



THE IMPACT OF BUDDHISM ON ART AND CULTURE, WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO LEH-LADAKH

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Abstract: Ladakh, formerly Western Tibet, was a significant part of Tibetan Buddhism before its incorporation into India. The region was known for occult practices and was influenced by Buddhism through the works of Saint Padmasambhava and Bhikshu Shantarakshita. Buddhism flourished in Ladakh with the support of Ladakhi kings, and its influence on society was significant. Religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence were achieved through observing the Dhamma of the Buddha, and the inhabitants followed religious customs from birth to death. Festivals, such as the New Year's Day festival, were held to commemorate the birthday of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa branch of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism also had a significant impact on Ladakh's fine arts, with beautiful Buddhist monasteries and stupas filled with Buddhist paintings and sculptures. Dance, music, poetry, and song were also influenced by Buddhism, with religious songs and dances paying tribute to the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha. Drama, based on Jataka Tales, was also a significant part of Ladakh's cultural heritage.

Index Terms - Buddhism, art, culture, Ladakh, impact, Buddhist festivals.

I. INTRODUCTION

The people of Ladakh practice Tibetan Buddhism, or Vajrayana Buddhism, which is also known as a later development of Mahayana Buddhism. Before its incorporation into independent India, Ladakh was known as Western Tibet, and it was ruled by a direct ancestor of Tibet's monarch until the 9th century C.E. As a result, Ladakh became vulnerable to the esoteric type of Buddhism, and Tibet was known for occult practices such as magic, sorcery, and supernatural powers, among other things. Buddhism flourished in Ladakh with the grace of the great saint Padmasambhava in the eighth century CE and the great Bhikshu Shantarakshita during the reign of the most powerful Tibetan emperor Trisong Detsen. After that, Tibetan Buddhism was resolutely instituted in Ladakh. Over time, several Ladakhi kings extended royal patronage to prominent Ladakhi lamas and Buddhism itself. To bolster religious practices in the region, numerous Tibetan Buddhist leaders were invited. This widespread acceptance and firm foundation of Buddhism profoundly influenced Ladakhi society, leaving a palpable impact that resonated throughout the region. Religious tolerance and peaceful co-existence have become possible only due to observing and following the Dhamma of the Buddha. Harming other sentient beings is regarded as a profoundly immoral act, and hence the inhabitants of Ladakh are religiously observant in practically every manner. Things are done following religious customs.

As a result, they would consult the lamas and faith in oracles before engaging in any activity. From birth to death, one only follows the religious path to alleviate suffering and achieve success under the teachings and sermons of Buddhism. Festivals here are also religious. The majority of these are monastic ceremonies held in the courtyards of monasteries to commemorate the actions of the Buddha or renowned masters of the past

linked with one tradition or another. Furthermore, the most important day in Ladakh, the New Year Day festival, is held on the birthday of Tsongkhapa, the founder of the Gelugpa branch of Tibetan Buddhism. Buddhism had a significant impact on the fine arts of the Ladakh region. The main architectural monuments worth noting are the beautiful Buddhist monasteries and stupas with which Ladakh is graced. These monasteries are filled with Buddhist paintings and sculptures. It is since when the Dhamma of the Buddha flourished, skilled image-makers abounded. The dignified murals and wood carvings that still survive in Alchi, the Lion Palace in Leh, and many enormous statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas are among the greatest instances of Ladakh's art and craft under the influence of Buddhism.

Dance, music, poetry, and song are popular in almost every part of the world. Buddhism affected them as well. Religious songs are among the most popular. Many of the dances, songs and poems have a strong Buddhist influence. Furthermore, the dances here begin with a tribute to the Triple Gem- the Buddha, Dhamma, and Sangha.

Ladakhi musicians claim to have three hundred and sixty melodies called Lha-RNA for gods and their acolytes. Offerings are made and blessings are sought from the Buddha and the Bodhisattvas in their songs and poems. Drama is also a component of the cultural heritage of the region. The main theme or the storylines of the dramas (Zlos-gar) have always been the Jataka Tales or stories of Gautama Buddha's previous lives. Thus, the facts mentioned earlier demonstrate Buddhism's impact and pervasiveness in Ladakh's society, culture, and fine arts.

II. Impact of Buddhism on the culture of Ladakh:

The impact of Buddhism on the culture of Ladakh is visible in the form of various religious festivals which are celebrated around the year. Ladakh has a variety of festivals, the majority of which are religious in nature and held in monastic institutions, in which the monks represent as participants and lay people serve as audience. One of the most significant impacts of Buddhism and its philosophy on the culture of Ladakh is the traditional songs and traditional dance.

Some of the main religious festivals of Ladakh are as under:

- Losar
- Spituk Gu-stor
- Dosmoche
- Stok Guru Tse-Chu
- Matho Nangrang
- Buddha Purnima
- Hemis Tse-Chu
- Lamayuru Kab-Gyat
- Karsha Gu-Stor
- Phyang Tse-Dup
- Dakthok Tse-Chu
- Thekse Gu-Stor
- Chemrey Wangchok

- **Losar:**

Losar one of Ladakh's festivals, is a very popular social and religious festival observed by the entire Buddhist community. The Losar festival is held on the first day of the eleventh month of the Tibetan calendar. The Losar festival and its celebrations begin with the Galdan-Namchot celebration, which commemorates the birthday of the Geluk-pa order's founder, Gyal-wa Tong Kha-pa. It is observed on the twenty-fifth day of the tenth month of the Tibetan calendar. Every Buddhist house and its windows, verandas, top edges, outer boundaries, hill slopes, and monasteries are illuminated with butter lamps on this auspicious day of Galdan-Namchot. Losar is celebrated for fifteen days, with the first three days being the most important. Unlike the Tibetans, who celebrate Losar on the first day of the Tibetan lunar calendar, Losar is celebrated in Ladakh on the first day of the eleventh month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. There is a reason for the disparity in the dates of the Losar celebrations in Ladakh and Tibet, and it is the sixteenth-century king of Ladakh Jamyang Namgyal, who had to embark on an expedition and thus decided to celebrate the festival two months earlier than the actual date.

The Losar festival is a combined ritual of Bon and Buddhism. The Losar festival began as a pre-Buddhist Bon-pa spiritual ceremony held to appease local spirits, deities, and protectors, but evolved

into an annual Buddhist festival during the reign of Tibet's ninth king, Pede-Gangyal. Several rituals are initiated during the celebration to ward off evil spirits and all negativities accumulated throughout the year and to welcome and wish for a prosperous new year. Figures of ibex, which have a special place in the Bon tradition and are also regarded as a symbol of fertility and prosperity for the family, are drawn on the house walls, doors and columns. Ibex models are also made from dough and displayed on kitchen shelves. A ritual known as Lhasol is performed on the first day of the eleventh month, which happens to be the first day of Losar. The replacement of the Lhato, the family deity's house, which is a bundle of juniper branches erected on a small square platform on the roof of the household chapel, is performed. There is also a custom of perception in a hearth God named Thapla who lives in the kitchen and protects the house. As it is also believed that he is sensitive to impurities that may harm the welfare of the family, the kitchen is purified on this day to purify his dwelling. During the reign of the family, the kitchen is purified on this day to purify his dwelling. During the reign of the kings, specifically two dances were performed on the occasion of Losar. First, the *Shon* dance, performed before the king of Ladakh by members of some specialized families, and second the *koshen* dance, performed at Leh Bazar led by the Lardak, the head houseman at the end of the race. The people in Leh in the morning pay visits to the Jo-Khang located in the main market, dressed in new traditional clothes and offer prayers. From the morning until the middle of the day, a pompous and grandiose event of cultural music, dancing, and singing takes place at the ancestral place of the kings of Ladakh, in front of the Masjid (the mosque).

Other than Losar, all of the major festivals are religious and held in monastic courtyards, with Chams (religious mask dance) playing a central role. The Cham or mask dance, is a secret Buddhist dance performed by lamas to the accompaniment of mystic music played on the monastic orchestra. The nature of the dance, however, is religious, as it is reserved solely for monks, who wear breathtaking masks depicting the religion's protector deities. The Cham or mask dances are performed to represent the victory of religion over the evils and ritual offerings are made to the tutelary deities (Yi-Dam) through the Cham dances.

The melodic sound for the performance of Cham is generated with the help of religious instruments such as longhorn (*Dungchen*), oboes (*Gyaling*), drum (*Nga*), cymbals (*Silnyen/bubjan*), shinbone trumpets (*Kangling*), conch shells (*Dung*), skull-drums (*Damaru*) and bells (*Drilbu and Dorje*).

- **Dosmoche:**

'Do' denotes an evil spirit, ghost, or demon who brings misfortune. As the name of the festival suggests, a large cross-threaded framework is set up, which is believed to trap those evil spirits, ghosts and demons. It is observed on the Twenty-Eighth and Twenty Ninth day of the Twelfth month of the Tibetan calendar. Every year, a different monastery is chosen for the prayer and mask dance performance. Consecration of the Do and Cham mask dance by the monks of the participating monastery takes place in the monastic courtyard beneath the Leh Palace. Only the monks of Dak-Thok monastery are skilled enough to construct that cross-threaded framework 'Dos'. As a result, the monks of Dak-Thok monastery prepare the Dos, while the monks of the selected monastery perform the mask dance. The Dos is said to gain the ability to trap evil spirits and misfortune creators after being consecrated. Offerings other than the Dos are added and a great procession by the monks' blowing horns and beating drums, followed by the local people carrying it down through the Leh town. The Dos is burned and overturned on the outskirts of Leh. The entire event is held to protect the entire region and its people from misfortunes and to keep peace throughout the following year. Thus, the festival is termed as Dosmoche- The Great Dos.

- **Hemis Festival:**

The Hemis Tse-Chu is one of Ladakh's most popular and thus most anticipated monastic festivals. Not only the people of Ladakh but also foreign and domestic tourists, eagerly join the massively crowded audience. The festival is held on the tenth and eleventh days of the fifth lunar month to commemorate the birthday of the great Tantric Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru Rinpoche. The Hemis Tse-Chu festival, as the name suggests, is held in the Hemis Monastery on the tenth day of the Tantric Guru Padmasambhavas' birthday. The highlight of the festival is the celebration of Guru Padmasambhava's birthday, featuring the Cham or mask dance portraying the Eight Manifestations of Guru Padmasambhava, also known as Guru mTshan brgyad. Besides the mask dance, the unveiling of the famous two-storey-high Thangka of Guru Padmasambhava is done every twelve years on the occasion of the Hemis Tse-Chu.

- **Shey Srubla:**

The Shey-Srubla festival unfolds in the monastery near Shey Palace, in the village of Shey, on the ninth and tenth days of the seventh month according to the Tibetan lunar calendar. Significantly, this festival coincides with the harvest season, marking the commencement of agricultural activities in the village, which commence only after the Shey-Srubla festival. During the festival, Dorje Chenmo, the protector deity of Lotsawa Rinchen bZangpo, is said to manifest in human form. This manifestation occurs through a chosen individual known as the Lu-gYar, who undergoes rigorous secluded meditation practices for two months before the event. Lotsawa Rinchen bZangpo, accompanied by his protector deity Dorje Chenmo, is a major figure in the festival. The Lu-gYar, which is said to be possessed by the deity, acts as a conduit for communication between the deity and the local community. During this possession, the Lu-gYar answers the villager's questions, offers predictions for the upcoming year, and forewarns any impending misfortunes.

- **Matho Nagrang:**

One such similar account of a deity possessing a human can be seen at the festival of Nagrang which takes place in the monastery of Matho village. Matho Nagrang is celebrated on the fourteenth and fifteenth days of the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar. Among the monks of the monastery, two are chosen as the Lu-gYar for deity possession. They both go under rigorous meditative practice for one year before the Nagrang festival. On the day of the Nagrang at around three or four pm both the monks possessed by the Lha (deity) appear in front of the crowded spectators. Predictions, blessings answers queries are being done by the two.

Hence the impact of Buddhism is seen vividly from the festivals as mentioned earlier which influence the people of Ladakh.

III. IMPACT OF BUDDHISM ON THE SONGS AND DRAMAS OF LADAKH:

The traditional songs and dance performances of the Ladakh region had a considerable amount of impact of Buddhism and its philosophy. The Folk songs or the traditional songs of Ladakh are categorized into eleven major different types by Ladakhi Scholars like Tashi Rabgias, Phuntsog Tsering, and Nawang Tsering Shakspo.

Among the various types of folk songs, Zhung-glu is composed and sung in honour of kings, high lamas, Buddhas, and Bodhisattvas, as well as monasteries and religious sites of significance. Songs sung in praise of nature, the sun, the moon, water, and earth are also classified as Zhung-glu. Zhung-glu, which literally translates to "central song," draws its meaning from the combination of "zhung," which means "central" or "center," and "glu," meaning "song." Therefore, according to its literal interpretation, a Zhung-glu is suitable for any occasion. Unlike other songs, categories like Tsigs-glu (sarcastic songs), Bagston-gi-glu (marriage songs), Chang glu (drinking songs) and Gying-glu (heroic songs) are not appropriate for every occasion. Many songs have been written in honour and dedication to various bodhisattvas, great lamas, and famous monasteries. These songs fall under the category of Chos-glu (religious songs), which falls under the category of Zhung-glu because they are appropriate for any occasion.

A noteworthy Chos-glu or religious song is the song dedicated to the biggest and most popular monastery of Ladakh i.e., Hemis monastery and the monastery's incarnate head lama Stag-tsang-ras-pa. This song is probably among the oldest folk songs of Ladakh.

Traditional dances often incorporate hand movements and gestures that are dedicated to praising gods and making symbolic flower offerings, among other gestures and expressions of reverence.

The Buddhist Jataka Tales (previous life of the Buddha) appear to be a recurring theme in the Ladakhi artists' dramas. Many popular regional dramas are based on the biographies of great lamas. In Tibetan Buddhism, this spiritual biography or hagiography is known as Namthar.

IV. IMPACT OF BUDDHISM ON THE ART AND ARCHITECTURE OF LADAKH:

The impact of Buddhism on the art and architecture of Ladakh is visible in the form of monastic architecture, which is easily found in every village. The monasteries are the main repositories of Ladakh's art and serve as a great architectural heritage in the region. Large sculptures of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas built in open spaces, as well as sculptures inside monasteries, are testimony to the fact that almost whole of the art in Ladakh has an

impact on Buddhism. Indeed, it would not be incorrect to say that the region's art and architectural portrayal would be incomplete without Buddhism. Buddhist art can be found everywhere in Ladakh, from statues and stuccoes to massive sculptures. The monasteries are adorned with mesmerizing statues of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas such as Sakyamuni, Avalokitesvara, Guru Padmasambhava, Maitreya, Tara, Manjusri, Vajrapani, and so on. The monasteries have figures of Dharma Teachers; Tsong-kha-pa, Atisa, Marpa, Milarespa, Naropa, Tilopa, and so on.

And, to complement the natural beauty, exquisite colossal images of Sakyamuni Maitreya, Guru Padmasambhava, and others can be seen from great distances. Massive images of Buddhas and Bodhisattvas engraved in rock plant consciousness into the barren rocky cliffs of Ladakh, adding charisma to the region's art.

CONCLUSION:

The festivals of Ladakh bear significant influence from Tibetan Buddhism, promoting peace and harmony within the community. This influence is evident in the region's art and architecture, particularly in the construction of monasteries and stupas. The murals and traditional paintings, often depicting Jataka tales, serve as reminders for individuals to cultivate compassion and adhere to righteous paths. Furthermore, Ladakh's folk songs, traditional dances, dramas, and poetry are deeply infused with Buddhist themes. Collectively, these aspects underscore the profound impact of Buddhism on the art and culture of Ladakh.

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