



A Concise History of Nyingma Tradition in Western Himalaya

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The western Himalaya is a region that includes the Districts of Ladakh, Spiti, Lahoul and Kinnaur. There are no specific physical or political boundaries, which could coincide with the term, and it has been used here more as a convenience than as a precise geographical definition. The whole of the ancient Tibetan kingdom of Gu-ge would also be encompassed by the western Himalayas, but the scope of this study does not extend to any areas that come in Tibet. The whole region continues to be one of the most inaccessible parts of India even though both Ladakh and Lahoul have been opened up for limited tourist access. The general level of the valleys in the areas varies between 10,000 to 16,000 feet above sea level (3,000 – 5000 metres) and three districts (Lahoul, Ladakh, and Spiti) are sealed off in winter by deep snow at the high passes which give access to the valleysⁱ. The distances are enormous and the modes of transport, until as late as the 1950's were primitive. The choice of transport, even now, in many of the valleys lies between walking and riding a horse. The country is surrounded by massive mountain ranges, several valleys deep to the north, south and west. In the northwest, the Kara-Koram range separates it from the main Tibetan plateau and to the south the Great Himalayan Range isolates it from India. The centres of Buddhist life along the intricate river networks that eventually feed the Indus (Senge), the Sutlej (Spiti) and the Chenab (Chandra-bhaga) rivers.

Lahoul is essentially with an admixture of Hinduism and Buddhism. It was never exclusively Buddhism. Lahoul is the only region in the western Himalayas where Buddhism could survive in continuity from the Kasana age to the present day. It was the place where Indian Buddhism imbibed the traits of primitive Bon cults and became highly contaminated. Later, in the 8th century, Padmasambhava purged dharma of the animistic impurities by propagating his tantra based Vajrayana doctrine before his departure to Tibet. There he could evolve a strategy of proselytisation under identical primitive circumstances. The Lahoul valley has already yielded confirmed evidence of the existence of instrumental Indian Buddhism. Among those, of far greater significance is the chased copper lota (goblet) that was accidentally discovered by Major Hay in A.D. 1857 at village Gondhala. The lota was found buried in a monastic cell, which was exposed by a landslide. That relic may be considered a definite evidence of the existence of Buddhist monastery at this place, which now falls in the administrative jurisdiction of the Lahoul sub-division of the Lahoul and Spiti district. That relic is assigned to the second century, when the Kushanad in north India firmly established Buddhism. However, on the strength of numismatic evidences,ⁱⁱ it may be affirmed that Buddhism must have entered Lahoul valley even in the Asokan era as Hiuen-Tsang also intends to suggest.ⁱⁱⁱ

Spiti is known for its ancient Buddhist monasteries many of which were built on craggy hills and doubled up as forts in times of trouble. The Gompas as they are sometimes known as still and cared by monks. Many of the old residential buildings have exquisite frescoed painting and carvings on their walls a rich heritage of their unique art. These monasteries serve as erudite centre of culture

and have influenced the life of the people for centuries. Even today, the people there are religious and strong spiritual atmosphere encompasses the valley. The spiti valley may be one of such rare pockets where one can trace a continuous course of the development of Lamaism from its very primitive form of the days of padmasambhava, when it had more of a Bon-pa overtone, to its latest version, the Gelugpa sect. there are seven monasteries in the Pin valley of spiti, which still profess the unreformed from the Nyingma pa order.

Spiti's second oldest monastery is located in the pin valley. The Gungri monastery is built around 1330 A.D. the monastery is believed to have been founded by Padmasambhava. The monastery as it stands today has undergone repeated repairs and should not be too old. But some of the carved wooden specimens in the monastery are definitely old, and Gungri must have remained an ancient monastic site of the padmasambhava days ^{iv}. structurally, the Nyingmapa monasteries of the Pin valley are similar to the other monasteries of Tibet. Generally, Tibetan monasteries are built in a compact layout with all the temples and apartments put together. But the monastery at Gungri is formed of three detached rectangular blocks facing due east, the Lha-Khang being on the higher terrace on the north followed by samdrup chos-ling in the middle and a compact structure accommodating tangyur and gonkhang etc, on southern end. The architectural features of the Lha-Khang and samdrup- chosling are typically Indian with which the monasteries and temples of Rinchen bzangpo period are identified. These temples may, therefore be considered to be the oldest structures at Gungri which may even predate the Rinchen bzangpo era by centuries. But the southern end structure, housing tangyur and gonkhang is definitely of a much later date when under the central Tibetan influence, compact structures were being built. Both the Lha-Khangs on the higher terraces confirm to the overall structural proportion of 1:1:15 in width and length, which together with the scattered layout pattern is the indication of their Indian bias.

In kinnaur, the primitive deities are propitiated and the Mahayanist pantheon worshipped by all. This practice is fundamentally not different from the universal usage of exigent propitiation of the malevolent and daily worship of the benevolent in the mainland^v. This dualism may be attributed to the socio-ethic uniqueness of region. the Kinnaur region, the geographical isolation notwithstanding has remained coalesced with the Indian socio-cultural system. Since the earliest times of history, this has contributed to the racio-cultural syncretism, which although not profound, has been responsible for the development of local pantheology on the brahminic pattern, which could remain unaffected by padmasambhava's expurgatory movement. The kinnaurs have thus stayed as a socio-ethnic buffer between the Buddhist Tibet and the Brahminic india. Nevertheless, being away from the mainland and geographically and socially nearer to Tibet, it imbibed considerable influence from that country. The Lamaistic association of kinnaur goes back to the days of padmasambhava and various places in upper kinnaur are associated with his tantric exploits. According to the local tradition prevalent around Nako village the Guru is believed to have landed upon a rock at that village where his footprints 'rLob-dPon-zhabs-rjes' embossed on the rock^{vi} are still worshipped by the people. There is another tradition prevalent at Nako. This village was originally named Nego, which literally means 'a place of pilgrimage' by a lama, Cho-che Rinpoche, in the 8th century. In the course of time Nego changed into Nako. This legend is connected with Guru Padmasambhava's visit to this place. Padma-bkai-thang contains no reference about such an incidence. But it may safely be assumed that the local tradition associated with the relic inspired by the reference in that treatise that from the island on Dhanakosa lake in Uddiyana he made his way through the heavens to Sahor.^{vii} The legend of his landing at Nako may, therefore be considered an oral terma tradition based on the association of Padmasambhava with that place. It is an ironical paradox that one of the greatest scholars of Lamaism and the greatest builders of the Monasteries, Rinchen bzangpo (Ratnabhadra, 958-1055), should have been born in a land where Lamaism could not establish itself in as firm and puritanical a manner as it did in the rest of Tibet. And inversely, Kinnaur has the distinction of having the maximum number of monasteries and temples ascribed to him. Eleven villages of such monasteries and temples already stand identified. According to the tradition preserved in folk songs, Rinchen bzangpo was born at the Sumra village in Hangrang sub-tehsil.^{viii} This tradition also finds support of the legend associated with the wooden image of Buddha in the

Guru Ghantal Monastery in Lahoul. Moreover, the existence of most of the Rinchen bzangpo monasteries are in and around Kinnaur.

Leo is situated in the Hangrang valley above Poo in the right bank of spiti river. The monastery belongs to Nyingmapa sect, which happens to be the most ancient order of the monks in Tibet. According to the local tradition, padmasambhava, who is also called Rinpoche, built the monastery. He is believed to be an incarnation of Buddha who appeared at the places and left a bronze plate at the place. Bronze is local dialect is called “Li” and it is just possible that the place thereafter derived its name from “Li” and it is just possible that the place thereafter derived its name from “Li” which was gradually corrupted to Leo. The bkra-Shis-Lhun-grub monastery of Li is asserted to be of ancient origin. This may be true, for it belongs to the Nyingmapa sect, the most ancient order of monks in Tibet. This sect has not founded new settlements for a long time. According to about of the place, the Li monastery was founded by Padmasambhava, which is probable, if it was not founded earlier. As Sarat Chandra Das has shown, the Nyingma order has much of its literature in common with the bonpos, the followers of pre-buddhist religion of Tibet. Around Lhasa, the monks of Nyingmapa order cannot be distinguished from those of the other order of the “re-persuasion”, as regards dress, but the Nyingmapa monks grow long hair which is never combed, and it gives them a savage appearance. The best specimens of this uncivilized order of saints can, however be seen at Pin in spiti. The present building does not appear to be of many years, standing nor the few idols contained in it. At the monastery, however they have an ancient and beautiful carving of teak wood, representing Buddha surrounded by bodhisattavas are of the primitive and simple type. Close to the bkra-shis-lhun-grub monastery, there are ruins of an old nunnery called J0moi-dgon-pa. it consists of three separate ruined houses of a Mani wall covered with white pebbles and two mchod-rten or stupas. The nunnery is believed to have been abandoned during the nineteenth century.

The monastery of Dagthag lies forty-six kilometres to the east of Leh, the capital of Ladakh, on the newly built road linking Leh and the Nubra Valley. It belongs to the Nyingma tradition that is the most senior of the four main sects in Tibetan Buddhism. Dagthag meant the rock ceiling in a cave. The shrine, which has rock ceiling, is known as the Duphug Lhakhang. Within this naturally formed rock shelter, the great padmasambhava is said to have meditated during his journey to Tibet. Subsequently, a prayer hall and cells for the lamas were built around this sacred cave the holy god seems to have enlarged over the years to accommodate the increasing numbers of followers of padmasambhava. Stone masons have used sharp chisels and hammers to burning of the site, the rough surface of the ceiling, now blackened due to the non-stop burning of butter lamps, shows its expansions and later additions. About twenty five in length and seventeenth feet wide, this sacred carve has become a focus for pilgrims who flock to seek fortune, favour and even salvation from the sacred water called Dubchu that dripped eternally from the ceiling. Even when all liquid is frozen in the depth of winter when the temperature can drop to minus degrees the water still dripped. Theoretically mysticism has no place in Buddhism, yet some mystic elements have been attributed to the Dagthag Gonpo. There are, inside and outside of the rock, fingerprints and footprints of human and divine beings. Most of these prints have been ascribed to Urgyan Rinpoche and the Khandroma (the dakinis). The female dancers have performed when padmasambhava had completed a session of meditation. Dagthag received more attention when Dubthob Padma Thinlas came from Tibet in the seventeenth century. People saw in him an image of padmasambhava who is said to have meditated here in rock roof cave in the eight century A.D. Dubthob Padma Thinlas was an ascetic and two gifted youths became his disciples and followed him as sheep flock after the shepherd. The smiling face of Dubthob Padma Thinlas has been installed as a statue in one of the monastery. The rituals, codes of conduct for the lamas, the teaching training, meditation, the choice of yidams and dakinis and the protectors in the Nyingma tradition have all been introduced at Dagthag. Therefore, Dagthag monastery has preserved the pattern of spiritual practices the kathog had followed before the Chinese cultural revolution in Tibet. Until 1959, during the glorious days of Tibetan culture, young lamas used to go to kathog monastery in Tibet for higher studies and training. Culture and trade link stopped when the routes between Tibet and Ladakh were closed. Frightened by the happening in Tibet the lamas of Ladakhi returned without finishing their education and training.

Besides the routine duties at the monastery, the lamas happily accepted the invitations from the surrounding households to perform various types of rituals. The lamas of Dagthag are much sought after to perform puja and to seek divine intervention to solve all types of destructive elements.

ⁱ Census of india :1961. District Census Handbook, p.2

ⁱⁱ Handa, O.C., Numismatic sources on the Early History of western Himalaya, Delhi. 1984, p. 63.

ⁱⁱⁱ Beal Samuel, Chinese Account of india, vol ii, Calcutta, 1958. P. 210.

^{iv} Francke, AH. Vol. I, p. 31

^v Sharma, Bansi Ram. Kumar Lok Sahitya, Bilaspur 1976, pp 222-23.

^{vi} Similar tradition about padmasambhava exists at village Umla, a few kilometers east of Leh on the Indus in Ladakh where a rock is called a La-ma-guru. It is believed that Padsambhava slept on that rock causing his impression on the rock.

^{vii} Padma bkai Thang, Vol. I. p. 249.

^{viii} Sharma, Bansi Ram, p. 59.

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