

BUDDHISM IN LADAKH

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ABSTRACT

Ladakh is located in the state of Jammu and Kashmir, situated at a height of 2500m above sea level surrounded by passes as high as 4000 to 6000m. It lies between the great Himalayas in the south and, the Karakoram mountains in the north, which is known as the trans-Himalayas region which consists of Ladakh and Zaskar ranges. Ladakh is largely a desolate cold desert, uneven terrain, with little vegetation on the mountains and fully fledged vegetation along the banks of rivers and its tributaries¹. Ladakh is one of the highest inhabited plateaus in the world. Ladakh served as an overland trade center between the central Asian region like Yarkhand, Kashgar, Khotan, and Tibet as well as the Indian region of Punjab.

KEYWORDS: *Tibetan Buddhism, Archeological and Literary Evidence*

INTRODUCTION

Ladakh is an important center of Tibetan Buddhism. Tibetan Buddhism is also known as Vajrayana Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism. It is one of three vehicles of Buddhism; the other two are the Hinayana and Mahayana. Tibetan Buddhism was introduced in Ladakh in the time of Rinchen Zangpo, which is further divided into sects and subsects. There are four major sects of Tibetan Buddhism: Nyingma, Kargyud, Sakya, Geluk. There are more than two hundred villages in the Ladakh and each village has its own Gonpa or Monastery, besides these there are sixteen bigger monasteries in Ladakh, all belong to Vajrayana school of Buddhism. For the Buddhist people of Ladakh, these Gonpa or monasteries are the main cultural and religious centers. The archeological and literary evidence of the Buddhist monuments in the Ladakh region goes back to the 3rd century BCE.

Kashmir has been one of the most important center for the spread and development of Buddhism. From the account of Kalhanawe come to know that king Surendra was first Buddhist emperor of Kashmir who was born after the Buddha but before the king Asoka. He built a Buddhist *Vihara* called Surendrabhavana², at Saurasa or present-day Suru in the Ladakh region. From the archaeological and literary evidence, we come to know it was during the time of king Asoka (250BCE) Buddhism started to flourish in Ladakh. The king Asoka hosted the third Buddhist council at *Patliputra* and sent Buddhist missionaries to Kashmir and Gandhara, for the propagation of Buddhism. The *Mahavamsa* and *Dipavamsa* also prove that the great Mauryan Emperor Asoka sent Buddhist missionaries under the leadership of Majjyantika³ to Kashmir and adjoining area for the propagation of Buddhism. Asoka himself visited Kashmir twice and founded the city of Srinagar (Puranadhisthana). He took with him numerous monks and built *viharas* for them. Ladakh was the northernmost boundary of Asoka's empire. The earliest evidence of Buddhist monument in Ladakh belongs to the period of king Asoka, it is

locally known as Teri⁴Chorten (Asokan Chorten) i.e., Stupa, which is one of the 84,000 stupas built by Asoka, located in the Teri village of Chang-Tang region. In 400 CE, when Fa-Hien visited Kiachha (Ladakh) he found two stupas of Buddha's relic. There is another stupa made of stone at Sumda village in Leh region and Buddhist shrine at Suru in the Suru valley which is attributed to king Asoka, but it is debated by the scholars.

The king Kanishka of Kushana dynasty is also known for sending Buddhist missionaries and building a stupa in Ladakh. In 1909CE a Kharoshti inscription reported by Moravian missionary A.H Francke at Khaltse⁵. This inscription mentions the name of the Kushan ruler Wima Kadphises and suggests that Ladakh was a part of the Kushan empire. In the first century AD, king Kanishka hosted the fourth Buddhist council at Kundalvana and sent five hundred Buddhist missionaries to Tibet via Zaskar, for the propagation of Mahayana, a newly formed branch of Buddhism. The missionaries constructed a stupa at Sani village in the Zaskar valley. At present day stupa locally known as Kanika or Kani Stupa⁶, is near the Kanikhar monastery. The stupa is built in Gandhara style with a square basement surmounted by a square *Medhi* upon which elongated hemispherical dome was built. On the dome stands inverted pyramidal component which is finally topped by the wooden *Chatravali*. The pinnacle is made of metal *Yashti*.

In the post-Kushan period, the influence of Mahayana Buddhism can be seen in the form of rock carving and sculptures. These Buddhist rock art sculpture bear witness to the introduction of Mahayana Buddhism and Buddhist art in Ladakh before the Tibetan influence began in the region. Images of Avalokitesvara, Maitreya, Buddha and Chorten⁷ carved on hills found from many places like Drass, Mulbek, Shey, Sangku, Paskyum, Padum, Tumel, Kartse, Sani, Gonpa Village, Changspa, Sumda, Shankar, Igu, Ufti, Khaltse, Spituk, Nimo, all these carvings and sculptures belong to period between 3rd century AD to 9th century AD. The rock carvings and sculptures of Ladakh broadly reflect the strong influence of Kashmir tradition. These sculptures were carved mostly by missionaries on their way from India to Tibet and other central Asian countries. These carvings are generally found in proximity to a settlement, a river, a stream or natural spring or on the trade routes.

The period from 10th to 11th century AD is known as the Second Great Diffusion of Buddhism in the Himalayas and considered as the pioneering stage in the history of Buddhism. The region of Ladakh was influenced by Tibetan Buddhism or Tantric Buddhism. In 975CE Yeshe-Od was a Lama-king of Guge kingdom (Western Tibet), he sent a group of twenty-one Buddhist students to Kashmir to pursue studies in Buddhism and bring back scriptures with the true knowledge of Buddhism, among which one was Rinchen Zangpo⁸. For thirteen years, he studied Sanskrit and Philosophy under seventy-five masters in Kashmir and another part of India. Rinchen Zangpo is known as a great translator. During his visit to Kashmir, he translated Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. In 988CE he returned to Guge with translated Buddhist text. From the literary evidence, we came to know that he was a great builder of temples and stupas⁹. In 996CE, on the order of king he traveled again to Kashmir and with help of 32 Kashmiri artist, he established 108 monasteries in the northern India and Tibet. The oldest monasteries of Ladakh are attributed to Rinchen Zangpo; these are Alchi, Lamayuru, Sumdha, Mangyu, Wanla, and Nyarma. At present these monasteries are world oldest serving monasteries except Nyarma, which was destroyed by a natural disaster in the 14th century CE. Currently, Alchi, Sumdha, Mangyu, and Wanla are serving as temples whereas Lamayuru is serving as an educational center for monks.

In the events of the downfall of Buddhism in eastern India due to the invasion by the Muslims in the 12th century CE, Buddhism started blossoming in the tough terrains of Ladakh. The Buddhist missionaries entered Ladakh pulling up the advantages of Ladakh being in the trade route and the lack of interest of invaders in such harsh landshaped by the arid climate. The theology of Buddhism prevailed in the religious landscapes of Ladakh merely by adapting itself in terms of architecture, rituals, and liturgy which made Buddhism of Ladakh unique in its own way. Also, the fact that this area was being influenced by Kashmiri art added flavor to its uniqueness.

The lack of other religious communities in this area became one dominant factor that this new adapted Buddhism was successful in spreading its roots pretty quickly from the time of king Asoka. Not only there was a rise of invasions by Muslims, but the instability in its own core values gave way to other contemporary religious activities to spread its arms. Finally, Ladakh's harsh geographical conditions and surrounded by other Buddhist regions never gave chance to any other community to invade. The ever important trade route and Ladakh being in its stretch made Buddhism in Ladakh to flourish till today.

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