



# A Study of Buddhist Rituals and Environmental Ethics in Ladakh's Leh District

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## **Abstract**

Man's contact with his environment has been changing and adapting for ages. Today, the rising scope and velocity of change, whether unintentional or intentional, threatens to overwhelm many cultures' current adaptive capacity, particularly in vulnerable high-altitude places, as well as the entire biosphere, by changing natural and socio-cultural systems. In this context, the current article examines environmental issues in the agricultural social setting of villages led by Buddhist rituals and customs in Leh district, Ladakh area, Jammu and Kashmir, India, where Buddhism is practised by 66.40 percent of the district population. The ethnography approach was designed and carried out as part of field work leading to a PhD degree to investigate the complicated interaction between Buddhist rituals and environmental ethics on an empirical level. The purpose of this study is to look at how Buddhist rituals and practises might help solve environmental concerns, which is in line with Buddhism's goal of relieving misery from all sentient beings. This indicates that building ethical standards and action plans based on Buddhist practises among Leh's Buddhist community may not only help to alleviate environmental concerns, but may also help to fulfil Buddhism's overall goal. The comprehension of socio-cultural events at three distinct levels (a) at the monastic institution level, (b) at the village community level, and (c) at the family or home level, as well as the social importance of rituals, was aided by qualitative data acquired on the ground.

**Keywords:** Buddhism; Environment; Rituals; Tormas; Monastery; Lungta; Protective Deities; Oracles and Shamans

## **1. Introduction**

Leh, a sub-district of the Ladakh area, is more sensitive to the effects of climate change since it is located on a high altitude plateau and is considerably closer to its glaciers and cryospheres, which are the lifeline of its population. Ladakh has been witnessing enormous cloudbursts, flash floods, mudslides, and avalanches over the past half-decade, resulting in significant death and devastation. Even in these sub-tropical latitudes, the Trans-Himalayan Ladakh, which is arid at 3000 metres above sea level, delivers a significant degree of radiation. On the other hand, because of the thin atmosphere, the sun's heat is actually stronger than on other Indian plains. Many locals believe that this is the only place in the world where you can get severe sunburn and frostbit at the same time. Climate chaos is more agreeably attributed to global warming and climate change by scientists, but most residents of Leh, particularly Buddhists, associate the eventual causes to karmic retribution and the wrath of an agentive sentient landscape by Buddhists. Traditional Buddhist monastic incumbents are seen to be traditional mediators between the human world and the sentient environment, explaining supernatural



punishment as a result of karmic wrongdoing that necessitates ritual intervention. Without a doubt, the effect of Buddhist philosophy on the conservation of the region's natural resources has provided a new multidisciplinary lens for capturing the interdependency of nature and human existence.

### **1.1 Significance of Monasteries in Ladakh: A Historical Review**

Monasteries are the religious centres of learning spirituality where not only the monks who explores the horizon of spiritual teaching but also for the lay people these centres are a sanctified presence of significant religious and cultural heritage. Monasteries are often build on the hill villages for the reason it is reverently be quantified in terms of purity and sanctity beside an isolated place for meditation that monks undergo. Though the plethora of rituals, symbols, iconographies, and philosophies in monasteries might often baffles even the followers who have little or no knowledge about Mahayana Buddhism besides different lineage of Mahayana Buddhism a monastery follows. Each monastery has its own distinct history of emergence, the oldest being the Nyigmapa founded by Guru Padmasambhava in 8<sup>th</sup> century whose imprints of visiting Ladakh laid the foundation of Takthok monastery in Takthok village. Kadampa founded by Atisha and his Tibetan disciple Dromtonpa. Many of the Gelugpa monasteries in Ladakh experienced the influence of Kadampa tradition at some point of time. Spethub monastery in Spethub village is one among them. Kargyu sect founded by Marpa Lozawa and Kyungpo Nyaljor has further sub-sects of its own and this tradition are followed in major monasteries in Ladakh such as Phyang, Lamayuru, Chemde, Hemis and many other. Sakya sect was founded by Khon Konchok Gyalpo and chief monastery existing in Ladakh is Matho and Gelugpa tradition founded by Je Tsongkhapa in early 14<sup>th</sup> century in Tibet diffused its tradition to Ladakh where Stakmo, Thiksay, Spethub, Likir and other monasteries situated in different villages of Ladakh follows its order. While many monasteries in Ladakh suffered destruction and robberies due to series of invasions it received from neighbouring states and other political reigns as Handa (2001) in his work on *Buddhist Western Himalaya: A Politico-Religious History* stated that monastery in Ladakh suffered heavy destruction due to outside invasions (Handa, 2001, 143). The influences of monasteries and monastic rituals on the minds of people have remained unabatedly intact over the centuries and it is still revered as a sanctified presence in the social life of people in Leh-Ladakh where the process of mutual exchange between the monastery and village have sustained the spiritual as well as cultural sense of shared belief in which the whole community is involved to be benefitted. However, it was critically noted by Hodge (1991) that the role of the monasteries in Tibetan culture has often led people to describe the society as feudal. Some monasteries own certain land, which is worked by the village as a whole. There are also farmers who, in addition to their own land, cultivate monastery fields in return for some of the yield (Hodge, 1991, 79).

### **1.2 Buddhist Ritual practices in Leh Ladakh**

It was closely observed that villagers have certain obligations towards the monastery and rightfully assist during the ritual prayers or annual ritual festival. Shared practice of religion usually reinforces social cohesion and enhances community support system within a geographic area. Buddhists in Leh commonly practice the ritual of offering colloquially called as Torma meaning to cast away and this practice is culturally significant as every Buddhist household undergoes such ritual offering once a while to cast away the evils. While the Chodpa ritual is practiced as an offering to deities, however, it may represent a deity in itself depends upon different form of elaborated prayer dedicated to different deity.



At the monastic level categorically, the monasteries that follows the Gelugpa order, observes the annual ritual monastic festival Gustor meaning a ritual offering of Torma in the ninth month of Tibetan Calendar normally fall out in October and November of English months. During this ritual, monks of the monastery perform the ritual prayer followed by masks dance in the courtyard of the monastery representing different protector deities. Devotees in large number witness such ritual as bless invoking ceremony in particular and an occasion of festive in general. A majorly accepted concept of this ritual is understood to avert away the negativities and evil forces thereby burning an effigy that symbolically signify it and eventually appease the guardian deities who are protects the villagers in particular and humankind in general which includes timely rainfall, high yielding and illness free community.

At the village level, each Buddhist household turn-wise invite a set of monks from the monastery that the villagers traditionally have been following the respective lineage, to perform the ritual of Skangsol. This ritual is annually observed by every household during the harvest season to offer the annual agricultural produce to the deities of Buddhist pantheon. Villagers hypothetically believe that a high yielding necessarily mean the guardian deities were being kind and appeased at the ritual performances as well as over the satisfactory spiritual persuasive activities of the village. Kunkyen Tenpe Nyima (2012) gave a brief overview of different kinds of Torma while writing on the Compendium of Oral Instructions: General Notes on the Rituals of the Development Stage in a co-authored book titled Vajra Wisdom: Deity Practice in Tibetan Buddhism explained that:

“For a more elaborate approach, visualizing the shrine Torma (Rten gtor) as the deity and maintaining the visualization for as long as offerings are rendered is performed. The perpetual Torma (Rtag-gtor) is kept for a specific duration of months or years. The Sadhana Torma, (Sgrub-gtor) also called the offering Torma (Mchod-gtor), is offered to the deities as a gift as a mean to delight them. The captured Torma (Gta'-gtor) is kept until an activity is accomplished swiftly and without delay. The session Torma (Thun-gtor also called Rgyun-gtor), is offered occasionally in order to enjoin certain temporary activities. A lay practitioner may also make this Torma using simply the best portions of his or her own food and drink”. (Nyima and Gyaltab IV, 2012, 19).

### **1.3 Concept of Animism and Divine Protection: An Indigenous Buddhist Perspective**

Animism is widely found in the religions of indigenous peoples where beliefs in geographic features such as mountains, water, rain and other entities of natural environment are given a sacred place. Stein (1972) observed animism of Tibet in the form of worship to the elements and mountain deities and he termed the practice as nameless religion. Incense offerings would be made to appease local mountain spirits and wind horse locally known as Lungta in Tibetan prayer flags affixed on higher prominent passes to ensure good auspices. Solemn declarations of truth and oaths would be made in the presence of local deities to invoke good fortune and talismanic objects or places, were revered as life-supporting forces. Enemies or hostile forces could then be overpowered by drawing in their life-supporting talisman in a ceremony know as Lahguk (Stein, 1972, 205-214). One such case at Spituk in the work titled Ladakh Then and Now: Cultural, Ecological and Political by Mann, 2002 recorded that the construction work for airfield included removal of boulders for avoiding obstruction while landing and taking off of aircrafts from the hill upon which the protector chapel is placed. This has consequently led to an untoward incident of a plane crash besides wild wind started blowing in the area by



then on. Local believes that this is retribution of the guardian deities because human trespasses nature and disturbed the abode of Lhu (Mann, 2002, 205).

Animistic form of religion in Tibet could be traced back to the emergence of Buddhism in the region which underwent various impresses in different period of time and that gave rise to the present Tibetan Buddhism, which is distinct from its Indian origin and other Asian counterparts and Tibetan Bon religion has testified one that influenced the most, arguably the prayer flags and burning incense are passed from Bon. Some of the rituals such as offering Lungta (prayer flags) and offering to mountain deities are still prevalent among the Tibetan Buddhism practiced widely throughout Ladakh. The driving collective motives to practice such rituals are to appease and accentuate local and protective deities for favorable weather conditions during agricultural seasons, inviting good fortunes and prosperity in life at the community level and well being of a family and self at the individual level. Mills (2003) when consulted by an astrologer in Leh instructed to erect the prayer flag in three fold action: placing the flag in a high place, ensuring that place was clean and pure, and ensuring for an enough flow of wind. The significance of this was laid in the equation of external wind component as a feature of the environment and its manifestation within the body as one of the elemental constituents of bodily health described in Tibetan medical accounts (Mills, 2003, 258). A sense of animistic worship could be generated out of prayer flags Lungta which are arranged in an order of five colors symbolizing five elements, blue symbolizes sky and space, white symbolizes air and wind, red represents fire, green symbolizes water and yellow represents earth. On each Lungta, mantras are written in Tibetan script while names of powerful animals also referred as four dignities such as Khyung (Garuda), Druk (Dragon), Stag (Tiger) and Sing (Lion) are also written on each corner. In the center Lungta, the wind-horse carrying the jewel of spirituality on its back symbolized the speed and holds the power to reach out every sentient to quickly transform the bad fortunes into good. An astrologer is consulted to confirm a favorable day for hoisting Lungta. This process is done more usually with the help of a Tibetan almanac that calculate the favorable as well as unfavorable dates to perform and observe any ritual.

#### **1.4 Oracles and Shamans**

The practice of oracle and shaman in Ladakh is little known to the outside world. Most of the oracles are believed to be from Tibetan Buddhists background, one of the primary religions followed in Ladakh. It was observed that almost every village in Leh has at least one shaman Lhamo to be consulted during need hour but not to be considered inevitable. Spirits that possess shamans during trance states are usually said to be from the pantheon of Buddhist mythology usually called as Khim-lha. Sometimes lesser known or unknown spirits can also control the shamans. Shamans are usually dressed in a multicoloured robe and a golden crown Ring-na, images of five Dhyani Buddha are painted on each part of the crown with sharp top edges. Ritual articles and materials including barley seeds, set of water offering bowls, incense usually of juniper leaves and other instruments such as Vajra bell, double-drum etc are used during this ritual performance. The room get shrouded with juniper incense while the Lhamo shrieks and chants loud, rocking back and forth on her knees, beating the double drum and bell and summoning a spirit to enter her body. The lay people who have come to consult Lhamo wait patiently during the whole process so that Lhamo could help them to resolve the problems they are encountering. Problems are manifold; it could be physical illness, psychic troubles and foretelling to begin a work. Lhamo is expected with respect to heal the patients.



Generally, the shaman works with several patients simultaneously and talks with each about their ailments before going into a trance. Once possessed, shaman starts performing the therapeutic treatment by sucking out disease-causing substances from their patients using straws or pipes placing them directly against ailing body parts and later show these substances usually black mucus or little tar like pieces to the patient and audience, and then spit them into a bowl or on the ground. The treatment may be rough and violent sometimes. A man suffering from liver problems due to alcohol abuse may get yelled at or even hit with a small whip on the back of patients. However, many have a wide identical confusion between oracles and shamans. Shamans are treated more as a councillor where the suggestions and advices are respected than that of human. Shaman is always a woman possessed by a spirit possessing clairvoyant qualities and is expected to heal human physical and related illnesses and their influence are limited to the village level while oracles are given higher places in the pantheon. Oracles on the other hand, are the men that appear during special occasions of ritual observances of a monastery are highly revered and celebrated. It is believed that such oracles have attained a Bodhisattva (a potential Buddha's) heart and are meant to be considered of tremendous compassionate. The person chosen to be possessed by the oracle observes strict retreat in the monastery for months to purify and make himself qualified for the holy revered super potent protective spirits to enter into his vision. During the monastic annual ritual festival, custodian of the monastery Chakzot is accompanied by village headman Goba along monks and members seek out advices about future projections. In most of the cases, advices are sought about availability of water in the years to come for agricultural activities in the village. Every word, wish and advice expressed by the oracle is taken due care of by the villagers to further execution. At many occasions advices came forth were about conserving the mountain glaciers as those are the abode of guardian deities and the main source of water for agricultural activities, purifying natural environment includes esoteric rituals as performed mainly by respective monks such as Zhiwey- Sangchod, Lhu-sTor, Lhab- Sang, Skang-sol, Zhing-rhak, Sadak-dodol etc. to maintain the reverences to holy guardian deities of the land thereby balancing the nature and human world. New comers and children witnessing the rituals are often startled and mesmerized by oracles in violent trances wielding weapons. In some cases oracles cough, shout and beat their own bodies until bruises appear to gain control over a spirit. In extreme situations, oracles cut their tongues with swords to exhibit certain disappointment towards sceptical observers and their wounds heal miraculously within days.

## **2. Idea of Sustainability: A Village Reflection with Special Reference to Women of Spituk**

An environmental movement was initiated by an NGO known as Women Alliance of Ladakh locally known as Ama Tsogspa, the term formally indicates an association of married women, was formed in 1991. The alliance aims at improving the status of women in rural Ladakh and strengthening local culture and agriculture production. Complete ban over usages of plastic bags and other plastic products in and around Leh, has proven a successful execution of the firmest of collective determination women held for future concern and environmental sustainability of the cold desert region. The alliance works in a syndicated structure, comprising group of married women at each village, determined to encourage its members to retain the traditional values, cultural traits and identity by challenging the undesired impetuses of modernization and development. Hodge (1991) who initiated the women alliance movement in Ladakh stated in her work Ancient Futures: Learning from Ladakh that “today, the global economy is powered by the relentless drive towards more exploitation of



resources, more technological innovation, more markets, and more profits. Monetary and psychological pressures are pushing people in the developing and developed parts of the world alike-towards a blind consumerism. The motto is “economic growth for the betterment of mankind”. Advertising and the media are telling people what to do-in fact, telling them what to be: modern, civilized and rich” (Hodge, 1991:155).

Notably, at the village level women groups focus dedicatedly to bring awareness about clean and green environment among the village people. Self Help Group (SHG) urges the community people about the importance of healthy environment and discusses various ways to materialize their objectives. At present more than around 150 women member working under the formalized structure of Women Alliance of Ladakh, throughout the region. Self Help Groups are its syndicated sub structure at each village level. Monetary assistance to carry forward necessitated campaigns concerning preservation of eco-friendly environment, local culture and traditions, moral values, are being provided by the parent body of Women Alliance. It was observed that in Spituk, group of village women runs local food stall within the village premises, special spot is chosen to sell out the food items, thus helping themselves out to generate funds for the functioning of their group more effectively while preserving the local tastes and cuisine. Comparatively, women in Ladakh enjoy better social privileges than women in other parts of the country nonetheless; the aim of women alliance of Ladakh is to improve the status of women in rural Ladakh which was observed critically somehow subtle.

Most of the household in the villages who own arable lands, domesticate hybrid yaks, cows and donkeys the reason being that these animals are directly or indirectly prove to be useful for agricultural purposes. The hybrid yaks are used for tilling the fields, cows are fostered for milk and donkeys are used for carrying the manure on fields. The aggregated dung of cattle is dried up as a winter stock for fuel in winter and organic decomposed human waste is used profusely as manure for fields. The domesticated animals excluding the cows that kept back at home for milking are taken up to the higher pastureland colloquially called as Phu on rotational basis and they come down back themselves when temperature dips down. Villagers live on basic and bare minimum life concept, where they make sure nothing goes wasted the used cloths are reused for shuttering irrigation channels. Jina (2007) Traditional society can be explained by the habits, customs, attitudes, and ways of life and means of the concerned people of the society. It also means that a society which has a certain rigidity in order to preserve its identity. However, adjustment of some changes according to the voice of young generation may stimulate. (Jina, 2007: 41).

### **3. Buddhist Ethical Actions**

Among other major sects of Mahayana Buddhism existing in Ladakh, Drukpa Kargyud and Drigung Kargyud sects enthusiastically respond towards environmental issues however, it doesn't necessarily mean the other sects lack concern

Many of the Buddhist masters today are constantly being engaged themselves in postulating new environmental activism. It thus conjuncts the idea of Giddens' (1990) reflexivity of modern social life which consists in the fact that social practices are constantly examined and reformed in the light of incoming information about those very practices, thus constitutively altering their character. (Giddens, 1990: 38).

His Holiness the 12<sup>th</sup> Gyalwang Drukpa, supreme head of the Drukpa lineage, founder of Live-to-Love global humanitarian initiative and an environmentalist led an arduous cycle Yatra that covered over 2,200



Kilometres from Kathmandu passing through the Indian states of UP and Bihar through Gorakhpur, Gaya, Patna, Rajgir, Varanasi, Allahabad, Kanpur and Agra before culminating in Delhi. More than 250 kung-fu-nuns participated in the venture to create awareness about women empowerment and to generate environmental conscious. The campaign also crossed over the Himalayan to have reached the fragile Trans-Himalayan cold arid terrain of Ladakh in September 2016 to create a mass awareness among its inhabitants.

### 3.2 Go Green Go Organic G3O Movement in Ladakh

The supreme head of Drigung lineage of Mahayana Buddhism His Holiness Drikung Kyabgon Chetsang Rinpoche initiated this movement on 23 April, 2013 at Shayok area with an aim to improve environmental, social and economic condition of the harsh mountain areas thereby maintaining an ecological balance and environmental stability and instantaneously improving the socio economic condition through eco tourism, environmental education and implementation of project such as organic farming. This project had a participation of more than 3000 volunteers including monks, nuns, students, leaders and villagers. Around 3'50000 tree saplings were planted in different villages of Changthang region since then. Project also encouraged for cultivating potatoes and sea-buckthorn plants on high scale which are commonly grown in Ladakh.

### **The Ice Stupa Project in Leh**

About 90 per cent of village farmers in Ladakh depend on snow and glacial water for irrigation, the productivity of agriculture depends on the supply of glacial-melt water. Agriculture will be adversely affected due to continuously retreating glaciers of the region. To deal with the effects of climate change and water shortages problem in Ladakh Sonam Wangchuk, founder of Ice Stupa Project and his team of volunteers are engaged in mounting gigantic vertical block of ice in Phyang village. The method stores water without the need for concrete water storage tanks or dams.

### **Conclusion**

Farmers in Ladakh have developed self-sustaining farming techniques despite limited resources and a climatically demanding terrain over generations. This research was conducted in order to better understand the complicated interplay between Buddhist principles and village occupational reliance on agricultural livelihood on the one hand, and village occupational reliance on agricultural livelihood on the other. Given that many environmental issues are the result of human action, religion may contain some remedies for reducing damaging practises. The presence of forces that are believed to be the guardians of land and natural environment is associated with the Buddhist pantheon; human activities are thus expected to be driven in accordance with nature's harmony; however, the consequences of human encroachment on nature and disrupting ecological balance could be destructive. A significant component of Buddhist rituals is related with the presence of supernatural powers that serve as a conduit between human actions and natural phenomena.

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