

The Built Environment of Monasticism in the Eastern Himalayas: Architectural Wonders and Archaeological Expressions of Sectarian Influence

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Abstract: In the Eastern Himalayas, the monastic complexes of Pemayangtse in Sikkim and Tawang in Western Arunachal Pradesh stand as testaments to the profound influence of Tibetan architecture and the politico-religious sway of Tibetan governance over the Monyul region. Shaped by the tenets of various schools of Tibetan Buddhism, these monasteries epitomize the harmonious adaptation of Buddhist spiritual principles to the unique geophysical conditions of the Eastern Himalayas. This paper embarks upon a meticulous examination of the physical built form of these revered monasteries, discerning the intricate interplay between the rugged terrain of the Himalayas and the construction techniques employed in their creation. Utilizing primary and secondary sources, archival materials, and fieldwork conducted at both Tawang and Pemayangtse monasteries, this research elucidates the impact of distinct Tibetan Buddhist schools on the foundational designs and architectural sketches of Pemayangtse and Tawang, thereby unveiling the nuanced relationships between spirituality, cultural expression, and the tangible structures of these monastic wonders. Futuristically, this research paper aspires to contribute to the preservation and appreciation of the Eastern Himalayas' unique monastic heritage, fostering cross-cultural understanding and informing sustainable conservation strategies for these architectural treasures in the face of evolving socio-environmental landscapes.

Keywords: Dukhang, Pemayangtse, Ganden, Tawang, Nyingma, Gelug

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INTRODUCTION

This research paper explores the historical, cultural, and architectural dimensions of Buddhist monasteries in the Eastern Himalayas, focusing on the Nyingma and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Specifically, it examines the development of prominent monasteries such as Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh and Pemayangtse in Sikkim. The establishment and evolution of these monasteries have been shaped by a combination of material factors, sectarian attributes, and local geophysical contexts. The paper delves into how the unique blend of Tibetan Buddhist traditions, local geography, and cultural-

religious practices has influenced the architecture, rituals, and societal roles of these monasteries. Through an analysis of historical narratives, architectural features, and the interplay between monastic institutions and local communities, this research highlights the significance of these monasteries in the cultural and religious landscape of the Eastern Himalayas. By tracing the connections between the spread of Buddhism from pre-medieval Bihar to the remote areas of the Eastern Himalayas, this paper sheds light on the enduring legacy of Buddhist monasticism in this geopolitically sensitive and culturally rich region.

The physical documentation of Tibetan monasteries finds mention in canonical literature, and these sacred edifices have also been vividly described by various visitors. Both of these sources are aptly supplemented by archaeological evidence, through which the earliest Buddhist temples, such as the venerable Jokhang and Tradruk temples, can be traced back in the annals of Tibet's history. The introduction of scripts in Tibet from circa 630 CE onwards precipitated the settlement and proliferation of numerous Buddhist temples and monasteries. The distinctive character of Tibetan architecture, as a reflection of the quintessential Tibetan culture, is primarily determined by the exigencies of geography and the nuances of climate. The building architecture of Tibet is ingeniously based upon locally available building materials and has been influenced by the traditional architectural styles of its neighboring regions. Historically, the Samyé Monastery, constructed between 763–775 CE, stands as the first model monastery in Tibetan history, exerting a profound influence upon the art and architecture of almost all Buddhist monasteries in the Eastern Himalayas that developed in its wake. Recorded sources indicate that the entire construction of the Samyé Monastery meticulously follows the universal model described in Buddhist doctrines, with the layout of the buildings around the main hall corresponding to the layout of the four continents and eight subcontinents of the Buddhist world. The monastery complex plan is an eloquent representation of the Buddhist mandala. Over time, the functioning of these monasteries also encompassed the roles of schools, local government, libraries, vocational training centers, ritual services, and meditation centers. Scholars opine that the Tibetan architecture of the Samyé Monastery exhibits discernible Indian influence, and was particularly influenced by Odantapuri of early medieval Bihar. However, local physical and cultural factors have exerted control over all the monasteries and temples in the Eastern Himalayas, including Western Arunachal Pradesh and Sikkim.

GEOPHYSICAL CONTEXTS AND MONASTIC ARCHITECTURE

The Eastern Himalayas, geologically diverse and replete with rich biodiversity, encompass the Bengal-Darjeeling region and the territory of Sikkim, where the soil is predominantly brown and hilly. In contrast, across the entirety of Arunachal Pradesh and its nearby areas, the soil classification ranges from red sandy to laterite. Soil resources in hilly areas constitute an essential bio-physical factor that holds sensitive importance in land use planning, including the construction of buildings. The hills of Sikkim are primarily composed of gneissose and schistose rocks, characterized by weak geology, which typically yields poor and shallow brown clay soils. Consequently, this region is predisposed to natural disasters such as landslides, owing to the combination of steep terrain and weak geology. Comparatively, the presence of sedimentary and metamorphic rocks is a distinctive feature of Arunachal Pradesh. Earthquakes and landslides have been prevalent in the Eastern Himalayan region since ancient times, acting as a constraining factor in the building process. On technical grounds, geologists have elucidated the location of Himalayan earthquakes over the last five decades, including

a significant earthquake that occurred in Arunachal Pradesh in the 17th century. While Arunachal Pradesh falls within a high to very high seismic hazard zone according to data from the Global Seismic Hazard Assessment Program (GSHAP), geologists affirm that historically, many parts of the state have experienced high seismic activity events. These events result in soil loosening, followed by landslides during rains, leading to disasters. Indeed, various indigenous skills, including building construction techniques of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, cannot be compared with modern reflections. However, following independence, the Nehruvian elite class endeavored to preserve local knowledge and adhere to indigenous architectural designs, thereby setting forth an agenda of secularism, welfare, and development within national politics. Among scholars, there exists a near consensus regarding the early house construction processes in pre-colonial Arunachal Pradesh. Despite the diverse cultural characteristics of the ethnic groups, locally available materials such as wood and bamboo, stone, grass, clay, Chinese palm leaves, cane leaves, and banana leaves were almost universally employed in the construction of dwelling sites. The local architectural style and technology have been an integral part of the material tradition of tribal life, grappling with the challenges of climate and calamity amidst limited available resources. Characterized by deep valleys and steep hills, the west-southwest and east-northeast parts of the state are enveloped by the Kangto massif hills, while the Namcha Barwa massif covers the frontier Himalayan region. Owing to differing geographical settings and cultural patterns, the inhabitants of the state's high, middle, and lower altitudes practice distinct architectural patterns. The availability of resources and the prevailing Tibeto-Bhutan customs and practices in the Monyul region have played a major role in determining the living conditions and development of the local community. The traditional houses of the Monpas are not formally planned but are instead adapted according to the physiographical conditions of the land. The challenge posed by these physiographical conditions has perennially been a major factor in the construction of various gompas and dzongs in this region as well.

Tawang Monastery is nestled within the military-economic geographical features of the Tawangchu Valley, perched atop a high ridge and safeguarded by deep gorges and small hills. Strategically, it connects through three routes with Tibet, Bhutan, and East Kameng. According to the Tibetan calendar, Merag Lama Lodroe Gyatsho initiated the foundation work of the main prayer hall of Tawang Monastery on the sixth day of the seventh month of the Iron-male-monkey year (1680). During this period of sectarian warfare, the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682) strongly supported the physical construction of the strategically located Tawang Monastery. As the Nyingma and especially the Bhutan-backed Kagyue Drugpa school sought to establish supremacy in the Monpa region, the government of the Dalai Lama of Tibet, affiliated with the Gelug school, aimed to maintain control over the region for political-economic purposes. The monastery served as a military post against fanatical attacks. During construction, challenges arose due to the high altitude and mountainous terrain, including limited technical facilities and scarce construction materials. Stone slabs were utilized as bricks, with clay stacked atop each other as mortar. Necessary stones for construction were sourced from Leychemerong, a site approximately one kilometre from the construction site. The monastery's structure is a triple-storeyed, imposing mansion featuring a large assembly hall, other functional structures, and sixty-eight residential buildings (*shak*) for students and monks. Each residential building was voluntarily constructed by a village or group of villages following the establishment of the monastery's main building. Village groups maintained and repaired these complexes for an extended period due to their devotion and attachment to the monastery. The citadel-like complex spans an area of 136 square

meters, enclosed by a compound wall 610 meters long. The main entrance, situated to the northeast, is a colorful, hut-like structure known as Kaklinga, with walls made of stone masonry. The Kaklinga's ceiling features mandalas, while its interior walls display frescoes of deities and saints. The three-storey main monastic structure, locally known as *Dukhang* ('*Du*' meaning assembly and '*Khang*' meaning building), contains several rooms on the first and second floors. The ground floor is a rectangular veranda with wooden pillars and timber used on either side of the entrance. Thankas adorn the pillars of the central worship hall on the ground floor, where prayers and rituals occur. The hall features about ten rows of seating with carpets and wooden planks, arranged according to seniority for Lama scholars. Beyond the Thankas, the balcony is embellished with curtains and Buddhist symbols. A wooden staircase leads to the upper floor from the right corner near the ground-floor door, with an additional staircase accessible from outside to the left. The lower and upper storeys boast stucco figures and metal idols of various gods, goddesses, saints, and lamas. The monastery's walls are adorned with murals, and pillars are painted. The abbot's (*Khenpo*) quarters are on the first floor (*Labrang*), and the chamber of His Holiness the Dalai Lama is on the second floor. The third floor is covered by a sloping roof. The outer walls exhibit a slightly inward-bent texture. Prayer wheels symbolizing faith in Buddhism are positioned on the outer and lower parts of the walls. As claimed by Tibetan chronicles, the construction of the Tawang monastery was completed in the eighth month of the *Iron-Female-Bird* year of the 11th Rabjung (1681). In addition to the main gompa in the central complex, there is a library building (known as *Parkhang*, measuring 15.3m × 15m × 9m) situated on adjacent sides, alongside a three-storey school building—a later structure located to the northeast of the gompa. The library faces southeast and is a two-storied building with places of worship on both floors. The upper floor, a rectangular pillared hall, is designated for preserving books and features windows for illumination. The wooden stairs and thatch constitute a beautiful specimen of wood art. A building to the south of the library serves office purposes. There is also a gate situated towards the rear southwest of the complex. Among the newer buildings of the Tawang Monastery, the museum is particularly prominent. Established in 2009 and inaugurated by the Dalai Lama, the museum exclusively serves as a repository of antiquities related to the history of the monastery and Buddhism. Since wooden shingles were employed for the roof of this monastery in its early days, its maintenance necessitated considerable effort from the supporters. The first renovation of this monastery was undertaken between 1808–1812 by Gelong Lozang Thabkhey of Kham province, Tibet, during which the roof of the main building (*dukhang*) was replaced with corrugated galvanized iron sheets. In a similar vein, the second renovation was executed in 1855–1856 by Ven Tanpa Rinchen, the 3rd Sarong Rinpoche of Tawang. The third restoration was accomplished between 1882–1886 by Gelong Sang Norbu, Gen Gonpo, and Gen Rinchen. The fourth restoration was completed during 1904–1906 under the leadership of Gelong Karma Norbu, Gen Tshering Wangchuk, and Gen Dorje Phuntshok. The fifth renovation was carried out between 1990–1995 by the Tawang Monastery Renovation Committee, headed by the then-abbot of the monastery, Dhanma Gyalsey Tulku. The Dalai Lama inaugurated the renovated building on 15 October 1997. Furthermore, between 2000–2002, apart from the current school building of Tawang Monastery, the main temple was also renovated in adherence to traditional Buddhist architectural style.

Sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts play an essential role in granting the monastic identity of Buddhist institutions like Tawang. Tawang Monastery is the most prominent collector of these items in the region. The monastery boasts a plurality of stucco figures, bronze sculptures, and metal paintings. Lamas and trained artists in the Lamaistic discipline craft these items. Artist names are



Figure 1: The Tawang Monastery, Arunachal Pradesh

usually not recorded on sculptures, following the Lamaist tradition of Tibet. Techniques and materials used in Tibetan sculptures are replicated in the monastery's craftwork. Stucco figures are adorned with colors from minerals and vegetables, painted with gold powder for brightness, and embellished with gold leaves. Vibrant colors of yellow, red, white, green, and blue characterize these figures, inspired by Tibetan art. Representations include Buddha Sakyamuni, Palden Lhamo, and other deities in the Tibetan iconographic tradition. Apart from stucco figures, the monastery houses bronze, brass, and copper sculptures, often made using the *cire-perdue* process and rendered shiny with gold powder. Professional craftsmen shape metal sculptures. Some figures bear inscriptions. The monastery also contains old wooden images painted in gold and decorated with precious stones, imported from Tibet-Bhutan or locally produced. Tawang Monastery possesses decorative and consecrated painting works, wherein decorative paintings also encompass religious objects. The monastery contains exquisite specimens of mural paintings. Through these works, spiritual myths, stories, or divinities drawn from the life of Dhyanī Buddha, Bodhisattva deities such as Tara, Lokpala, and saints like Padmasambhava or other Lamaist masters have been painted on canvas. Specific images bear brief descriptions of mantras. Scroll paintings, or Thangkas, and geometrical design paintings, or Mandalas, constitute other categories of paintings. Mandalas are exclusively employed for religious purposes and are not intended for public display, whereas Thangkas serve both decorative and religious purposes within the monastery. Thangka paintings, derived from the Tibetan term "thangyig" meaning 'annal' or written record or recorded message, are adorned with shining cloth that imparts the appearance of a rainbow. These are stitched with yellow and red bands and accompanied by wooden sticks. In addition to

ritualistic purposes, Thangkas are commonly utilized as banners and religious symbols in monasteries and Buddhist institutions. The purpose of mandala paintings is to illustrate the entire creation emerging from the principles of eternal forces, thereby preparing monks for the path of salvation. Through these paintings, all manner of worldly forms—the universe, human beings, creatures, deities, and everything—are depicted as emanating from the principles of eternal powers. These principles within the Buddhist painting tradition bear similarities to modern nuclear science and nuclear energy principles. The allusive nature of Vajrayana and Mahayana, or Tibetan paintings, provides laymen with psychological and symbolic means, and their dominant colors represent different elements.

Geologically, Sikkim is an integral part of the Eastern Himalayas, where glacier-fed peaks, high mountains with lush forests, fast-flowing rivers, and complex geomorphic developments have played a significant role in shaping the current topography. The most damaging effects of this geology are evident in the frequent occurrence of earthquakes and landslides, which constantly challenge structural settlements. Sikkim is classified within Zone IV and Zone V of India's earthquake hazard zonation. The prevailing cold, wet, and humid weather in the region further complicates the settlement process. Generally, the hills in this region are rocky and prone to erosion. The western part of Sikkim has been particularly vulnerable to landslides. The district of West Sikkim, with its headquarters at Geyzing/Gyalshing, predominantly consists of rocks from the Daling group. The main litho-units of the area include chlorite-sericite phyllite, phyllitic quartzite, milky white and ferruginous quartzite, and chlorite-biotite-sericite schist/phyllite. High clay content is prevalent in landscapes such as Pelling and Pemayangtse. In West Sikkim, the majority of habitational structures are built using stone, mud, and thatch. The use of local materials is evident in the remnants of pre-colonial traditional buildings. Two types of traditional housing systems, constructed using local techniques, are found in Sikkim: wooden houses and masonry houses. The first type, known as Iqra, consists of traditional houses made primarily of bamboo and built privately by ordinary people. Traditionally, masonry buildings are constructed using unclad stones with clay mortar or lime-based mortar. This type of structure features stone masonry walls plastered with mud, with shingles made of wood or bamboo. Sikkim is home to numerous cloisters or hermitage places in rock caves, Gonpas, and village-level temples such as Manilhakhang, Lhakhang, and Tsamkhang/Dubkhang. Rock caves, cave hermitages, or Tak-phu in Sikkim have served as meditational centers for monks and are renowned as holy caves among Buddhist followers. The monasteries in Sikkim, known as Gompas, are built in full-fledged physical form. According to Gary Chopel, these Gonpas were constructed on hilltops for purity and to establish a visual connection with other Gonpas. The structural planning of these monasteries is based on the three-tier 'man-monk-god' concept. The ground floor (dukhang) represents the common man, the first floor contains manuscripts intended for the monks, and the second floor is the sacred space called '*Sangdogpalri*' or '*Zangdokpalri*' (*zangs mdog dpalri*), representing the space for God. Dubdi, Enchey, Phodong, Ralang, Rumtek, Tashiding, and Kartog are renowned monasteries, with Pemayangtse being the principal monastery of the Nyingma school. It adheres to the Mindröling tradition and belongs to the lineage of Lhatsun Chenpo. Pemayangtse functions as an overseer for subordinate Gompas of the Nyingma school. Monasteries constructed in the seventeenth century are rich in traditional architectural values, featuring load-bearing stone masonry accompanied by timber frames. In contrast, newer monasteries utilize Reinforced Cement Concrete (RCC) technology. The resplendent Pemayangtse Monastery is situated on a hilltop (6,840 feet) in Gyalshing town of western Sikkim. According to literary sources, the monastery was established in 1645, although some sources

cite 1650-51. Lama Lhatsun Chenpo Namkha Jigme initiated the monastery as a small shrine named 'Tsangkhang' (house of purity), built west of the present monastery. The monastery was relocated and constructed during the reign of the third Chogyal, Chador Namgyal, in 1705, with the assistance of mkhanchenrol pai, the first head lama of the monastery. It was at this time that the name was changed to Sangchhen Pemayangtse Gompa or Pad ma yang brtse dgon pa (The perfect sublime lotus). The monastery was rebuilt in 1913 following significant damage from an earthquake. Sir Tashi Namgyal initiated a restoration program for the monastery through funding in 1960. In 1965, Guru Rinpoche's heavenly abode, "Zangdokpalri," a beautiful wooden masterpiece, collapsed during government-aided reconstruction of its upper portion by the lamas. The replication of this "Zangdokpalri," in accordance with monastic beliefs, had appeared in a vision to Gyalwa Lhatsun Chenpo in the seventeenth century. Restoration work, led by the late Serdup Dungzin Rinpoche/Jigme Wangchuk, commenced and was completed in 1972. During this time, 12 feet of land were excavated to renovate the building. The restored masterpiece was consecrated by His Holiness Dudjom Rinpoche, then head of the Nyingma sect, in 1972. The building underwent renovations in 1969-70 and 2014-15 to protect it from seismic effects while preserving its original character and architectural form. Thus, Pemayangtse Monastery exhibits a composite structural style combining masonry and RCC. This composite style emerged following Sikkim's integration into the Union of India, which facilitated the availability of cement, steel, and semi-skilled labor for RCC construction in remote hilly areas. The monastery's architecture is adorned with a distinct Tibetan style, featuring sloping roofs and colorful doors and windows. Like Pemayangtse, the monastery has an entrance facing east, while statues and replicas of saints are prominently displayed on the west wall. Prayer wheel drums are installed in the northern and southern directions adjacent to the monastery's walls. The supporting structure of the buildings is composed of corbel arches decorated with wooden pillars and artworks.



Figure 2: The Pemayangtse Monastery, Sikkim

The monastery's main building is a three-storied structure with an asymmetrical built form, housing a large prayer hall (Dukhang) spanning approximately 139.35 square meters. The ground floor boasts colorfully painted doors and windows, featuring statues of Lord Buddha and Padmasambhava (known as Guru Rinpoche, who revived Buddhism in Tibet) with multiple heads and arms. This hall contains idols of Guru Shamari, Dorje Phurba, Dorje Phamu (Goddess Kali), Chandeehi Yak Seshun (the ancestor of the Dalai Lama), and others. The story of Dorje Phamo, the goddess of the monastery, is linked to its origin as a defense against Mongol invasions in 1716. Dorje Phamo's actions bear a striking resemblance to those of Durga, the Hindu mythological goddess who vanquishes demons. During the colonial era, Lieutenant Colonel Laurence Austine Waddell described the Pemayangtse (Pemiongchi) monastery. In 1854, Joseph Dalton Hooker described the architecture of Pemayangtse. The specialty of the structure and artistic architecture of the monastery is that they have retained their traditional form. It is evident that even before adopting the mixed style, the architecture of some other seventeenth-century monasteries, including Pemayangtse, was based on the pillar-beam technique, which architects refer to as the "kawa zhi dung gyed" (pillar four beam eighth) architectural principle. In the monastery, semi-dressed stone masonry walls with wood frames rested on timber beams. A gold-plated statue of Padmasambhava, a statue of Maitreya Buddha, frescoes, Thangka paintings, and other holy objects within the monastery reflect a three-hundred-year-old tradition. A wooden staircase with a simple design leads to the top on the right. The structure of the first floor is divided into two parts. The front part resembles a hall where Buddhist lamas collectively chant and perform rituals. The Lakhang, dedicated to Guru Padmasambhava with its main idol made in Tibet, is located on this side. Similarly, a statue of Tsoki Dorjee, brought from Nepal, has been installed in the monastery. The monastery's walls are adorned with beautiful murals of deities, painted in a devotional spirit. Apart from Buddhist sculptures, scriptures, and decorated paintings, various traditional musical instruments are also utilized here. The Kangyur-Tengyur has been preserved in the monastery. The rear part of this hall serves as a storeroom with a small entrance on the right side, used for collecting items related to the monastery. The entire floor is covered with broad pieces of wood divided into sections. The stairs from the ground floor lead through the first floor to the second floor, which is narrow and steep. The structure of the second floor is also roughly divided into two parts. Where the stairs end on this floor, a narrow structure proceeds clockwise (in a circumambulating manner) from the right side. This area is used to preserve scriptures, manuscripts, and antique articles, including old water reservoir pots, wooden print blocks from the 18th century, old pillars from the 17th century, musical instruments, traditional flags, and more. The central part of this floor holds sanctified importance as it preserves the Lotus Light Palace of Guru Rinpoche or the celestial abode of Guru Padmasambhava, featuring a wooden replica of a seven-storied structure called 'Zangdokpalri.' Large parts of the buildings are constructed using concrete, and Toona ciliata wood has been used in furniture. However, some Saal or Sakhua timber has been utilized for its long-lasting and pest-resistant qualities. Buddha, Bodhisattvas, deities such as Vajrakila, Heruka, Vidarana, Vajrabhairava, Rahula, Virudhaka, Virupaksha, Dhritarashtra, Vaisravana, lineage trees, and religious symbols are the main subjects of the wall paintings and murals in this monastery. The use of blue, green, brown, white, and yellow colors is prominent in the paintings. Natural pigments, extracted from plants, minerals, and other natural resources, have been used in the wall paintings. In some areas, the paintings are not clearly visible due to the old and dilapidated condition of the walls. Some herbivorous animals like partridge, monkey, elephant, and hare are also depicted in

the frescoes of the monastery. According to Robert Beer, these animals have been compared to the sky, tree, ground, and underground, respectively, in order to compare them with terrestrial habitats. Similarly, the depiction of the Seven Precious Things of the Universal Emperor on the balcony door at Pemayangtse Monastery is inspired by images and personalia of the Buddha, with some local influences. Prominent among these painted images are the Precious Wheel, precious white elephant, Precious flying Horse, precious gem, Precious General, Precious minister, and precious wife. Geometric patterns and symbols are noteworthy in the Pemayangtse monastery. Some of the lamas from Pemayangtse monastery and other Buddhist centers received special training in Torma sculpture, Thangka paintings, Mandala, mural paintings, and mask making. They became proficient in these arts for various religious occasions. The gradual pattern of the formation of hill-top Buddhist monasteries, akin to the spread of Buddhism throughout the Eastern Himalayas including Tibet, emanating from pre-medieval Bihar, also establishes a connection between monasteries such as Tawang and Pemayangtse and the Gangetic plains. The first hilltop Mahayana Buddhist monastery in the Ganges valley was discovered by archaeologists at Lal Pahari in the Lakhisarai district of Bihar. Sanctuaries have been unearthed in numerous locations within this region, as the renowned archaeologist Alexander Cunningham also discussed many monasteries in his book. Hiuen Tsang mentions several monasteries and caves in this area; however, this particular site is the first instance of a monastery situated atop a hill. Based on two burnt clay seals inscribed with the monastery's name at this site, it has been identified as '*Srimaddharmaviharikaaryabhikshusanghasya*.' In Buddhist literature, this region was referred to as *Krimila*. Archaeologists assert that the region was a significant trading and administrative center during the Pala period. Nonetheless, the physical structure and artistic architecture of the hill-top monasteries that spread from the Ganges plains to the remote areas of the Eastern Himalayas have been shaped by local factors. These factors encompass both physical elements and cultural-religious elements.

IMPACT OF SECTARIAN TRAITS ON MONASTERY EVOLUTION

The establishment of various Buddhist monasteries in the Eastern Himalayas has depended on material factors. However, the direction and sequence of their development have been guided by the respective Tibetan schools. The rituals and patterns of behavior in monasteries affiliated with different schools have also evolved in accordance with their ideology. Among the four primary Tibetan Buddhist schools, the Gelug school continues to dominate western Arunachal Pradesh, while the Nyingma school covers almost the entire Sikkim region, with Tawang and Pemayangtse playing essential roles, respectively. The Nyingma, or 'Ancient Tradition,' founded in the 8th century, is the oldest of the four schools of Tibetan Buddhism. In contrast, the Gelug school of Tibetan Buddhism, propounded by Je Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), is the newest and has gained considerable prominence. Nonetheless, all Tibetan schools share equal faith in the Mulasarvastivada lineage. The core principles of both the Nyingma and Gelug schools determine the nature and norms of their affiliated monasteries. The Nyingma school places primary emphasis on practice, the essential part of which is maintaining the view. In contrast, the main emphasis of the Gelug school is on study and discipline, followed by practice. However, the Nyingma schools specialize in performing rituals and tantric vows for the lay community through the Ngagpa (Mantrika) ordination. The Gelug school defines dharma from the perspective of ordinary beings, whereas the Nyingma school defines it from the perspective of enlightened beings. The diffusion processes of Gelug monasteries in the Tibetan region exhibit spatial

and temporal heterogeneity. In 1402, an assembly of monks was organized by Tsongkhapa, along with his teacher Rendawa (Red Mda'ba gzhon nu blo gros) and others, at the temple of Namstedeng (rNam rtsed Ideng/Iding). The strict observance of the monastic code, emphasized to re-strengthen the Buddhist order, became the code for other Gelug monasteries. The Gelug tradition accords a special place to Guhyasamāja Tantra in its teachings, and it forms part of all monastic education. Just as all Gelug monasteries originated from the "mother monastery" of Ganden, Gelug scholars have compared this to Mount Kailash. Thus, this analogy has been drawn to illustrate that as numerous rivers descend from Mount Kailash, so did the spread of Gelug monasticism to other regions following the establishment of Ganden. This comparison is an attempt by Gelug scholars to expand and emphasize Tsongkhapa's teachings and traditions. The diffusion of Gelug monasteries after their establishment in 1409, from Ganden Monastery (believed to be the birthplace of the Gelug school) to Tawang Monastery, represents the history of directing practices and rituals. Thus, the "Great Three" Gelug monasteries of Drepung (1416), Sera (1419), and Ganden (1409) became inspirations for other monastic centers of this school. In this sequence, the name of Tashi Lhunpo Monastery, established by the first Dalai Lama Gyalwa Gendün Drup, is also included. The diffusion of Gelug monastic mechanisms from Tibetan regions has been described as a combination of natural and human driving factors. However, these same factors are also prominently reflected in different parts of the Eastern Himalayas. Natural factors in the distribution pattern of Gelug monasteries are evident in the Monyul area. In accordance with the principles of hierarchical diffusion, the influence of Tawang Monastery spread from the city to rural areas. An important reason for the large-scale assimilation of Buddhism by local communities in the Monyul region was the liberal, democratic, and secular aspects of Gelug institutions, through which primitive beliefs were absorbed into Buddhism. The Gelug doctrines disseminated by Tawang Monastery gained social and economic support even in Monyul, the remote southern region of Tibet, without which religious institutions could not have flourished. When Buddhist Drukpas became more aggressive against Tawang Monastery and the Gelug school during the 17th century, Mongol and Tibetan troops sided with Tawang, and Tawang Monastery worked to pacify those raiders. The steps taken to help Monyul and Tawang Monastery did not occur in isolation; however, it can be said without a doubt that it was the secular image created by the Gelug school that was maintained from the 'Tibeto-Mongol' border to the 'Indo-Tibetan' areas of the Eastern Himalayas through organizations like Tawang. It is also worth noting that Buddhist monks became more skilled in non-Buddhist practices, such as worshiping local spirits, receiving oracles, and fortune-telling, than Bon believers. In comparison to Pemayangtse, Tawang was not attached to any particular high clan but was accountable to all the tribes within its religion-administrative territory. Part-time monks played important roles in connecting the common people of society to the monastery. The established tradition of the Gelug school, namely its strict adherence to monastic discipline, strong emphasis on study and meditation, and relative indifference to political participation, set the standards that later became determining factors for the nature of the monasteries that developed. Later, the Dalai Lama's image, personal sanctity, and good reputation attracted many people to the monasteries associated with this school. Huber describes monasteries as "centers of scholasticism as well as sites of articulation with political power," becoming important sites of pilgrimage and cult worship. The popularity of Tawang appears to reflect wider historical and cultural trends in western Arunachal Pradesh. The cultural transformation of Tawang Monastery is reflected in the concentration of social, religious, political, and economic power within this religious institution, similar to that of noble families. The Gelug monasteries in the

region, such as Tawang, became popular as sites of pilgrimage, protector worship, and tantric practice. In addition, these aspects are also invested with the presence of charismatic objects/lamas or divine/semi-divine Buddhist figures through narratives. For example, the embellishment of Tsongkhapa's charismatic personality is found in Gelug monasteries throughout the Eastern Himalayas. In this sequence, like Ganden, the material aspects of Tawang Monastery are also found to be in harmony with the otherworldly. The name of the first Ganden monastery founded by the Gelug school was chosen to promote Tsongkhapa's charismatic presence to monasteries throughout Inner Asia, and Tawang Monastery is a part of this. Nyingma promoters were involved with the Bhutia settlement in Sikkim from the outset, and after Buddhism became the official state religion, Nyingma lamas assumed the role of official abbots for state ceremonial functions. Just as Pierre Pichard and François Lagirarde perceived monasteries as economically and politically humanitarian organizations whose prosperity is contingent upon the social environment, Nyingma monasteries such as Pemayangtse also succeeded in achieving enduring stability among the leading classes through elaborate public festivals and ritual activities. Nyingma doctrines and the aristocratic system have complemented each other in fortifying the state-funded Pemayangtse Monastery. State guidelines for monasteries, coupled with Pemayangtse's monastic autonomy and etiquette rules—which have remained consistent throughout—further substantiate this assertion. In the context of monastery governance, Berthe Jansen cites the example of "monastic ordinances" in the form of chayik, which in certain cases were primarily religious in nature, serving as a tool for the authority or those concerned with it. As these ordinance texts encompass both secular and clerical elements, according to Jansen, it appears that the issuance of these texts was predominantly a politically motivated act and an attempt at exerting state control. Although this observation has been made in the context of Tibet, the monasteries of Sikkim also exhibit similar tendencies.

CONCLUSION

In the mist-shrouded peaks and verdant valleys of the Eastern Himalayas, the monastic architectures of Pemayangtse and Tawang stand as sublime testaments to the confluence of spirituality, sectarian influence, and geographical nuance. These sacred edifices, emblematic of the Nyingma and Gelug schools of Tibetan Buddhism respectively, weave a narrative of devotion, adaptation, and cultural synthesis. The intricate stone masonry, vibrant murals, and sacred sculptures of Pemayangtse Monastery in Sikkim, with its adherence to the Mindröling tradition, reflect the Nyingma school's emphasis on practice and tantric rituals. Conversely, Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh, a stronghold of the Gelug school, epitomises the tradition's stress on scholasticism, discipline, and the charismatic legacy of Tsongkhapa. Archaeological expressions within these monasteries reveal the imprint of sectarian traits on their evolution, as well as their responsiveness to the challenging geophysical contexts of the Eastern Himalayas. Amidst a landscape prone to seismic turmoil and sculpted by millennia of geological forces, the monastic architectures of Pemayangtse and Tawang endure, bolstered by traditions of local craftsmanship and sectarian identity. In their prayer halls, Thangka-adorned walls, and the silent grandeur of their sacred spaces, these monasteries encapsulate the essence of Himalayan Buddhist monasticism. Thus, as beacons of the Nyingma and Gelug traditions, Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries perpetuate a legacy of spiritual enrichment, cultural heritage, and architectural wonder in the Eastern Himalayas.

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