated on a mountain.¹⁶ In 1726 during the reign of King Tsewang Namgyal, rje Lama Lobzang Gelegs Yeshe Dakpa visited Ladakh Both the king and the lama became close friends. As a result of which, the king followed the path of religion and supplicated rJe Lama to build a monastery wherever he wanted. He further assured that he would help to the possible extent and be at his service all the time. The then Lama Rinpoche assured to do so and looked for a proper piece of land in the eastern and upper parts of Ladakh to build a monastery. He found a mountain amidst the plains on the way to Padum for The Mountain resembled Sinhasan or the posture a Roaring Lion. This auspicious sign attracted him and he thought if a monastery would be built on top of this mountain, it would be able to preserve the teachings of Lord Buddha forever.¹⁷ Especially, he visualized that this monastery would resist the invasions of non- Buddhists, as it was the demarcated line between the Buddhist Zanskar and other non-Buddhists. Lama Yeshe Dakpa informed King Namgyal that he had found the proper land at Rangdum to construct a monastery and apprised the king of the benefit of the monastery in preserving the Buddhist culture in that region. He said that the place is very auspicious for building a monastery. So he requested the king to keep his words by helping to construct the monastery at Rangdum. So the king assured him of every help. In this monastery, a devotee can visit three shrines and get blessed from them. These shrines are Dukhang or the Worship hall, Alam or the shrine of Muni and Gonkhang or the Temple of Mahakala etc.

7. **Stakrimo Monastery:** In the 16th-17th century the king of Padum built this small monastery at Stakrimo in Zanskar valley,¹⁸ as his personal place of worship in a secluded place. With the passage of time, this small monastery was expanded and the monk community was introduced. As a result of which, the monastery became a large one and the statue of tutelary deities, texts and stupas were installed. The monastery is called (Tiger Image) because there is a self-arising image of a tiger on a large precipice in front this monastery.¹⁹ Earlier this monastery was a branch of Bardan Monastery. 30 years back the tradition was to invite the monks of Bardan Monastery for Lo-Pon or Acharya post of Stakrimo monastery. At that time the monks of Stakrimo monastery used to visit Bardan monastery for the Puja of Getsa. Then it was the tradition of Bardan monastery to invite the monks of Stakrimo monastery. The monks of Bardan monastery used to blow conchs and trumpets etc. Still today the monks of Stakrimo monastery go and perform tantric dances during the Getsa Puja at Bardan Monastery.
8. **Mune Galdan Diskitling:** Mune monastery is located in the Lunganak valley on a small mountain. History says that the Lama Changsem Sherab Zangpo visited Mune and Raru villages as well as the place of monastery, and sanctified these places. Since then after one generation the devotees and the pujari of Mune and Raru villages visited the place of worship. At that time for the living of monks, on the mountain top lying to the west of Mune village, a small monastery was established. In this monastery the traditions of living in rainy season, fasting etc, popularly known as²⁰ Trimul were introduced like other monastery. Before year 1911 there was only one temple in the name of Pujari Residential Temple. The Dukhang or Worship hall and Gonkhang or Mahakala Temple were constructed in year 1911, and in year 1980, whole monastery was renovated by monks and villagers.

¹⁶ དགོན་རབས་ཀྱི་གསལ་ཉི་ལྗང་། རྒྱལ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་གསལ་

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¹⁷ The History of Monasteries in Zanskar page no:27,

¹⁸ Himalayi Bodh sanskriti kosh, page no: 609

¹⁹ The history of monastery in Zanskar, page no:43,

²⁰ དགོན་རབས་ཀྱི་གསལ་ཉི་ལྗང་། རྒྱལ་ཤེས་ཀྱི་གསལ་

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Conclusion: We all know, in ancient period Zanskar region was recognized as the Land of religion, because from Zanskar region many monks went to Tibet or Bhutan for studies of Buddhist philosophy and Tibetan language and some of them became very famous learned persons such as Tamchos Gyaltsan, Dupkhan Delegs Gyatso, Yonzin Lobzang Gyaltsan, Lama Shedpa Dorje and Lama Kunga Choslegs etc. With their blessings, contributions and guidance, many monasteries have been established in Zanskar region, especially with the guidance of Zanskar Lotsawa Phakpa Sherab, Stod Changsem Sherab Zangpo, Marpa Choskyi Lodos, Panchen Naropa, Lama Lobzang Delegs Yeshe Dakpa and Acharya Padma Jungnas etc. At present. all above mentioned monasteries have become the identity of Zanskar and source of income of Zanskar valley. So it is very important to look after the maintenance and safety of all monasteries.

Thank you.

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