

Buddhist tourism in Ladakh

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Abstract

Ladakh literally meaning “Land of High Passes” is a cold desert area situated in Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir, lies between Kunlun Mountain in the North and Greater Himalayas in South and having an immense potential for Buddhist tourism. Also known as Moon Land and Last Shangrilla, Ladakh is one of the three regions of Jammu and Kashmir State, consisting of two districts viz Leh and Kargil with Boti (Ladakhi) as main language. Buddhism being major religion has deep influence of Tibetan Buddhism, which follows the Mahayana and vajrayana schools. In this form of Buddhism, Buddha is worshipped as deity having attained Nirvana (means free from cycle of birth and death) and various incarnations of Buddha known as Bodhisattvas are also worshiped in monasteries. The mythology of Tibetan Buddhism has many tales of various spirits and demons representing good and evil qualities, depicted in the form of masks, and stories are enacted as masked dances during the annual festivals of various Gompas. His Holiness Dalai Lama (14th Dalai Lama) is their supreme spiritual leader and is living incarnation of Buddha. This paper is an attempt to discuss Buddhist tourism in Ladakh division and various constraints to it.

Keywords: Gompa, stupas, monasteries, chartens, thangka, mahayana, vajrayana

1. Introduction

Buddhism’s founder, Siddhartha Guatama, was born into royalty in Nepal around 563 B.C. He was born in a family or clan called Sakya, it was a Kshatrya clan (warrior Clan) at a place called Lumbini (Kappilavastu) Nepal. His father’s name was Sudhdhodhana and the mothers name was Mahamaya. But Buddha was brought up by Gautami. His wife’s name was Yasodra and his son was Rahul. He lived luxuriously, with little exposure to the outside world. His parents intended for him to be spared from the influence of religion and protected from pain and suffering. However, it was not long before his shelter was penetrated, and he had visions of an aged man, a sick man, and a corpse. His fourth vision was of a peaceful ascetic monk (one who denies luxury and comfort). Seeing the monk’s peacefulness, he decided to become an ascetic himself. Then he left his home on a horse named Kantak at the age of 29 years. Leaving house of Buddha is known as Mahabhenishkraman. At the age of 35, he sat under a pipal tree on the banks of river Niranjana (today called as Phalgu River) at Bodh Gaya (Bihar). He sat here for 49 days or 7weeks. Then after meditation of 49 days under pipal tree, he went to Sarmath (Banaras) and gave his first sermon there. This first sermon of Buddha is called as Dharmachakra Pravartan. He abandoned his life of wealth and affluence to pursue enlightenment through austerity. He was skilled at this sort of self-mortification and intense meditation. He was a leader among his peers. Eventually, his efforts culminated in one final gesture. He “indulged” himself with one bowl of rice and then sat beneath a fig tree (also called the Bodhi tree) to meditate till he either reached “enlightenment” or died trying. Despite his travails and temptations, by the next morning, he had achieved enlightenment. Thus, he became known as the 'enlightened one' or the 'Buddha.' He took his new realization and began to teach his fellow monks, with whom he had already gained great influence. Five of his peers became the first of his disciples. What had Gautama discovered?

Enlightenment lay in the “middle way,” not in luxurious indulgence or self-mortification. Moreover, he discovered what would become known as the ‘Four Noble Truths’—1) to live is to suffer (Dukha), 2) suffering is caused by desire (Tanha, or “attachment”), 3) one can eliminate suffering by eliminating all attachments, and 4) this is achieved by following the noble eightfold path(Ashtangnik Margs). The “eightfold path” consists of having a right 1) view or thought, 2) intention, 3) speech, 4) action, 5) livelihood (being a monk), 6) effort (properly direct energies), 7) mindfulness (meditation), and 8) concentration (focus). The Buddha's teachings were collected into the Tripitaka or “three baskets.” These pitaka include ‘Suta Pitak’, ‘Vinay Pitak’, ‘Abhidhana Pitak’. Suta Pitak contains original teachings of Buddha. Vinay Pitak includes the rules of Buddhist monestry (Vihar). While as Abhidhana Pitak is philosophical text of Buddhist. According to the philosophy of Buddhism, they have no answer about God. According to their philosophy, soul is a living thing and is not eternal and dies with the body. They believe in rebirth. According to their philosophy, Nirvana is freeing your soul from physical and worldly desires. Mahapari Nirvan is freeing yourself from cycle of rebirth according to Buddhist philosophy. Buddha died in 483 B.C at the age of 80 years at Kushinagar which is in present day Uttar Pradesh in India. Last meal of Buddha was pork. When Buddha died, the king was Ajatshatru.

Buddhism is one of the leading world religions in terms of adherents, geographical distribution, and socio-cultural influence. While largely an “Eastern” religion, it is becoming increasingly popular and influential in the Western world. It is a unique world religion in its own right, though it has much in common with Hinduism in that both teach Karma (cause-and-effect ethics), Maya (the illusory nature of the world), and Samsara (the cycle of reincarnation). Buddhists believe that the ultimate goal in life is to achieve “enlightenment” as they perceive it. Behind these distinguishing teachings are

teachings common to Hinduism, namely reincarnation, karma, Maya, and a tendency to understand reality as being pantheistic in its orientation. Buddhism also offers an elaborate theology of deities and exalted beings. However, like Hinduism, Buddhism can be hard to pin down as to its view of God. Some streams of Buddhism could legitimately be called atheistic, while others could be called pantheistic, and still others theistic, such as Pure Land Buddhism. Classical Buddhism, however, tends to be silent on the reality of an ultimate being and is therefore considered atheistic. The main spiritual goal of Buddhism is to attain 'Nirvana', which means the spiritual liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth. Buddhism religion does not believe in the existence of god and questions the Hindu practice of elaborate ceremonies, image worship, suppression of women and the elevation of Brahmins. Its core lies in the philosophy that everyone is equal and that nothing lasts forever and nothing happens by chance. The teachings of Buddha teachings were first compiled on the Pali script as the 'Tripitakas'. King Ashoka (250 B.C) was one of its chief believers and propagators. Buddhism is divided into 2 major sects - Hinayanas (travellers by a lesser vehicle) & Mahayanas (travellers by a greater vehicle). Buddhism was bifurcated into two schools of thought by the 1st millennium B.c., when a new cult, known as Mahayana emerged as a reaction against the orthodoxy of the existing sect called the Theravadins or Hinayanas. The older version of Buddhism (the Hinayanas) believed that the only way to attain nirvana was by leading a monastic life of austerity, abandoning all worldly pleasures. There was no scope for a lay person to attain liberation. Prince Siddhartha, who later became the Buddha, was accepted as the sole possessor of the Eternal Truth. Cutting across China, Tibet, Japan and Korea, the Mahayana sect has a much larger following because of their more liberal interpretation of the teachings of the Buddha than the Hinayanas. The newer school allowed for the possibility of enlightenment to all those who followed the path of righteousness, irrespective of their status in society. Synonymous with the Mahayana sect are the values of love and compassion combined with that of knowledge. Equal importance is given to both these key concepts of Mahayana, and that might be one of the reasons this denomination attracts devotees in great numbers. Mahayana (Mahayanas) introduced the idea of a deity into the religion, both on a speculative level which belongs more to philosophy, and in a popular way that was more like the polytheism of the masses. Hinayana (Huinayanas) professes to follow the basic principles of the Pali canon and, by this standard, may be identified with primitive Buddhism. Certainly its emphasis on the four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path places it nearer to the original teachings of Gautama than Mahayana whose express purpose was to reinterpret the Buddha's esoteric doctrine in order to make it universally acceptable.

Buddhism today is quite diverse. It is roughly divisible into the two broad categories of Theravada (small vessel) and Mahayana (large vessel). Theravada is the monastic form which reserves ultimate enlightenment and nirvana for monks, while Mahayana Buddhism extends this goal of enlightenment to the laity as well, that is, to non-monks. Within these categories can be found numerous branches including Tendai, Vajrayana, Nichiren, Shingon, Pure Land, Zen, and Ryobu, among others. Therefore it is important for outsiders seeking to understand Buddhism not to presume to know all the details

of a particular school of Buddhism when all they have studied is classical, historic Buddhism.

2. Buddhism in Ladakh

Buddhism is said to have come into western Ladakh via Kashmir in the 2nd century A.D during the reign of Kushan dynasty and spread later in the 8th century A.D from Tibet. Historians state that Dards made West Tibet their home in the 4th and 5th centuries. They say that these people migrated along the course of the Indus River and that they introduced irrigation and settled communities. But who were the Dards? Colonial historians placed almost all peoples and languages of the Upper Indus River into one pot and defined Tibetans as Baltis, later obscuring and simplifying distinct identities by introducing three other terms, "Dard, Dardistan, and Dardic," which in truth do not occur in classical sources and were never mentioned before. John Mock noted that the word dard "may be a loan word from Persian via Urdu" and means "pain." He investigated all sources (Herodotus, Strabo, Sanskrit, Puranic, and Kashmiri references) that led modern scholars to make such a mistake and wrote: "This usage of the term is curiously parallel to the Sanskrit usage, where it connoted non-specific ferocious outsiders living in the mountains beyond the borders of civilization. It is not clear when the first Buddhist communities were established in Ladakh. The site of His Holiness the Seventeenth Karmapa, Ugyen Trinley Dorje, writes that "Starting about the 3rd century, Buddhism began to grow and spread outside India, adjusting to local cultures and the varying conditions of different countries. Buddhism began to take root in different countries in Asia as they came in contact with Buddhism from the early 2nd century B.C. Buddhism became nearly extinct in India, the country of its origin. History books concede that after the eastward propagation of Buddhism in the 7th century, Ladakh and its neighbours were overrun by those fleeing westwards from the early Tibetan Tubo Kings. The chiefs of the Tubo Empire in Yarlung (which is situated in Central Tibet) had established an aristocracy and displaced the native inhabitants who had an independent state with its own language, literature, and culture; these people continue living in remote areas of Zhang Zhung in West Tibet proper, Kashmir, Ladakh, Zanskar, and the Himalayan regions of Nepal. Under the patronage of King Trison Detsen, Khenpo Shantarakshita from India established a monastic order in Tibet by ordaining the first seven monks at Samye Monastery in the year 791. He called Guru Rinpoche to vanquish all obstructions impeding the construction and to help establish Buddhism on the Tibetan Plateau. Guru Padmasambhava, the "Second Buddha," travelled from Northwest India through Lahaul-Spiti, Himachal Pradesh, Ladakh, Tibet, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Arunchal Pradesh and firmly established Buddhism in these lands.

Buddhism in Ladakh is ancient and widespread and a popular theme for cultural tours in Ladakh. The population of Ladakh is predominantly Buddhist and Ladakh has been deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, which follows the Mahayana and Vajrayana schools. In these forms of Buddhism, Buddha is worshipped a deity who has attained Nirvana (freedom from the cycle of birth and death). Various incarnations of Buddha, known as Bodhisattvas, are also worshipped in monasteries. Many tourists undertake trip to Ladakh to explore, understand and learn from the ancient Buddhism which is practiced here. The mythology of Tibetan

Buddhism has many tales of various spirits and demons. These representations of both good and evil qualities are depicted in the form of masks and their stories are enacted as masked dances during the annual festivals of various Gompas in Ladakh.

3. Main Buddhist Monasteries in Ladakh

Spituk Monastery

The Spituk Gompa "Exemplary"; 7km. to southwest of Leh, was founded by Od-Ide, in the 11th century AD; when the monastic community was introduced. Meanwhile, Lotsava Rinchen Zangpo (the great translator) visited this monastery. In those days the Gompa belonged to the Kadampa School but Gelukpa order was introduced during the reign of King Dragspa Bum-Lde, when Lama Lhawang Lotus restored the monastery. The "Spituk Gustor" takes place in the courtyard of the monastery, on the 18th and 19th of the 11th month of Tibetan Calendar.

Stok Monastery

Stok, 14 kms southeast of Leh, is a place, where the present day royal family resides. The three days trek from Stok to Spituk and the 8 days trek of Markha Valley start from here. King Tsespal Tondup Namgyal built Stok palace & Museum in the year 1825, after Zorawar Singh's annexation of Ladakh. The royal family resides here since Ladakh lost to Zorawar Singh. At present the palace has a collection of royal dresses, old Thankas, King's crown etc. that is open for visitors. Gurphuk Gompa, a branch of Spituk Monastery is a little away from the palace, which is famous for its festival "Guru Tsechu" held on the 9th and 10th of the 1st month of Tibetan Calendar.

Shey Monastery

Shey, around 15kms south of Leh was the seat of power of the first king of Ladakh, Lhachen Spalgigon, who constructed the hill top fortress. The ruins can be seen further above the present Shey Palace. There are hundreds of Chortens (stupas) and Dresthang Gompa built around the palace, which are under the Thiksey Monastery. King Deldan Namgyal built Shey Palace in the beginning of the 17th century AD. The main image in the monastery is the three-storey statue of Buddha Shakyamuni, made of copper gilt, which was made by Deldan Namgyal in the memory of his father Singay Namgyal. The statue is the only of its kind in the region. Dresthang Gompa near the palace was built during the reign of King Singay Namgyal, with a three-storey statue of Buddha. "Shey Srubla" festival is also held here at Dresthung Gompa. The Rock-carved statue of five Buddha can be seen below the palace on the roadside, which was probably carved during the reign of Singay Namgyal.

Thiksey Monastery

Thiskey Gompa, 17kms. south of Leh the most beautiful of all the Monasteries in Ladakh, belongs to the Gelukpa order. The Gompa was first built at Stakmo by Sherab Zangpo. Later the nephew of Sherab Zangpo, Paldan Sherab, founded the Thiskey Gompa on a hilltop to the north of Indus River. The Thiskey festival (Thiskey Gustor) is held in the month of October- November. Around 80 Monks resides here at present. Dukhang Karmo is a huge long assembly hall, which consists of the image of Shakyamuni and Maitriya Buddha

statues. Chamkhang at the top near the courtyard contains the three storey Maitriya Buddha's statue, constructed in recent years. Dukhang at the top, consists of thousand armed Avaloketesvara, Shakyamuni Buddha and Bodhisattavas, Gonkhang contains the statues of Vajra Bhairava, Mahakala & Dharmakaya, the goddess Paldan Lhamo and Cham-sring.

Hemis Monastery

The Hemis Monastery is around 45 km. south of Leh, which is one of the largest and most famous monasteries, belonging to the Drukpa order. The monastery founded by the first incarnation Stagsang Raspa Nawang Gyatso in 1630, who was invited to Ladakh by a king Singey Namgail, and offered him a religious estate throughout the region. The youngest son, Nawang Namgail, became a monk and his name was changed to Zamling Drags. The Monastery was named Changchub Samling and the community was introduced. The Hemis festival is held in the month of June.

Takthok Monastery

The Takthok (the monastery with rock ceiling); 50km. east of Leh, this is the only monastery belonging to the Nimgmapa school of order. The monastery came into existence when Guru Padma Sambhava visited this place and blessed it in the 8th century. The Gompa was merely a meditation cave of Padma Sambhava, with footprints and many other signs, until the reign of King Tsewang Namgail. When Mahasiddha Kunga Phunstog introduced monastic community, it was given the name of Takthok Padmalinggon. The Takthok Festival is held in the month of July or August.

Phyang Monastery

Phyang Monastery, 17km. west of Leh is remarkably built on the hilltop, similar to the Likir monastery. This monastery belongs to the Degungpa Order. It was the first monastery, which introduced the Degungpa teaching of 'Skyob Jigsten Gonbo' in Ladakh that was founded by Chosje Danma Kunga, during the reign of King Jamyang Namgyal in the 16th Century A.D. It has about 50 monks in residence. Phyang also has a festival called 'Phyang Tseruk' on the 2nd & 3rd of the 6th month of Tibetan Calendar.

Lamayuru Monastery

The Lamayuru "Yungdrung" Gompa is remarkably built on a rock, around 125kms west of Leh, on the Leh Srinagar highway. Lamayuru belongs to the Drigungpa order of Tibetan Buddhism. The history of the monastery begins with the visit of Arahat Nimagung to this place, when there was merely a lake here. It is said that Arahat made a prophecy that "a monastery will come up at this spot" and he made offerings (prayer with grains of corn) to the Nagaserpent spirits. The corns mixed with the earth and formed in the shape of Swastika (Yungdrung), later it came to be known as Yungdrung Monastery. The Great Translator Rinchen Zangpo constructed a temple here in eleventh century. Naropa also visited Lamayuru and meditated here. Gelukpa or Kadampa school of Tibetan Buddhism initially looked after Lamayuru, but later; it was taken over by Digungpa Order. Its monastic festival is called "Yuru Kabgyat", takes place on 17th and 18th of 5th month of the Tibetan Calendar.

Besides these monasteries, there are so many monasteries to be visited in Ladakh.

4. List of Monastic Festivals of Ladakh

Table 1

S. No	Name of festival	2017	2018	2019	2020
1.	Spituk Gustor	January 25-26	January 14-15	January 3-4	January 22-23
2.	Leh & Likir Dosmochey	February 24-25	February 13-14	February 2-3	February 21-22
3.	Yargon Tungshak	March 2-3	February 19-20	February 8-9	February 27-28
4.	Stok Guru Tsechu	March 6-7	February 24-25	February 14-15	March 3-4
5.	Matho Nagrang	March 11-12	March 1-2	February 18-19	March 8-9
6.	Saka Dawa	June 9	May 29	June 17	June 5
7.	Yuru Kabgyat	June 21-22	June 11-12	June 29-30	June 18-19
8.	Hemis Tseshu	July 3-4	June 23-24	July 11-12	June 30-july 1
9.	Sachkul Gustor	July 11-12	June 30-july-1	July 19-20	July 7-8
10.	Stongday Gustor	July 12-13	July 1-2	July 20-21	July 8-9
11.	Karsh Gustor	July 21-22	July 11-12	July 30-31	July 18-19
12.	Phyang Tsedup	July 21-22	July 11-12	July 30-31	July 18-19
13.	Korzok Gustor Tsomoriri	July 26-27	July 15-16	August 3-4	July 23-24
14.	Dakthok Tsetso	August 2-3	July 22-23	August 10-11	July 29-30
15.	Sani Nasjal Zangskar	August 6-7	July 26-27	August 14-15	August 2-3
16.	Deksit Gustor Nubra	October 17-18	October 7-8	October 26-27	October 14-15
17.	Thiskay Gustor	November 6-7	October 27-28	November 15-16	November 3-4
18.	Chamday Wangckok	November 16-17	November 5-6	November 24-25	November 13-14
19.	Galdan Namchot	December 12	December 2	December 21	December 10
20.	Ladakhi Losar	December 19	December 8	December 27	December 15

4. Analysis

Buddhist tourism in Ladakh has a tremendous potential. Having good number of Buddhist monasteries, each has its own history and importance. These monasteries celebrate their festivals on different dates of the year according to their Tibetan calendar.

Sufficient accommodation for tourists is available in Ladakh. In Leh district, there are about 12915 beds available in different categories of hotels, including 6225 double rooms and 465 single rooms. There are also 73 restaurants and 527 travel agencies in Leh district.

As far as Buddhist tourism is considered, no data is available with the govt. departments or with other authorities. Concerned Government authorities in Leh expressed their inability to provide any information as no data was available about Buddhist tourism in Ladakh.

As no secondary data was available, an effort was made to generate some basic data about Buddhist tourism in Ladakh. Sample of foreign tourists who visited Ladakh by road and by air was targeted. About 500 foreign tourists of different nationalities, religion and gender were questioned and only 30% out of these disclosed their main motive to visit Ladakh primarily being to know about Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries, the rest showed their interest in adventure tourism and sightseeing only. Besides interview, questionnaire was also used to generate feedback, from which almost similar results were obtained.

Similarly, interaction with the domestic tourists of different religion, region and gender was also undertaken to understand their motive of travel. In this case also a sample of 500 domestic tourists was randomly selected, questionnaire was also used to get feedback. After analysis it was surprising to know that only 1% is interested in Buddhist tourism and remaining showed their interest in sightseeing and adventure tourism only.

Analysis of data further revealed the reasons for tourists of not being attracted to Buddhist tourism. It got revealed that in Ladakh the peak tourist season starts from June to September

and during this season the hotels and other available accommodation in Leh remain almost packed. For this reason the authorities or stake holders don't make any efforts to attract or promote Buddhist tourist which are mainly budget class or low end tourists. However, in 2016 'Mahabodhi international meditation centre' (based in Leh) attracted Buddhist tourists mainly from Thailand, but these Buddhist tourist were sponsored by some organisations. Similarly in the Hemis monastery, there is one festival namely 'Naro Gyantuk' festival which is celebrated after every 12 years. During this festival, head Lama of Hemis invites Buddhists from different countries like Bhutan, Thailand and Vietnam to participate in this festival, but again this is also a sponsored tour by some organizations. An organisation called 'Transhimaliya will of life' has been formed with the mandate to attract Buddhist tourists to Ladakh, but this project is still in pipeline. Another institution called 'central institute of Buddhist studies', offers various programmes in Buddhism, however it does not attract much student from outside Ladakh. Various private travel agencies and other organisations also offer various Dhamma and meditation camps in Ladakh.

5. Constraints to Buddhist Tourism in Ladakh

1. The government and other authorities have not shown any interest in promoting Buddhist tourism in Ladakh.
2. No campaign and serious efforts are being made to attract Buddhist tourists from potential markets like Japan, S.korea, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Vietnam, Cambodia etc.
3. Very poor internet and mobile phone facility in Ladakh.
4. No credit cards (plastic money) are accepted in Ladakh due to poor connectivity.
5. The air fare to Ladakh is too high (average 25000 INR) during peak tourist season.
6. Insufficient dormitories to accommodate Buddhist tourists.
7. Non availability of any insurance plan by govt. to the tourists.

8. Since Ladakh is in seismic zone IV, there is great possibility of big earthquakes and also possibility of cloudbursts. In such possible disasters, no disaster management system is in place.
9. Only 24 registered guides are operating in Leh, out of which only 2 to 3 guides know to speak French and German besides English.
10. Most of the foreign Buddhist tourists get attracted towards Tibet, which is nowadays hub of Buddhism. Besides, there are very good facilities for these tourists.
11. Government has not developed Buddhist Circuit in Ladakh yet.
12. There is no promotion of Buddhist festivals of different monasteries in Ladakh.
13. Travel agents are also not able to promote Buddhist tourism in Ladakh due to poor internet facility.
14. No Buddhist monestary in Ladakh is deleared as World Heritage Site by UNESCO.
15. Ladakh is also a seasonal destination. Peak season is from June to September and rest are lean seasons. During winter the temperature goes down upto minus 35 degree celcius. During winter season, Ladakh remains cut off from rest of the country and world, only air route remains functional during winter season.
16. No public convenience (toilets) available en route to the monasteries.

6. Conclusion

Ladakh is having tremendous potential to develop as Buddhist tourist destination provided a serious and sustained effort is made by govt and other stake holders to make Ladakh a referred Buddhist Tourist destination. Not only facilities need to be enhanced but strong publicity plans need to be worked out to attract and inform the potenial tourists.

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