



BUDDHIST TEMPLES OF LADAKH

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Abstract:

Ladakh is the hub of the Buddhist culture. Here you will find a unique amalgamation of the Buddhist as well as the Tibetan culture. It is home to some of the greatest monasteries in the world. There are more than 100 monasteries in Ladakh, which is the domicile of the religious Buddhist, who meditate, pray and live in these 'Gompas' or 'Monasteries'. The Lama, who is the head of the monastery, is also known as the 'Kushak', which means reincarnation. The access to these monasteries is possible only through trekking, as they are situated in the far-flung areas of the Ladakhi region. The tour of these monasteries will make you vigilant of the great impact this religion has on the locals.

KEY WORDS:

Buddhist Temples , unique amalgamation , Buddhist monuments .

INTRODUCTION-

LADAKH, a remote district of the State of Jammu and Kashmir, is a mountainous area, situated to the extreme north of India, and lies at an altitude between 330m to 700, (10,000 and 20,000 feet) above sea level. The whole region is surrounded by high snow peaks. Through the center of Ladakh flows the great river of the Sengge Kha-bab (the Sindhu of the Indus), to the east of which lies Leh, the capital of Ladakh and to the south west is Zangakar region. This mountainous region contains with numerous Buddhist monasteries, cave-temples, stupas, etc.

The Buddhist monuments in Ladakh are classified in two broader categories, i.e., early and late. The early monasteries are assigned to the time of Rin chen bZang Po (C.950-1055 C.E.), who is considered as the great translator of Buddhist scriptures and the builder of the temples. The foundation of Nyar..me Monastery is ascribed to him. It is one of the earliest, but now is merely a collection of empty temples and ruined stupas.

In the western Tibetan cultural areas of mNga'-ris (Nari). La-dwags (Ladakh), and lahul-Spiti to the east and southeast of Kashmir, Buddhist monasteries from the eleventh century and later have survived to the present day. While the original buildings have often been subjected to later alterations, they contain many objects and paintings produced by Kasmiri artists during the original period of construction.

Probably the most abundant evidence of the extension of Kasmiri art styles beyond the main political centers of Kashmir is found in the ancient kingdom of Ladakh, now in the state of Kashmir in India. In recent centuries, the region has been completely under the cultural sway of Tibet, and indeed, Ladakh is aptly seen as essentially an output of Tibetan culture. However, though the eleventh century, the region was greatly influenced by the cosmopolitan culture of the capitals of Kashmir . Such association and the

transmission of Kashmir culture to Ladakh is suggested by several isolated sculptures and inscriptions.

The most impressive is an enormous rock-cut representation of the Bodhisattva Maitreya carved on the face of a solitary rock at Mulbek (Fig. 1a).

LAMAYURU is situated on a majestic position built on rocks half-way down from the Photo pass to Khalaste in the Indus Valley. The Lamayuru monastery belongs to the 'Bri-gung-pa an 'Order of Tibetan Buddhism' which traces its origin to two Indian Tantric masters named Tilopa and his disciple Naropa. The main image in the temple is that of Vairocana's, seated on a lion throne with garuda the mythical bird of the Hindu mythology and a pair of makaras, which form a canopy to Vairocana's outer halo. The four main Buddha- are seated against the back wall, two on either side. On the left wall are mural paintings of eleven headed Avalokitesvara and a mandala of Vairocana. The entrance on the right is painted with protecting divinities and miniature scenes from the life of S'akyamuni. In a small adjoining temple on the right are three human size stucco figures of protecting divinities. All this iconography suggests that the cult of Vairocana is typical of Rin-Chen-bzang-po's times and especially of monasteries associated with him. Below the monastery are some old chotens (stupas) which are seen along the old track towards Mulbek. The Lamayuru monastery is also famous for another incident. During this period, the great Atis'a came to Tibet from the famous monastery at Vikramaila in eastern India in 1042 C.E. and remained here until his death in 1054 C.E. He met Rin-Chen-brang-po who worked under the royal patronage primarily as a scholar.

MANG-GYU consists of an old monastery and an adjoining shrine-room with a central image of Vairocana with Buddha's manifestations of directions around him. On the walls are the painted mandalas of Vairocana.

Phyang monastery is located 17 km west from Leh in Ladakh region in Jammu and Kashmir (Fig. 1b). Phyang and Lamayuru are the only monasteries in Ladakh that belong to Dri-gung-pa sect of Tibetan Buddhism. The name Phyang was derived from Gang Ngonpo that means the blue mountain, which is situated behind the monastery. According to legend, foundation of the monastery was laid by Denma Kunga Drakpa. Phyang contains numerous sacred shrines inside the monastery, frescoes dating from the royal period (Figs. 1c & 1d), and an old museum which has an extensive collection of idols including a number of fine Kashmiri bronzes probably dating to the 14th century, thangkas, Chinese, Tibetan and Mongolian firearms and weapons.

ALCHI is a small valley, inhabited for the length of about 2 km is situated on the south bank of the Indus River (Fig 2a). It is famous for a group of about half a dozen important monuments known as Choskhor, i.e. 'religious enclave' or 'religious buildings' known as DUKHANG, SUNTSAK, LHAKHANG and MANJUSRI LHAKHANG. The temple at Gomba in the vicinity had old paintings with temple dedicated to Padmasambhava, who is flanked by two fierce looking deities known as the Tiger-God (sTag-lha), and the Lion-Headed goddess (known as Sege Dongma). Besides on the walls are the murals of Supreme Buddha Vajradhara and his other manifestations. There are three other Chotens (stupas) containing ancient paintings. The painted mandalas in the Alchi Monastery mostly refer to Vairocana in his Tibetan form as Kun-rig i.e., 'Omniscient One'. DU-KHANG, literally means an 'Assembly Hall' in Alchi is place where Buddhist monks assemble and perform the Buddhist rituals and ceremonies. Du-khang is the primary building of the Buddhist monastic establishment. It has been attributed to a man of religion named Skal-Idan Shes-rab. The 'Assembly Hall' consists of a square hall with a sanctuary on the rear with an image of four headed Vairocana accompanied by his entourage. As usual on the side walls are painted various mandalas of Vairocana and his manifestation. The hall is 8m square and the mandalas are 3m in diameter. Over the door is a mural of Mahakala surrounded by mandalas of Aks'obhya, and miniatures depicting religious scenes and the paintings of 'Thousand Buddha's', Prajnaparamita and Manjusri in the roundels. (See figures 2b, c and d for some of the wall paintings in the monastery).

Perhaps the most interesting and well-preserved painting in the Du-khang is that of a Tibetan ruler with his queen and a crown prince. The king and queen has halos around their heads. Below the royal couple wear the 'Sassanian' style robes decorated with lions in the roundels. The four-faced Vairocana in the sanctuary is gilded and is luxuriantly dressed. The four main Buddha's are arranged against the left and right hand walls of the sanctuary. On the left side are Aksobhya below and Ratnasambhava above; while on the right are Amitabha and Amoghasiddhi. Maitreya is also seen in the attitude of preaching. A crowned female image in the corner appears to be Tara. To the right of Amoghasiddhi throne is an image of a Lama who is identified as Atis'a which appears to be later addition. Vairocana's throne is decorated with lions and is surrounded by makaras and gandharvas are sporting with trumpets. Sum-Tsek, the 'three-tiered structural Temple', still looks solid, but its front porch rises to a second storey, is supported by wooden pillars. The protruding beams of the temple are carved with lion heads and are set between short supporting pillars carved with lion heads and a set between short supporting pillars carved with Buddha images with triangular designs. This intricate original wood-work, both on the exterior, occurs in many Hindu and

Buddhist temples along the Himalayas from Kangra to Nepal valley.

The Sum-tsek', the 'triple storey temple' has openings in the middle of each floor that permits light to enter from the topmost chamber. The ground level is laid out on a stepped plan, with a chorten (stupa) in the middle surrounded by four columns as well as those in the porch brackets incised with flowering foliage. Sculpted Buddha image are seen in trefoil niches above the elaborately carved beams. The interior walls are covered with painted figures and mandalas which are notable for their vibrant red and blue colors.

The interior niches on three sides contain colossal figures more than 4m high. These are Manjusri in the west. All these are lavishly painted with superb head-dresses and costumes. Miniature medallions on the robe contain scenes from the life of Buddha. Besides the colossal Bodhisattvas (Fig. 3a), are painted rows of miniature devotees, sages, Buddhas, female figures, celestial gandharvas and apasaras and attendant figures. At the entrance on south side is a large blue coloured-Mahakala striding across a corpse. The walls of the second and third storey's are completely covered with painted mandalas. They consists of a large circle, and within are four square 'gateways' and surrounded by numerous seated Bodhisattvas, gods-goddesses, guardian figures, lotus petals and so on. The ceiling is also profusely painted with lotus medallions, miniature figures of horsemen and stylized foliage. This Sun-Tsek or 'three-storey temple' is lavishly painted is dated to the eleventh century C.E.(Fig. 3b).

Lha-Khang-So-Ma, a square structure/chamber with chorten (stupa) in the centre. Two columns with lion faced brackets support the roof. The west side wall of the interior is painted with mandala while on the north side is seen images of Vairocana surrounded by multiple Bodhisattvas and guardian figures. On the lower part of the south wall are scenes from the life of Buddha. Over the doorway is Mahakala. This small chamber belongs to C.12th-13th century.

LOTSAWA*LHA*KANG and MANJUSRI LHA*KHANG are the two square chambers adjoining each other with chorten in the centre. It has centrally placed columns supporting roofs over the central bays. Manjusri is seated in the middle of the Lha-Khang shrine with Bodhisattvas and female deities and guardian figures.

BASGO, in the upper Indus valley has the remains of the Buddhist citadel, which served as a royal residence between the 15th and 17th centuries (Fig.3c). One of the Namgyal rulers constructed a Maitreya temple which consists of the paintings in the Tibetan style (Fig.3d). At the entrance doorway is a representation of Vajrapani and illustrations of the life of S'akyamuni and Bodhisattva figures. Nearby is the Serzang Gold and Copper temple of 17th century which owes its name for the copy of the Buddhist Canon written in gold, silver and copper. Murals in the temple depict Buddha figures including Vairocana.

Ladakh's another attraction is the Buddhist Gompas are constructed on the highest point of the mountain spurs. These are constructed on the highest point of the mountain spurs. These are constructed on isolated rocks or under the shelter of lofty cliffs with difficult approaches and away from the villages and are cut off from worldly affairs. In olden days these Gompas stood on trading route to Tibet and other Central Asian sites and offered sanctuary to travelers and traders. Many of these Gompas celebrate their annual festivals in winter. Some of them are known as Hemis Gompa, Thikse Gompa, Lamayuru Gompa, Mulbeck appears to be an ancient halting point on the road between Srinagar and Leh the main metropolis of Ladakh. This monumental image is about 9m in height and belongs to the Vairocana cult, and is dated to eighth to ninth century C.E.

The Mahayana of Tantric Buddhism entered Ladakh around the eleventh century for it was at this time the great Tibetan translator Rin-chen bZang-po (C.982-1055 C.E.) and the Indian pandit Dipankara Atis'a (C.982-1054 C.E.) were active in the spread of Buddhism in Western Tibetan and Ladakh. The former is said to have founded one hundred and eighty temples in Ladakh, Spiti, and Gu-ge, and many are attributed to his followers.

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Fig.1a Mulbeck Bodhisattva Maitreya Ladakh.



Fig. 1b Phyang monastery Distant view.



Fig. 1c Mahakala Phyang monastery.



Fig. 1d Painting Phyang monastery.



Fig. 2a Distant view of Alchi.



Fig. 2b Avalokitesvara Alchi upper room.



Fig. 2c Painting mandala on south wall west side Alchi Monastery.



Fig. 2d Green Tara Alch



Fig. 3a Interior of Sumtsek showing west alcove with Avalokitesvara Alchi monastery 11th century.



Fig. 3b Sumtsek Amitayus wall painting on north wall of west alcove first story Sumtsek Alchi.



Fig. 3c Bazgo monastery Distant view Ladakh.



Fig. 3d Painted sculpture room two Bazgo monastery.

