

BUDDHISM IN THE HIMALAYAN BELT

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This paper shows how and why Buddhism is important for India and the India Himalayan belt. It covers historic roots, followed by analysis of select border regions.¹ Its central theme is the need to nurture Buddhism.

INTRODUCTION

What is the influence and importance of Buddhism on the Indian Himalayan belt? We can answer this question from many perspectives. As far as influence is concerned, Buddhism as practiced in the region has roots in India. It is practiced in the Indian Himalayan belt in Ladakh, and in border regions of Himachal Pradesh, Uttarakhand, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh.² In neighbouring countries it is practiced in Tibet,³ mountainous regions of Nepal and most of Bhutan.⁴ This vast and linear region of harsh terrain, limited resources

¹ This paper is based on both a survey of written sources and interaction with leading Buddhist figures.

² According to 2001 census figures on Buddhism, proportion of Buddhist are 1.1% in J and K (1.13 lakhs), 1.2% in Himachal Pradesh (75, 859), 28.1% in Sikkim (1.52 lakhs), 13% in Arunachal Pradesh (1.43 lakhs) and 0.1% in Uttarakhand (12,434). However, the land area is much larger. Ladakh is one third of J and K. Buddhist border region of Arunachal Pradesh likewise stretches all along the Sino-India border. All are residing in strategic and sensitive border regions.

³ According to Ministry of Home Affairs *Annual Report 2008-2009*, population of Tibetan refugees in India is 1,10,095. Figures for Tibetans in TAR and other regions of China with Tibetan population on 2000 Chinese census data is 2.41 lakhs in TAR and 4.5 lakhs in all China. See *Encyclopedia of Contemporary Chinese Culture*, Edward L. Davis (ed.), London/New York, Routledge, 2005. According to exiled Tibetan website, there are 6.1 million Tibetans worldwide which included 20,000 in Nepal, 1,500 in Bhutan, 3,500 in the USA and Canada, 2,000 in Switzerland and a few elsewhere. See <http://www.tibet.com/index.htm> accessed in October 2008.

⁴ Nepal has 11% Buddhists in a population of 2.9 crores which is about 29 lakhs consisting of Gurungs, Tamangs, Sherpas, Newars, and Bhots. Bhutan has a population of 6.8 lakhs with 75% practicing Lamaism Buddhism. See, "Socio Economic Indicators" in Ashok K. Behuria (ed.) *Changing Political Context in South Asia: Implications for Regional Security*, New Delhi, IDSA, November 2008, pp.237-

and carrying capacity has found an ideal location of its practice. As far as importance is concerned it informs India's border relations with its neighbours such as China and Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Nepal and Bhutan. The Tibetan spiritual leadership in-exile is now lodged in India. In Sino-India relations the Tibet factor has and will remain crucial. It is important to look at a religion which has for India, all the ingredients of what some political scientists call 'soft power'.

Historically, Indian Buddhist institutions such as Nalanda were the centres of excellence for propagation of Buddhist ideas. Indian influence and role was pivotal in the establishment of Mahayana Buddhism in Tibet. As an extant spiritual and soft power, this link is too important to be ignored. According to Ladakhi scholar and the Principal of Central Institute for Buddhist Studies Dr Nawang Tsering:

Students and pilgrimage kept rushing to Tibet in quest of learning Buddhist culture and language. They came from all corners of its ethnic regions of Mongolia, Bhutan, Nepal and the Indian Himalayan states for higher studies until middle of the 20th century when Tibet lost its independence in 1959. The upheaval in Tibet proved cultural setback not only for the Tibetans but also among its traditional cultural satellite regions and ethnic groups. Fortunately, the Tibetans received whole edifice of the Indian culture in general and Buddhism in particular before Buddhism disappeared from India in 12th century. In the same manner, the people of Indian Himalayan states received complete culture from Tibet before the Chinese Red Guards' destructive Cultural Revolution in 1960.⁵

Two events lead to near extinction of Buddhism from the plains of India. One account as given by Hiuen Tsang (Xuanzang) showed Buddhist crusades of Kumarila and Sankaracharya in the eighth century were potent factors in rendering Buddhism unpopular. The final blow was delivered by Muslim invaders. As one example, Muhammad Bakhtiar Khalji in end of the twelve century, destroyed Buddhist religious infrastructure such as Nalanda. However, the knowledge and literature of Buddhism, rather than being available in India, was

272 and Pitambar Sharma, *Unraveling The Mosaic: Spatial Aspects of Ethnicity in Nepal*, Lalitpur, 2008. It has enduring friendly relations with India including Buddhist connections. See Maj Gen Y.K.Gera (Retd), "Developments in Bhutan," *The Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol.CXXXVII, No.573, July-September 2008, pp.342-350.

⁵ Dr Nawang Tsering, "Why Bhoti Should be in the Eighth Schedule", *Border Affairs*, April-June 2007, pp.16-20.

reserved or we can even say got ingrained and further developed in Tibet before it got eliminated in India.⁶

The pendulum so to speak swung back. In mid-twentieth century, when the People's Republic of China (PRC) took over Tibet, that very knowledge pool came back to India with the Tibetan exiles. There is a need to revisit the aspect of how religious wisdom originating from India has now virtually lodged back in India with the Tibetans in exile.

Besides, in recent times, a new trend is emerging with international dimensions: more and more Westerners and people across continents are also getting attracted to Tibetan Buddhism. It is getting truly globalised. What is unique is that India is now in the stage where it can facilitate the consolidation of this great religion—which was born in India and its Mahayana version in the Himalayan belt including Tibet was the result of the hard work and influence of Indian monks, philosophers and travellers in the past such as Nagarjuna, Santaraksita, Padmasambhava, Kamalsila, Atisha Dipankara, Tilopa, Naropa and others. It must be acknowledged that the Indian state in present times has given all the possible support to preserve Buddhism. There is a new momentum. Institutes as centres of learning and preservation of the Buddhist culture exist in the Himalayas like the The Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Ladakh, in the west to the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok and Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies in Arunachal Pradesh in the east. In mainland India in the plains, many universities have departments of Buddhist studies. The Varanasi based Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) envisioned by Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru in consultation with His Holiness the Dalai Lama, was established in 1967 with a view to educating the youths of Tibet and Himalayan border students of India. It is now an autonomous body under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Education, Government of India. The institute is achieving its goal of excellence in the field of Tibetology, Buddhology and Himalayan Studies. Another university of repute is the Sampuranannd Sanskrit University at Varanasi. A synergy exists with other seats of learning set up or under consideration by the Tibetans in India. The new Nalanada university planned will also provide momentum.

It may be admitted that unlike PRC which according to some accounts is “fast assuming the leadership role of the Buddhist world”⁷

⁶ Suniti Kumar Pathak, *The Indian Nitisastras in Tibet*, Delhi, Motilal Banarasidas, 1974. Likewise, after expulsion from India, like Mahayan Buddhism in Tibet, in Sri Lanka Theravada Buddhism has flourished.

⁷ P. Stobdam, “Chinese Checkers” IDSA web commentary of June 13, 2008.

no long-term strategic thought has been given to India nurturing and then using this spiritual and cultural power to its advantage. In the Indian context both the state and society have to play a mutually supportive role. The state needs to facilitate the religious practices and make institutions that benefit the minority community besides suitable economic development. At the same time the people in the so called periphery have to be willing partners in nation building. This willingness is contingent on both top down policies by the state and bottom up people's participation.

With capitalism, it is possible that there may be strong revival of religion in China. Tibetan Buddhism already exists in the region. Will PRC encourage spread of Buddhism and religious freedom? It is very unlikely. Thus to recapitulate the roots of this religion, seeing how it is being practiced in present times, both by Tibetans, Indians and other nationalities in the strategic Himalayan borderlands may give us fresh insights on a soft power which we may need to be nurtured.

Four regions have been covered as a sample case for the study—Ladakh, Gangtok, Siang region of Arunachal Pradesh and Kameng and Tawang.

PART I : LADAKH

General Information on Ladakh

It needs to be noted that Buddhism first came to Ladakh via Kashmir in first century AD, well before it had reached Tibet. Later with conversion of Kashmir to Islam and expulsion of Buddhism from India it spread to Tibet. Tibet in turn under influence of Indian monks, sages and the university system of Nalanda and the like adopted Buddhism. Tibet became the centre of the faith. In a survey in 2004, in seven monasteries in Ladakh there were 96 elderly monks who had been to various monasteries in Tibet before the take over by the Chinese.⁸

Monasteries

Ladakh has about 37 monasteries of different traditions spread out in the Leh Valley along the Indus River from the international border till short of Kargil, Zaskar region, Nubra Valley and Chushul region.

⁸ Sonam Joldan, "Traditional ties between Ladakh and Buddhist Tibet: Monastic organization and monastic education as a sustaining factor", *The Tibetan Journal*, Vol.XXXI, No.2, Summer 2006, pp.69-88.

Broadly there are four traditions⁹ with representative monasteries as under:

- a. Nyingma. The oldest tradition founded by Padmasambhava.
- b. Kagyu. In Ladakh it has two prominent sub-traditions. The Changpa nomads of Durbok follow the Dri-Gungpa tradition and those of Nyoma block follow Drug-pa tradition.
- c. Sakyas.
- d. Gelug, the dominant tradition in Tibet, and that of the Dalai Lama.

It must be appreciated that with influx of foreign tourists and devotees the ambience is of a very high spiritual order. What was striking was the 14th Dalai Lama's photograph was found in all traditions. He also had inaugurated some work in monasteries and had visited nearly all of them.

Mahabodhi International Meditation Centre, Choglamsar

This is a new centre set up by a former Ladakh Scout soldier Bhuikku Sangasena in 1986 who chose monkhood. It has an impressive campus with most of the young employees from Ladakh. This centre is a new variation in Buddhist practice including Theravada and has opened up the religion to the common man as an NGO of charity and inter-religious and inter-cultural dialogue. It has great potential to strengthen the religious practices of the people of Ladakh.

Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Choglamsar

The Central Institute of Buddhist Studies (CIBS), Choglamsar is now in its new sprawling campus. The Principal Dr Nawang Tsering is a regular contributor to the journal *Border Affairs* on issues of Bhoti language and the trans-Himalayan nature of Buddhism. The institute is impressive and is propagating Buddhist religion, art and culture. The institute is under the Ministry of Culture, Government of India. Overall there may be about 1400 lamas in schools in Ladakh. At CIBS, out of 600 student population 50% are lamas. An important point that emerged is the "Nalanda System of Religion" that informs Buddhism in

⁹ One thing that I have gathered from my interactions with Buddhists is that they do not consider the traditions as exclusive or divisive. Though in Tibetan history, there was violent struggle this is no longer the case. I thank Professor Hira Paul Gangnegi of Department of Buddhist Studies, Delhi University in emphasizing that it will be apt to call them 'traditions' rather than 'sects'.

these parts. Also the climate, terrain and environment are conducive for Buddhism.

People of Ladakh

The Buddhist border region of Ladakh also provides troops for the famous Ladakh Regiment of the Indian Army. The people have lived up to their reputation in defending India from aggression both against China and Pakistan. In this region Buddhism and lifestyle is integrated. Rapid changes are underway. The crisis is now upon settled agriculture. Unintended consequences have emerged due to population control policies. They have been counter productive in Ladakh. With one or two child norms, Ladakh is now suffering. Farm labour is less. So much so that Nepali and Bihari casual labour is being employed. Service sector is luring people with false hopes. Too much of “market forces” is not a good thing as ecology can not be left to flourish under market forces.

Another change is sedentarisation of the nomads—the most pristine form of nature worshipers who have adapted to Buddhism—the ones who dwell in the harsh border regions. Dr Tsering Phuntsog, District Sheep Husbandry Officer, Leh had carried out research on the political economy of the nomads of Changthang region in both Tibet and Ladakh.¹⁰ According to him, there are about 13,000 Indian citizens and 3,500 Tibetan refugees (Changpas) practicing this nomadic lifestyle in the harsh and high altitude regions of Ladakh. Absence of monasteries in the region is itself proof of the harshness of the environment. Grasslands are reducing and grazing is getting affected due to many reasons. The Changpas still follow a mixture of Bon religion practices with Buddhism, which is very close to their deep understanding of nature and the domesticated animal kingdom. Primarily it is the Pashmina goat wool that is their product. This is a neglected field and much more can be done for the Changpas. Due to hard life they are migrating and settling down in urban areas such as Leh even for menial jobs. The animal population had increased but the number of people fending for them has decreased. This shows that if correct policies are framed it can be a profit making enterprise. In a survey, their priorities were children’s education, jobs, and health. Animal related issues were last in priority. Animal husbandry and agriculture, which were central

¹⁰ Tsering Phuntsog, “Changing needs to balance continuity and change”, *Border Affairs*, January – March 2008, pp.19 – 28, “Best So Far Has Not Been Good Enough”, *Border Affairs*, April – June 2008, pp. 15-33 and discussions.

to the traditions of Ladakh, are on the decline. Due to imported goods like down jackets, the market for local products of wool has gone down.

It is with the tolerant and evolved Buddhist practices that the people of Ladakh are prospering. Unlike the unresolved land reform issues in mainland plains of India, Buddhist practices of people willingly contributing to monasteries who have a large land under their influence is fundamental to understanding the influence of Buddhism. After partition, while getting rid of the zamindari system, the powers that be also thought fit to implement it in Ladakh. The people agitated. The Wazir Committee was formed which underlined the role of monasteries and how people willingly contribute their produce.¹¹ Such lessons should not be forgotten and one-fits-all solutions by policy makers may create more problems. Now there is a need to be sensitive to the changes being brought about by economic growth. Changes are bound to impact also on the way Buddhist practices relate to nature.

Economic prosperity has also led to greater awareness and modern education. The new set of Ladakhi intellectuals are now helping Ladakh to develop and realize its potential. Rather one can sense the emergence of a Ladakhi identity which may no longer consider the past Hindu Dogra rule or the dominance of Tibetan Buddhism as central.

PART II: SIKKIM

General Information on Gangtok (Sikkim)

Sikkim became the 22nd state of India in 1975. The 2001 census placed its population at 5.40 lakhs. It has now been made one of the eight states of North East India. It has majority Indians of Nepalese descent (70% mostly Hindus) with Bhutia (mostly in north Sikkim – Lachenpas and Lachungpas 16%) and Lepchas (14% who are followers of the Nyingma tradition) making up the balance.¹²

¹¹ R.S. Mann, *Ladakh Then and Now*, New Delhi, Mittal Publications, 2002, p.294.

¹² P.N. Chopra, *Sikkim*, New Delhi, S. Chand and Co. Ltd, 1972, Reprint 1985, p.45. According to Tashi Topden extant colonial data of gazetteer is inaccurate on Sikkim. See Tashi Topden, "History and the Loss of Sikkimese Culture" paper presented in the Golden Jubilee Conference of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology in October 2008, Gangtok, Sikkim on *Buddhist Himalayas: Studies in Religion, History and Culture* (forthcoming).

Though Sikkim may not be a Buddhist majority state, its culture and ethos, more so in the border regions, is closely integrated with Mahayana Buddhism.

Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT)

The importance of Buddhism in Gangtok gets further fortified by institutes such as the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology. The NIT is envisioned as a storehouse of collective wisdom of all sects of Mahayana Buddhism. It was established during the reign of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal. Its foundation stone was laid by HH the 14th Dalai Lama in 1957. It brings out *The Bulletin of Tibetology* bi-annually. Nearby are the Do-Drul Chorten, built in 1948, and the Sikkim Institute of Higher Nyigma Studies (affiliated to Sampurnanand Sanskrit University, Varanasi), where young men imbibe teaching of the Nyingmapa tradition of Buddhism and acquire various degrees like Madhyamika, Shastri and Acharya.

The Golden Jubilee Conference of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology (NIT), Gangtok, Sikkim was held from 1 to 5 October 2008 with the title *Buddhist Himalayas: Studies in Religion, History and Culture*. Undoubtedly, the NIT is emerging as an international nodal point for Tibetology and related studies. This will be in consonance with the *North Eastern Vision Document*¹³ which suggests that Sikkim can be developed as a hub linking other Buddhist destinations in Nepal, Bhutan, TAR, and Tawang to a pan-regional Buddhist circuit.

Division Within and Among Traditions

Without a mention of Rumtek, the survey is incomplete. This monastery of Tibetans-in-exile near Gangtok was in the media highlights when the teenaged 17th Karmapa Ogyun Thrinley Dorje fled to India from China in 2000.¹⁴ He was endorsed as a reincarnation (tulku) by the 14th Dalai Lama after the death of the 16th Karmapa in Chicago in 1981. Regents looked after the baby boy till he was grown up. Thus by 2000 or so the problem came to public scrutiny. India gave formal permission to him to be registered as a Tibetan refugee. There is also a rival candidate. The other rival camp within the sect had installed their own 17th Karmapa named Thrinley Thaye Dorje. When interacting

¹³ *North Eastern Region: Vision 2020*, Ministry of Development of North Eastern Region, May 2008, pp.131-132.

¹⁴ Anil Mahaeshwari, *The Buddha Cries!: Karmapa Conundrum*, New Delhi, UBS Publishers, Second Reprint, 2008.

with monastery information office, it was mentioned that there is even a third claimant. The Dalai Lama's endorsement, however, is generally final.

Rumtek monastery is the repository of precious gold, ashes of the famous and respected 16th Karmapa with his distinctive black hat.

As regards Karmapa and his tradition, most analysts who wrote in the New Delhi-based media when Karmapa escaped to India in 2000 considered that this controversy involves a security risk, as people of Sikkim will be affected as they follow this sect. However, most Sikkimese are followers of the Nyingma tradition. What security impact the Karmapa struggle will have thus may not be that serious for the locals. Interaction with Principal of CIBS at Ladakh also revealed that in Ladakh there is no impact on the society in Ladakh with politics related to Karmapa.¹⁵

In the larger study of Buddhism in the Indian Himalayan belt, perhaps one answer which lays to rest concerns for the extant continuation and resilience of Buddhism was provided by Principal, CIBS when posed this question. He answered that it needs to be remembered that Buddhism has survived since ancient times of Kushan and will continue to do so.

PART III: SIANG REGION OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH¹⁶

Peopling of the Region

Arunachal Pradesh is home to 26 major tribes scattered in 3,649 villages. Population of the state in 2001 census was about one million with population of upper Siang over 33 thousand (the ratio of scheduled tribe to general category is 78% : 22%). Broadly, the entire population in the Siang region (consisting of three districts of East, West and Upper Siang) bordering Bhutan could be divided in two groups based on their socio-political-religious affinities.

¹⁵ According to media reports of 2008, the Indian government has not allowed the 17th Karmapa Ogyun Thrinley Dorje to visit Tibetan Buddhist dominated areas close to the border of TAR due to the sensitive nature. However, in September 2008 he did visit Leh (Ladakh) and due to heavy snowfall was even rescued by military helicopters on the Upshi Manali axis beyond Barlachla pass. He is presently in his temporary abode at his monastery at Sidhbari near Dharmsala in Himachal Pradesh.

¹⁶ Entry to the state by Indian nationals is governed by the Inner line Regulations. Other states having the inner line regulation are Nagaland and Mizoram. Foreigners have to obtain restricted area permits.

The first are the Adis who reside in the middle belt. They worship and recognize Donyi (Sun) and Polo (Moon) or Donyi-poloism. The second group is that of the Buddhists like the Khambas and Membas who like other Buddhist communities of the Indian Himalayas live near the border with Tibet. To maintain their Buddhist connections, children from these regions get educated in schools and institutes of Mahayana Buddhism all over India.

PART IV: WEST KAMENG AND TAWANG DISTRICTS OF ARUNACHAL PRADESH

In this region if the second half of the twentieth century was a period of military build up and war with China in 1962, early twenty-first century history is centered around the consolidation of Buddhism with an Indian touch. This is borne out by the institutions, and cultural and religious infrastructure.

Central Institute of Himalayan Culture Studies (CIHCS)

The CIHCS at Dahung was established in 2003 under the Ministry of Culture and is affiliated to Sampurnanand Sanskrit University (SSU), Varanasi. It has about 130 students from all over India. It starts from class 9 onwards. It is a landmark institute and has a bright future. What is important is that it has highly motivated and dedicated Indian teachers hailing from all over the Himalayan belt including Tibetans and teachers from the Indo-Gangetic plains of the Hindi belt. Its dynamic principal Shri Geshe Ngawang Tashi Bapu (Lama Tashi), was born in Kameng District and had his Buddhist education in Karnataka in the Tibetan establishment located at Drepung Loseling Monastery at Mundgod, Karnataka. He is also former Principal Chant Master of the Dalai Lama's Drepung Loseling Monastery in India—one of the largest Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in the world, with over 3,000 monks. He has travelled extensively throughout the world, teaching, performing, and recording with monks from his Monastery. He was nominated for a Grammy Award for his path-breaking Tibetan chants in 2006 (available in CD).

CIHCS is an appropriate institution for preserving the culture. With a high level of leadership and devotion, the experiment has lots of potential. Rapid changes in society need to be balanced with both scientific and religious education. Institutes such as these are the future of the region. Unlike public schools for the rich and the elite where

boys and girls are prepared to serve the urban world of service, industry, business and commerce—this Institute will serve the poorer sections of the Buddhist Himalayas. In doing so, it will also have to chart a difficult course which now lays before us due to urbanization, modernization and all sorts of raised expectations. How much of negatives it rejects and how much of positives of progress it absorbs is now the new challenge.

Monasteries

Upper Bomdila monastery was earlier in Tsona (now in Tibet) and has an Indian citizen as its head. The present head, HE the 13th Tsona Gontse Rinpoche, is a former Congress MLA, who is leading with the issue of granting the region 'Monyul' an autonomous status as in Ladakh. He has followers spanning India and Tibet. Unlike the general impression that only Tibetans are in the top hierarchy, Indian citizens from Kameng region are the top clergy. Today gompas in Upper Bomdila and Tawang are headed by Indians.

Civil – Military Relations in Tawang Region

Tawang Maitreya Diwas is organised by the Indian Army, District Administration and YUVA (NGO) at Tawang on a regular annual basis. It is an important annual event in fostering a good rapport and is much liked by the locals. It is also very useful for the military who can better understand the local culture and Buddhism. This event is followed by Buddha Mahotsav around November.¹⁷

Tawang War Memorial

This 1962 war memorial is impressive and a tourist attraction. The memorial is built as a traditional chorten on Buddhist lines. It was personally anointed by HH the Dalai Lama in 1998. This bonding of the Indian Military with the Dalai Lama has a great significance for the people of Tawang, Buddhism and the military. The military needs to be complemented in being sensitive to the culture. A number of war memorials have come up in the former NEFA battle zone and are aesthetically based on the Buddhist concept of chorten.¹⁸

¹⁷ The 8th Festival was held in early November 2008 which was attended by the Indian External Affairs Minister Shri Pranab Mukherjee. See http://www.outlookindia.com/pti_print.asp?id=631281 accessed on 13.11.2008.

¹⁸ 28 Infantry Division of the Indian Army has the Buddhist symbol of Vajra as its formation sign.

Demand of Union Territory Status to Ladakh, Mon Autonomous Region and Gorkhaland

One positive result of the Buddhist belt in the Himalayas which is of considerable importance to India both in terms of economics and security is that there has never been any insurgency in the region. All political demands have been resolved by peaceful means. However, what is of concern is the clash between the Ladakh Buddhist Association and Islam which began in the 1980s. It is unfortunate that Ladakh, which includes Muslim Kargil, now appears to be divided. Kargil district has a Muslim identity and Ladakh Buddhist. To preserve their identity the people of Ladakh in the late 1980s had agitated for Schedule Tribe Status and formation of Ladakh Autonomous Hill Development Council. Now some demand a Union Territory status.¹⁹ Resolving this issue is difficult but essential.

Since 2004, there is a demand for the creation of the Mon Autonomous Council for West Kameng and Tawang. This is led by Tsona Gontse Rinpoche.²⁰ From a purely Buddhist point of view it appears that the demand is to ensure cultural and religious identity. Like in Ladakh, the perceived threat may be of spread of other religions like Christianity or even Islam or reassertion of Hinduism in some form.

There is an ongoing agitation for Gorkhaland in the Siliguri region of Darjeeling district of West Bengal and neighbouring areas. The context of these demands are different and it will be incorrect to compare them. It appears that granting Mon Autonomous Region Status will benefit both the people and ensure the so called nurturing of Buddhism in this belt on the Sino-India border. Similarly Ladakh's case for a Union Territory is driven by a desire to preserve religious identity and must be accommodated in some form. As regards Gorkhaland, if it includes Sikkim, then even the existing Buddhist identity of Sikkim may get overwhelmed. This will have many

¹⁹ Thupstan Chhewang, "Vindication of Leh Agitation for UT", *Border Affairs*, July-September 2008, pp.23-25 and "2008 a Crucial Year for us in Ladakh", *Border Affairs*, April-June 2008, pp.5-10, Sonam Wangchuk Shakspo, "Ladakh and New Delhi Made for Each Other", *Border Affairs*, July-September 2008, pp.26-28 and Tsering Samphel, "Ladakh's Stirring Saga of Valour and Patriotism", *Border Affairs*, April-June 2008, pp.11-14.

²⁰ *The Hindu* (New Delhi), October 20, 2008. In the Patkai region the demand for an autonomous council is for Changlang and Tirap districts, probably due to the threat they perceive due to spread of Christianity with the political demands of Nagalim.

disadvantages as it is important to retain the Buddhist identity of Sikkim.²¹

Buddhism and Ecology

Another important influence of Buddhism is in ecological matters. We know how the fragile nature of the Buddhist Himalayan region has a complex relationship with and respect of nature. Buddhist values, lifestyles and expectations also preserve the ecology. Though the PRC claims it to be harmonious, economic development which is being carried out in Tibet is not in tune with the wisdom of the religion. Tibetan nomads who are now sidelined as far as their lifestyle or development is concerned are reported to have been the first one to notice changes in the land and weather around them.²² Climatic warming will spell disaster and so much is dependent on sustainable land use and respect for the environment. Desertification of open grassland and pastures, loss of biodiversity and over exploitation by way of resource extraction like water, deforestation, mineral extraction, etc., are appearing to be the new challenges. The Tibetans have pleaded for a Chinese Government rethink on development and environmental policies, be it settling of nomads, fencing of grasslands, reforestation, infrastructure development, and urbanization.²³

There is an urgent need for environmental degradation to be controlled in Tibet as it is the 'water tower of Asian' as all major rivers emanate here. To this end, the study indicates that there is an ecological aspect to the importance of Buddhism in the Himalayan region including Tibet. The carrying capacity of the Himalayan region is low and it is not possible for it to support a greater density of population. Bhutan being a small country has some policies such as gross national

²¹ It needs to be appreciated that some scholars have opposite views. A.C. Sinha has argued for a Nepalmul majority 'Sukhim' (united Darjeeling and Sikkim) for reasons such: 1) it will be free of Bhutia heritage and will save New Delhi the embarrassment of creating a tiny state (Darjeeling), 2) it may appeal to emotions of West Bengal, 3) it will have a viable state for Nepamul Indians which will take care of language, culture and identity, 4) it will be strategically located between Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Bangladesh with strong links to the north-eastern region, and 5) it will be 'Indianised', free from the legacy of the Namgyal Sikkim. See A.C. Sinha, *Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic*, New Delhi, Indus Publishing Company, 2008, p.311.

²² Michel Zhao and Orville Schell, "Tibet: Plateau in Peril", *World Policy Journal*, Fall, pp.171-180.

²³ *Tibet 2003: State of the Environment*, White Paper, Central Tibetan Administration, Dharamsala, 2003.

happiness. Sikkim has a green and organic policy evident by billboards and bumper stickers, but population growth may make it difficult to implement. Seeing the interrelated nature of people and their environment, it is suggested that both from ecological and Buddhist perspectives, the inner-line status quo, restricting population and influx by special status continues to be maintained in the Indian Himalayan belt.

Summary on Buddhism in the Region

Buddhist religion and culture is being vigorously pursued by Indians along the Himalayan belt. What is important to understand is that besides Tibet having an area half that of Europe and one fifth that of China, its population of six million (60 lakhs) dwarfs that of the Indian Buddhists in the Himalayas which varies from seven lakhs (census figure) to 22 lakhs as assumed by one author.²⁴ Thus any discourse on Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhism of the Mahayana variety can not ignore these vast regions of Tibet and their people.

Lama Tashi, the Indian monk and principal recalls that he owes all his training in Buddhist practices to the 'Harvard' of India at Mungod, north Karnataka (Drepung Loseling Monastery) where most of the teachers were Tibetans. What he implied was that a sprinkling of Tibetans monks and scholars had led us to enrich the culture and preserve this knowledge.

Relative Position of India and China

There are two different narratives in China and India. To preserve the culture and to let people develop according to their genius India restricts non-tribal people from settling down in the strategic Himalayan states according to Indian constitution and laws. The concept of inner line is still maintained.²⁵ On the other hand, the Chinese carry out Hanisation of Tibet. One should not see this in purely material, economic and infrastructure terms. While India allows religious freedom, it is suspect in Tibet. As the March 2008 events (spontaneous demonstrations all across TAR and also neighbouring

²⁴ Nawang Tsering, op cit, note 5.

²⁵ Some Tibetan youth are known to have admired the Sikkim model and feel that Tibetans could flourish in a democratic pattern laid out by the Dalai Lama following the example of Sikkim, which is to some degree its own world, even if it is part of India. See Pico Iyer, *The Open Road: The Global Journey of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama*, New Delhi, Penguin/Viking, 2008, p. 219.

regions of China having Tibetan population) show, religion appears to be a very powerful factor in Tibet. How about Buddhism in China? Box A is one snapshot.

Box A

BUDDHISM IN CHINA¹

Introduction

Amartaya Sen shows how Buddhism went first to China from India. Buddhism later reached Tibet. The journey of Buddhism from India to China has been particularly notable in the case of Chan (dhyāna) which transformed to Zen in Japan. In Tibet Buddhism survived and thrived. In 792 AD there was a great debate in which the Tibetans accepted the Indian version of Buddhism rather than that of China. What is important to know is that it declined simultaneously in China due to Neo-Confucianism, and at the same time in India due to Hindu revival. Daoist (or Taoist) opposition to Buddhism also had strong element of Chinese intellectual nationalism and a sense of superiority of Chinese ways. For example, the early 4th century Daoist activist Wang Fu in his book claims that Lao-tzu, the semi-legendary founder of Daoism went on a civilizing mission to India and to influence Gautam Buddha.

It is the tradition of irreverence and defiance of authority which came with Buddhism from India that was singled out for a particularly strong chastisement in early anti-Buddhist criticism in China. Fu-yi, a powerful Confucian leader had complained about Buddhism to the Tang emperor which parallels the contemporary disorder generated by the present day Falungong.

New discoveries along the silk route in Dunhuang show the spread of Buddhism from China through Central Asia till it got replaced with Islam. In the twentieth century, communism officially put an end to established religion. Yet in the contemporary world, one book on Chinese Buddhism (Ling Haicheng, translated by Jin Shaoqing, *Buddhism in China*, China International Press, nd.) claims that out of the three types of Buddhism in the world (Han Buddhism, Pali Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism), China is the main region of two (Han and Tibetan). It is paradoxical that an atheist country can take credit for owning two thirds of Buddhism.

The New Fad

Like the Dalai Lama's effort to create interest and fascination with himself, his cause, and his religion around the world, something similar is happening in China. A. Tom Grunfeld writes that "There is a similar phenomenon going on in China, where the government's attention to Tibet has resulted in a different sort of fad; an infatuation with things Tibetan, at times portraying Tibetans as 'noble savages' with curious ways. Tibetan traditional medicine has become very popular while young Chinese are 'dropping out' by leading 'hippy lives' in Lhasa."

India and China

The modern development of Buddhism in China is already being assisted by the Indian Government as can be seen by the parliamentary debate on building Indian Buddhist temple in China. The Joint Declaration of 21 November 2006 between Premier Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Manmohan Singh when the former visited India is reproduced below.

India must be proactive via the ancient Nalanda trail and the new network which is emerging including Himalayan belt and South East Asian countries, Myanmar and Sri Lanka. It is unlikely that Buddhism will encompass the whole of China, but its spread may lead to a better understanding of democratic rights and Tibetan autonomy in future. In any case the name Shangrila (imaginative name in the 1933 novel *Lost Horizon* by British author James Hilton) and Buddhist mythical concept of *Shambala* have already been innovatively used by China for tourism. In 2002, they have even renamed Zhongdian County as Shangri-La (Xianggelila). The bulk of tourists are domestic Han Chinese.

It needs to be seen if Japanese variation of Soka Gokai (which is now also popular in urban India) may also spread in China in the future. Falung Gong was suppressed as in Chinese history, secret sects and cults are eyed suspiciously. But this now cannot be said for Mahayana Buddhism and allowing India the opportunity to promote the religion in China.

India has nothing to lose in spreading monuments to China. Rather it will be useful to track the historic routes of Buddhism and attempt to have Asoka type pillars in China and neighbourhood through diplomacy.

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATE ON BUILDING INDIAN BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN
CHINA AND JOINT DECLARATION OF 21 NOVEMBER 2006

Q. 2145 BUILDING INDIAN BUDDHIST TEMPLE IN CHINA 07/12/2005

LOK SABHA
UNSTARRED QUESTION NO. 2145
TO BE ANSWERED ON 07.12.2005

2145. SHRI BRAJA KISHORE TRIPATHY:

Will the PRIME MINISTER be pleased to state:

- (a) whether India has an opportunity to build the first Indian Buddhist temple in China;
- (b) if so, the details in this regard; and
- (c) the extent to which Indian heritage is likely to be boosted in China as a result thereof?

ANSWER THE MINISTER OF STATE IN THE MINISTRY OF EXTERNAL
AFFAIRS (SHRI E. AHAMED)

- (a) Yes, Sir.
- (b) The decision to construct an Indian-style Buddhist Temple in Luoyang, China was finalized with the conclusion of a Memorandum to this effect during the visit of the Chinese Premier, Mr. Wen Jiabao to India in April 2005. Under this Memorandum, the Indian side would provide Rupees Five Crores to the Chinese side for the construction of the Temple, in addition to providing the Buddha idol and other accompanying material. The Indian side is also responsible for the architectural design of the Temple project, its blueprint, material specifications and landscape planning, as also architectural and expert supervision during the construction work. The Chinese side will provide land and also undertake the construction work. The design and the architect for the project have been selected by an Advisory Committee constituted by the Prime Minister. The construction work to be undertaken by the Chinese side is expected to begin in 2006.
- (c) It is expected that the Temple, once completed, will become an enduring symbol of the centuries-old cultural exchanges between India and China, of which Buddhism is an important and integral part.

Joint Declaration by the Republic of India and the People's Republic of China of 21/11/2006.

IX. Revitalising Cultural Ties and Nurturing People-to-People Exchanges:

29. The centuries-old cultural contacts between the two peoples provide a strong foundation for enduring friendship between India and China. The initiatives to rediscover these historical linkages and revitalise them in the present day context, including through an early completion of the Xuanzang Memorial in Nalanda and the Indian-style Buddhist Shrine in Luoyang, will further strengthen these bonds. The two sides agree to strengthen cooperation in the area of spiritual and civilizational heritage, discuss collaboration in the digitisation of Buddhist manuscripts available in China as well as the re-development of Nalanda as a major centre of learning with the establishment of an international university on the basis of regional cooperation. In order to promote greater awareness of each other's culture, the two sides shall organise a "Festival of India" in China and a "Festival of China" in India, with a joint logo. Detailed modalities in this regard will be decided by the concerned authorities through mutual consultations.

The other narrative is about India which on the other hand allows religious freedom. India is also preserving Tibetan Buddhism which now is lodged in India and is also the land of Buddha. When comparing the two narratives it is clear that this soft power factor with India is vital. Policy planners must be sensitive to it. Buddhism, then with this logic needs to be nurtured in the Indian Himalayan belt. It is no surprise that the Dalai Lama has mentioned Buddhism as a line of Defence by India. What he meant was surely that defence is not only a function of weapons and military power. Much like the contemporary discourse on broadening of security agenda to include non traditional threats, culture and religion also provide a soft power which military weapons of coercion cannot match, and which are available at a far lesser cost than military forces.

As regards ethnicity, it can be said that Indians should not sound apologetic for Indian citizens being ethnic Tibetans. India in any case is a mixture of many races, religions and people. A study of literature at Box B shows that there are very varied accounts of ethnicity.

ETHNICITY AND LITERATURE SURVEY
OF THE INDIAN HIMALAYAN BELT AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH TIBETⁱⁱ

There are a number of anthropological, social, cultural and political accounts on the complex nature of the ethnicity of the people in the Himalayan belt under study.

When the Dalai Lama fled to India, Jawaharlal Nehru the Indian Prime Minister stated in the Lok Sabha that, “We have large number of people of Tibetan stock living in India as Indian nationals. We also have some Tibetans émigrés in India” (Bureau of Parliamentary Research).

The various Tibetan type Buddhist people on the southern side of the Himalayan watershed in India and Nepal are broadly described as Monpas in Tibetan, meaning ‘ravine dwellers’ (Das, Gautam). The ‘Gyagar Khampas’ or Kinnauris, Spitis or Ladakhis are Indian citizens with Tibetan ethnicity or religio-cultural affiliations with Tibetans (Falcone and Tsering).

According to Kharat, a population of Tibetan race inhabits Nepal, especially the Tamang region, Bhutan, Sikkim and along the westward Himalayas and is also found in varying numbers in the hill districts of Garhwal, Kullu, Spiti, Lahaul, Ladakh, Kashmir and NEFA (Arunachal Pradesh). This shows there were many Tibetans who had settled in India much before the post-1959 events, living peacefully, while maintaining cordial relations with the local inhabitants of India. In the Tawang region many Tibetans were settled almost a century ago and hold Indian citizenship.

Linguistic Groups

According to Nawang Tsering (Tsering), Bhoti is the name of a language as well as the name of a class or tribe who speaks this language. It is the lingua-franca of the people of Mongolia, Bhutan, Tibet, Pakistan Occupied areas of Skardu, Nepal, and the Indian Himalayan region from Ladakh to Arunachal Pradesh. Bhoti language is also known as Tibetan language because central Tibet has been the nucleus of Bhoti culture and language for centuries.

Regarding the linguistic groups, according to the Central Institute of Indian Languages, both Tibetan and Bhutia languages are of Tibeto-Burmese origin like Manipuri, Boro, Tripuri and others (CIIL).

Recent scholarship (Huber) shows that the entire region of Siang to Kameng in Arunachal Pradesh can be divided into four linguistic groups: Kho Bwa, West Tani, East Tani and Mishmi. In the region of Subansiri and Siang, community structure is very complex. The Membas area has a heterogeneous population. They are also mixed with Khambas in the area of Gelling.

Ladakh

According to Dewan (Dewan), in Ladakh initially Aryan Dards followed Bon Chos. Later, some converted to Buddhism. Dards were squeezed in from the east by Mongolian people from Tibet. In an alternative theory, Tibetan nomads were first to arrive, followed by the Mon people of north India and eventually by the Dards. There are two distinct groups of Ladakhi population (Mann). Firstly are the the Ladakhi or Bhoto, Boto, Bhaota, Bodh, Bodpa, and secondly are the Mons and Dards. According to Fernanda (2007), Ladakh is regarded as part of 'ethnographic Tibet'. Mullik (1971) mentions that the whole of Ladakh, except the western end near Kargil, is ethnically similar to Tibetans.

Himachal Pradesh

The Anthropological Survey of India (ASI) on Himachal mentions that the Bodh, Bhot or Chanzang are primarily distributed in the Lahul and Spiti valleys. Though the history of the Bodh is not available, according to local accounts, those people of Tibet who came and settled here in the past i.e., prior to 1962 are called Bodh or Bhot, whereas those who came after 1962 are known as Tibetans (ASI, a).

Sikkim

In the case of Sikkim, the Anthropological Survey of India mentioned that Lepchas, the original inhabitants call themselves Rongkup or Muntachi Rongkup. Later in the book it is mentioned that Lepchas are known as 'Monpa' by Tibetans and are a Kirate tribe, while Bhutias call them 'Meris' (ASI,b).

Sinha alludes to Bhutia immigrants representing Tibeto-Burman stock, Tibetan culture, language and a combination of pastoral and semi-settled grazers. The Lepchas (in Nepali 'lap' is vile, and 'che' is speakers) call themselves Rong and are known to Tibetans as 'Mon-ba' or 'Mon-rik', referring to the people of Mon country—a general Tibetan name for the lower Himalayas, from Kashmir to Assam and Burma (Sinha).

The Sikkim Development Report by the Planning Commission in tracing the history mentions no historic records exist to show how Lepchas came to the region. They have their own language known as Rong. In 1642, Bhutia rule was established in Sikkim. Land monopoly shifted from Lepchas to Bhutias. Bhutias also promoted inter-marriages with Lepchas and converted the spirit worshippers to Lamaist Buddhism. The name Bhutia is derived from their original habitat 'Bhot' (Tibet).

According to Topden, a lot of research needs to be done at the grass root level. His critical appraisal of available accounts of Sikkimese history, especially in English language, showed how writings by British colonial civil servants, adventurers and soldiers were based on their own biased observations, translations from grossly inaccurate Tibetan texts and incorrect interpretations provided by local guides. The British's exposure to Himalayan Buddhism was also limited. Ignorance of social systems, customs and religious beliefs of the local people resulted in 'Tibetanised' versions of Sikkimese history, given the British's primary fascination with Tibet during that particular period. Early accounts also suffered from a total ignorance of Sikkimese language such as Lepcha. The absence of academic interest by local scholars has also resulted in a very superficial account of Sikkim. Scholarship needs to be encouraged in this direction (Topden).

Arunachal Pradesh

According to the *Techno-Economic Survey of NEFA* by the National Council of Applied Economic Research (1967), the local population consists of 82 Indo-Mongoloid tribes and sub-tribes. In Western Kameng it shows that the region is home of Monpas and Sherdukpens. Both tribes are Buddhist and are strongly influenced by Tibetan and Bhutanese culture, tradition and customs. In Siang, along the international frontier, the two Buddhist tribes are Membas and Khambas which resemble the Monpas of Kameng district.

What is of particular interest now is what B.M. Mullik (1971) has mentioned at page 94 on Siang District: "This big bend of the Tsangpo contained within it Pemako and Chimdru areas, the inhabitants of which were not Tibetans and who had more access to India than to Tibet. Even as late as 1959 petitions were filed by the people of Pemakao and Chimdru to the Government of India to take them under Indian administration."

According to Chowdhury (1983), ethnically the Monpas of Kameng might have affinity with the Bhutanese to the west and Tibetans across the northern borders.

In current government documents most of the people in Arunachal Pradesh are either Tibetan or of Thai and Burmese origin (North Eastern Region, Vision 2020). According to Keki N. Daruwala, the tribes in Arunachal Pradesh have migrated over centuries from the Mekong and Tibet. The Adis claim Tibetan descent (Daruwala).

Some just prefer to mention that Monpas and Sherdukpens of Tawang and West Kameng have close social and religious ties with the Tibetans (Das, Pushpita). In the case of Tawang and Kameng, to counter the Chinese claim, Indian scholars (Dutta) have gone on to argue that Monpas are not Tibetans and China can not claim the area on the basis of ethnicity or religion.

These arguments of denial of ethnicity are not convincing. Probably they are based on one of the initial official publications (Bureau of Parliamentary Research, page 38), which also emphasised this point. It was mentioned that the Monba, Aka, Dafla, Mir, Abor, Mishmi had no kinship ties with Tibetans. Rather the Tibetans refer to them as 'Lopas' – 'southern barbarians beyond the pale'.

Conclusion

This survey establishes the incompletely researched, complex, multi-cultural, linguistic and ethnic composition of India in the frontier zone of the Indian Himalayas. The crux is that at no time should Indians be apologetic for having Tibetan stocks in their population. Rather, it is time we shed mongoloid prejudices all together. Priority is for an Indian identity followed by regional identities. However, more multi-disciplinary scholarship is needed to have the correct 'data' on our own people.

To consolidate this invaluable soft power, what needs to be done is to make further attempts to integrate the Buddhist Himalayan belt with national and international centres of learning and preserve and promote the Buddhist cultural heritage of India. As the evidence shows, Indian Buddhist institutions have a symbiotic relationship with those in Tibet. Buddhism is a common factor. With this logic, religious and cultural roots are integrated into the Indian Himalayan region through Buddhism. Thus even the exiled Tibetan Buddhists, the Buddhists in TAR and other regions of China, the Tibetan Buddhist Diaspora and Buddhists of the India Himalayan belt have much more in common with each other than Han Chinese with Tibetans. It is no surprise that after 50 years, Tibetans are never unwelcome in India. This as we show is due to the linkages of Buddhism.

In summary Indian diplomats, academics, military officers, scholars and citizens must be educated on the complexities of these issues. More research and publicity concerning the Buddhist regions of the Indian Himalayas is needed at an international level by the Indians.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to show the influence and importance of Buddhism in the Himalayan belt for India. The overlapping nature with Tibet and Buddhism as practiced in Tibet has also been shown to have entwined linkages with India. The twenty-first century should not be

like the twentieth with military conflicts with hard power tools. Rather, importance of soft power such as culture and religion can now be supplemented to enhance both national and human security of the people. The Indian state and citizens need to be made aware of these characteristics to nurture Buddhism in the Himalayan belt and beyond in Tibet.

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