

# Historical Evolution and Cultural Integration of Mahayana Buddhism in Western Arunachal Pradesh

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## Abstract

This paper examines the vibrant Buddhist cultures in Arunachal Pradesh, focusing on the Mahayana tradition in the western part of the state. It traces the historical arrival and evolution of Buddhism, noting its unique synthesis with indigenous practices and Bhutanese traditions, particularly among the Monpa and Shertukpen communities. The paper delves into the architectural and functional significance of Buddhist monasteries, prayer halls, entrance gates, stupas, and prayer wheels in Western Arunachal Pradesh. It highlights how these structures serve as central hubs for religious life, community gatherings, and cultural identity, illustrating the profound integration of Buddhism into the local social and spiritual landscape, often blending with older Bon religious customs while maintaining distinct practices.

**Keywords:** Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhist History, Buddhist Culture, Monpa, Shertukpen, Northeast India.

## Introduction

Buddhism holds a significant place as a religious tradition in Arunachal Pradesh, a region located on India's easternmost frontier. This relatively compact area of Arunachal Pradesh has uniquely fostered the simultaneous growth of two different yet vibrant Buddhist cultures.

In the southeastern reaches of the state, Theravada Buddhism has been a living practice since the fourteenth century, tracing its origins and traditions back to Southeast Asia. Conversely, in the western part of Arunachal Pradesh, which is the specific focus of this paper's research, Mahayana Buddhism took root much earlier, beginning in the eighth century. Both these forms, Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism, have continued to thrive as active and integral religious cultures within Arunachal Pradesh.

The Western Arunachal Pradesh region, particularly the historical Mon area (Monyul), stands as a significant bastion of Mahayana Buddhism, a tradition that has profoundly shaped its cultural and social landscape since its arrival in the eighth century (Tenpa, 2018, p.29). This region, encompassing present-day Tawang and West Kameng districts, offers a unique lens through which to examine the intricate processes of religious dissemination, adaptation, and institutionalization in the Eastern Himalayas. While Buddhism reached Monyul shortly after its introduction to central Tibet in the eighth century, its firm establishment and integration took several centuries, evolving through a dynamic interplay with indigenous beliefs and various Tibetan Buddhist schools.

From a community perspective, the Monpa and Shertukpen peoples are the primary adherents of Buddhism in Western Arunachal Pradesh. Nevertheless, several smaller communities, including the Nahs, Membas, and Khambas, who reside in the western and northwestern areas of Arunachal Pradesh, also

observe Mahayana Buddhism. Currently, the predominant sects of Tibetan Buddhism followed in Western Arunachal Pradesh are primarily the Nyingma and Gelugpa. It is important to note, however, that these specific traditions have not remained isolated but have instead intertwined with local religious customs and have also influenced one another, resulting in a unique synthesis of beliefs and practices.

This article delves into the historical trajectory of Buddhism in Western Arunachal Pradesh, exploring its initial arrival from Tibet, its institutionalization through the establishment of monasteries and sects, and its profound influence on the Monpa and Shertukpen communities. Furthermore, it examines the distinctive architectural expressions of Buddhism in the region, including monasteries/prayer halls (Gompa), entrance gates, stupas, and prayer wheels, highlighting how these structures not only serve religious functions but also form an integral part of the region's cultural identity.

### **History of Buddhism in Western Arunachal Pradesh**

In Western Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhism initially arrived and flourished in the Mon region, also known as Monyul (Tenpa, 2018, p.29). This area, encompassing the modern-day Tawang and West Kameng districts, remains a stronghold of Mahayana Buddhism as a vibrant religious tradition. Tibetan texts refer to this region with several names like- Mon, Monyul, Lho Mon, or Shar Mon, situating it southeast of central Tibet. During the 8th century, Monyul was part of Old Mon, an administrative division of the Tibetan empire that covered much of the eastern Himalayas, from Sikkim in the west to Mon in the east, and all of Bhutan. While Buddhism reached the Mon region of Arunachal Pradesh soon after its arrival in central Tibet in the 8th century, it took several centuries for it to become firmly established and institutionalized. A thorough understanding of Buddhism's dissemination in Western Arunachal Pradesh necessitates an exploration of Tibetan Buddhist history.

Buddhism arrived in Tibet from various regions including the Pala kingdom of eastern India, Kashmir, Nepal, and China, between the seventh and twelfth centuries CE (Fisher, 1997, p.11-14). Its introduction to central Tibet in the seventh century CE was supported by the ruling class, particularly during the reign of King Songtsen Gampo. While traditionally considered the thirty-third Tibetan king, historical evidence for the thirty-two preceding rulers is lacking, making him the first historically recognized king, reigning from approximately 620 to 650 CE.

King Songtsen Gampo married two Buddhist princesses: Bhrikuti from Nepal, daughter of King Amsuvarman, and Wencheng from China's Tang dynasty (Dondrup, 2006, p.185). These two devout queens were instrumental in introducing Buddhism to Tibet from their home countries, bringing several Buddha images with them (Banerjee, 1981, p.74-75). The Nepalese princess brought an image of Buddha Aksobhya, which was placed in the temple now known as Jo-kang ("house of Lord"). Princess Wencheng brought images of Sakyamuni Buddha and Maitreya, as well as Buddhist texts, for which another temple was constructed in Lhasa.

Influenced by his queens, King Songtsen Gampo embraced Buddhism and established it as Tibet's state religion. He dispatched his minister to India, Nepal, and China to invite Buddhist monks to spread the faith and to acquire Buddhist scriptures. The translation of Indian Buddhist works into Tibetan also commenced during his rule, with many Indian Buddhist monks and scholars visiting Tibet and translating numerous Indian Buddhist scriptures under his royal patronage (Dondrup, 2006, p.187).

King Songtsen Gampo designated Buddhism as Tibet's official religion, intending for his people to embrace it. Nevertheless, Buddhism primarily stayed a courtly religion, blending Indian and Chinese

influences. It struggled to reach ordinary citizens due to significant resistance from Bon, the dominant religion of Tibet at that time, which Banerjee (1981, p.76) describes as 'a shamanist, necromantic cult.' Following Songtsen Gampo's death, King Trisong Detsen (reigned 755-97), the son of the Chinese queen, actively promoted Buddhist teachings among the populace. He orchestrated a debate to determine whether Tibetans should adhere to the Indian or Chinese Buddhist tradition, with the Indian tradition prevailing (Casey, 2003, p.31). King Trisong Detsen invited Shantarakshita, a celebrated master from Nepal and a professor at the University of Nalanda, to disseminate Indian Buddhism.

Facing intense opposition from Bon's religious leaders, Shantarakshita sought help from Padmasambhava, another distinguished master from the University of Nalanda. Padmasambhava possessed mystic charms and was believed to have supernatural abilities, which Shantarakshita deemed necessary to counter Bon's widespread appeal (Banerjee, 1981, p.77). Padmasambhava journeyed extensively throughout Tibet to spread Buddhist teachings. He is credited with founding the Nyingma, Tibet's first Buddhist sect, by integrating Tantrism with existing Tibetan religious customs. This sect, also known as the 'Red hat' sect because of its monks' red hats, successfully connected with the Tibetan people by incorporating elements of Bon.

Lobsang Tenpa asserts that Buddhism was introduced to the Mon region of Arunachal Pradesh in the seventh century, during Songtsen Gampo's rule (2013, pp. 5-6). Gampo was responsible for the construction of numerous temples across his empire, including the Sinmo Lhakhang Buddhist temple in Lekpo, a location now within the Tibet Autonomous Region and close to Tawang.

In the eighth century, under the royal patronage of Trison Detseng, Buddhism saw a vigorous expansion. During this period, Padmasambhava spent over a year in Monyul to disseminate Buddhist doctrines while traveling through Tibet. His biography, *Padma-bka-thang*, indicates that he visited Old Mon and resided in the Eastern Himalayas for several years (Tenpa, 2018, p. 52). Many pilgrimage sites in Tibet and its vicinity are linked to Padmasambhava's travels, with a considerable number located in the Mon region (Tenpa, 2013, pp. 6-7).

However, information regarding Buddhist activities in the Mon region between the late ninth and twelfth centuries is scarce, suggesting only the presence of Buddhist elements rather than institutionalization during this time. Subsequent to Padmasambhava, various Buddhist masters from Tibet and Bhutan journeyed to the region, significantly contributing to the spread of Buddhism among the Monpa and Shertukpen communities, the latter being another prominent Buddhist group in Western Arunachal Pradesh (study of Arkar, cited by Dey, 2006, p. 223).

Beginning in the thirteenth century, Tibetan Buddhism underwent institutionalization in Monyul (Tenpa, 2013, p.8-9). Over the next four centuries, until the seventeenth century, various Tibetan Buddhist schools established monasteries in the region. The Kyine Gompa of the Karma Kagyu School, founded in the fourteenth century by the third Karmapa Rangjung Dorjee (1284-1339) or his followers, is considered the earliest monastery in the Mon region. From the fifteenth century onwards, disciples of the first and second Dalai Lamas also visited Mon, leading to the establishment of Gelugpa monasteries. Even the less prominent Bodong School of Tibetan Buddhism also built monasteries during this period. The three oldest Nyingma monasteries—Urgyenling, Sangeling, and Tsorgeling—were constructed by the brother of master Pema Lingpa (1450–1521), who journeyed to Tawang from Bhutan (Mizuno and Tenpa, 2015, p.59).

Prior to the sixteenth century, the Nyingma sect gained prominence in Monyul due to its strong connections with neighbouring Bhutan, where it was already well-established (Mizuno and Tenpa, 2015,

p.59-80). However, the Gelugpa School gained popularity in Monyul from the sixteenth century onward, spurred by the active interest of the second Dalai Lama, who dispatched his disciples Tenpe Dronme and Lobsang Khetsun to establish monasteries and propagate the Gelugpa faith. Starting in the fifteenth century, various Tibetan Buddhist sects began to compete for dominance in the Monyul region. The Gelugpa School faced opposition from both the Karmapa and Nyingma sects, as well as from Bhutanese Drukpa supporters who sought control of the entire Tawang region. A military force was even sent from Tibet to support the Gelugpa. Ultimately, the Gelugpa School solidified its supremacy in the seventeenth century with additional support from the fifth Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso. The Tawang Monastery, established in the latter half of the seventeenth century after political stability was achieved, became the primary institution for establishing and maintaining Gelugpa supremacy in Monyul, a position it holds to this day. Merak Lama Lodoe Gyatso, a direct disciple of the fifth Dalai Lama, is credited with founding the Tawang Monastery with his master's backing. Currently, the Gelugpa is the predominant sect in the Mon region of Arunachal Pradesh, though the Nyingma sect retains its popularity in the Dirang area. In some locations, however, the Gelugpa and Nyingma sects coexist.

### **The Monpa Community**

The Monpa are a prominent ethnic group in Western Arunachal Pradesh, constituting approximately 90% of the population in Tawang and 70% in West Kameng (Tenpa, 2018, pp. 14-17). In the Tawang district, the Monpa are considered the sole "tribe" (Dey, 2006, p. 223). The term 'Mon' is broadly used by Tibetans to denote a region or its inhabitants (Tenpa, 2018, pp. 14-17). While 'Mon' historically encompassed all regions and peoples south of central Tibet, 'Lohmon' or 'southern Mon' specifically designated the Eastern Himalayan region, including Sikkim, Bhutan, and Monyul. The term Monpa can signify a resident of Mon or someone belonging to the Mon ethnicity. Currently, however, 'Mon' is "exclusively used to designate the area of Monyul in the wider Tibetan cultural region" (Tenpa and Tempa, 2013, p. 5). In China, the Monpa are recognized as one of 56 ethnic groups. In contrast, in India, Monpa refers to a distinct ethnic group in Arunachal Pradesh, officially recognized as a Scheduled Tribe.

According to Mizuno and Tenpa (2015, p.7-8), the Monpa people of Arunachal Pradesh are classified into three main groups based on their geographical locations: the Tawang Monpa, Dirang Monpa, and Kalaktang Monpa, named after their respective dwelling places. These main groups are further subdivided, with the Tawang Monpa having five subgroups and the Dirang Monpa three. These Monpa groups exhibit linguistic differences. The Tawang Monpa's language resembles Tibetan due to Tawang's proximity to Tibet, while the Dirang Monpa's language is similar to Bhutanese, reflecting its geographical closeness to Bhutan.

Similar distinctions are observed in their Buddhist religious cultures. The Tawang Monpa adhere to Gelugpa Buddhism, the dominant Buddhist school in Tibet, whereas the Dirang Monpa lean towards Nyingma Buddhism, the primary school in Bhutan. This connection extends to Bhutanese Buddhist practices; even Gelugpa monasteries in the Dirang region incorporate Nyingma Buddhist elements. For instance, altars in Dirang monasteries display images of Buddha wearing both red hats (signifying Nyingma) and yellow hats (signifying Gelugpa) together. Additionally, monks from both sects frequently participate in religious ceremonies side-by-side, a practice Mizuno, et al., (2015, p.59-80) describe as a "merging" of the two traditions.

Prior to the introduction of Tibetan Buddhism, the Monpa practiced the Bon religion, which is still present. They maintain strong ties to both Tibetan Buddhism and Bon. Some Bon-related rituals have been

integrated into Tibetan Buddhism, while others are practiced outside monastic settings. Certain local Bon religious figures have also been adopted as guardian deities within Monpa Buddhist tradition. Consequently, while the Monpa observe Tibetan Buddhism, it has developed into a distinct Monpa form through the syncretisation of Nyingma, Gelugpa, and Bon religious cultural elements.

The Monpa community and its monasteries share a profound connection (Dorjee, 2006, pp. 197-203). The community provides financial, material, and labour support to the monasteries and their monks, receiving spiritual solace in return. The Tawang Monastery, founded in the seventeenth century and situated atop Tawang town, serves as the primary institution of Tibetan Buddhism for the Monpa people of Arunachal Pradesh (Mizuno and Tenpa, 2015, p. 79). The Monpa calendar in the area is even synchronized with the Tawang Monastery's activities, which are, in turn, aligned with their agricultural cycle (Dorjee, 2006, p. 203). Monpa villages voluntarily built and continue to maintain sections of the monastery and its outer wall. Furthermore, each family from these villages donates food and grain to the Tawang Monastery twice annually, along with regular contributions of firewood and cash. Monks from the Tawang Monastery also oversee twelve smaller monasteries, with senior monks being chosen to manage a subordinate monastery for a three-year term.

### **The Shertukpen Community**

The Shertukpen (also called Sherdukpen), a smaller ethnic group than the Monpa, live primarily in the central West Khameng district of Arunachal Pradesh, spread across thirteen villages today (Thongchi Jr., et al., 2019, p.x). Historically, there were only three Shertukpen villages—Rupa, Jigoan, and Shergaon—with other settlements being small "pams" or "lurek," meaning hill (lu) and cultivation (rek) (Sharma, 1988, p.1). These "lureks" originated from their past practice of jhum (shifting) cultivation, a method now largely replaced by permanent cultivation. The Shertukpen consist of two consanguineous groups, the Sher and Thukpen, known locally as Shenji and Thonji respectively. The villages of Shergaon and Rupa are called Shenthui/Senthu and Thonthui/Thonthui, with residents referred to as Senjis and Thongjis, where "thu" means village and "ji" means people (Sharma, 1988, p.1-2). Originally, both groups lived in Rupa, but an increase in population and a cholera outbreak led the Senji to settle in Senthu. The Shenji occupy the land beyond Jigoan, while the Thonji inhabit other areas. Rupa remains the administrative centre (Thongchi Jr., et al., 2019, p.x). Although they organize annual Bon religious festivals and have separate jurisdictions, their language and culture are largely similar.

Shertukpen oral history traces their lineage to Tibet, specifically to the Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo, who they believe married an Ahom princess from neighbouring Assam. According to their tradition, the king, hearing of the Ahom princess's beauty, sent his minister Rigpu Chhan to Assam. After passing a series of difficult tests set by the initially reluctant Ahom king, the minister secured the princess. However, on their return journey, the minister and princess engaged in infidelity, and the princess became pregnant. Upon arrival in Tibet, the king married the princess but soon discovered her pregnancy, leading to the minister's imprisonment. The child born was considered abnormal—having a human body, a dog's face, and goat horns—and was left in the forest. The king forgave his queen, who later bore him two sons. One son eventually succeeded in Bhutan, while the other, considered the forefather of the Shertukpen, took control of their territory in Arunachal Pradesh, becoming their first king. Scholars refer to him differently: Sharma (1960, p.6) calls him Japtang Bura, while Thongchi Jr. and Thongchi (2019, xi) name him Usu Gyaptong. The community believes Usu Gyaptong arrived at their current location approximately five

hundred years ago, establishing Lomehkhari (present-day Rupa) as his capital (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, p.1).

The introduction of Buddhism among the Shertukpen is a subject of scholarly debate. Some scholars suggest it arrived concurrently with the Monpa, brought by Padmasambhava in the eighth century (Dey, 2006, p.223). Others propose a much later introduction, as late as the eighteenth century, citing the construction of the Rupa Gompa (Pena Tsoling Gompa), the oldest Buddhist monastery in the Shertukpen area, in 1742 (Dash, 2006, p.134-137). Shertukpen oral history indicates that their forefather Usu Gyptong and his group came from Tibet before adopting Buddhism, accompanied by warriors, porters, servants, and Bonpo priests on their journey to Rupa (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, p.1). These priests are believed to have helped combat evil spirits, enabling their successful settlement. Consequently, despite being followers of Tibetan Buddhism, local magico-religious beliefs, or Bon/Bonpoism, remain a significant part of Shertukpen religious culture. They actively practice nature worship and believe in demons, omens, and natural sprites. Each Shertukpen village features *Gompas*, along with *Manes* (small shrines), *chortens* (stupas), and prayer flag posts. Unlike the Monpa, Bon traditions among the Shertukpen have not significantly merged with Buddhist traditions but exist as a more distinct religious entity. Both Buddhist and Bonpo rituals are considered essential but are performed by separate designated individuals: Bon rituals by Bonpo priests (locally called Zizih/Jijih) and Buddhist rituals by Buddhist lamas. Zizih/Jijih, alongside Buddhist Lamas, are crucial to the Shertukpen's socio-religious landscape. K. Dey describes Shertukpen religion as "a curious blend of Buddhist and local beliefs" (2006, p.223), highlighting how "Buddhist Lamaism and Bonpo shamanism conflux in the Shertukpen so brilliantly and blend them into interesting philosophy" (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, p.xv).

The Shertukpen adhere to the Nyingma sect of Tibetan Buddhism (Dash, 2006, p.134-137). Their prayer halls in monasteries feature not only Buddhist imagery but also representations of local deities, which are worshipped by Lamas using Buddhist rituals. The gompa serves as the primary location for ritualistic activities and also functions as a judicial centre within their society. In addition to daily rituals, monthly holy days involve special ceremonies at the gompa.

A significant daily religious practice for the Shertukpen as well as Monpas is Yonchhap Phiyibah (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, p.132-133), a water offering ritual performed in both gompas and domestic altars. A family member, regardless of gender, fills seven metal vessels with water and lights a butter lamp, emptying the water in the evening. This ritual is believed to have been introduced in the early eleventh century by Dipankara Srijnana of Vikramsila University, known as Palden Atisa in Arunachal Pradesh. Srijnana considered water offerings the purest form of oblation for gaining religious merit, as it involves no cost, making it accessible to even the poorest. This offered water also plays a role in the Shertukpen justice system: when the village council cannot determine an accused person's guilt, he or she is required to drink a sip from each bowl of this water to prove innocence. It is believed that if the person is guilty and has lied, the water will cause severe physical or mental harm within a month, a fear that often leads accused individuals to confess.

The Shertukpen utilize a traditional lunar calendar called Termu, maintained by village heads and Zizih. The eighth (half-moon), fifteenth (full moon), and thirteenth days of each month are considered holy days, known as *duchhin* (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, 127). During these days, hunting, animal killing, and agricultural activities are prohibited. Elderly women, in particular, spend the entire day at the gompas, counting rosaries and reciting Buddhist hymns. Violators of these rules face fines, which are used to purchase ritualistic supplies for monasteries, such as incense sticks and butter lamps. Padmasambhava is

highly revered by the Shertukpen, in line with the Nyingma tradition. The tenth day of every Termu month is dedicated to him and called the *bedzar* guru day. Although not officially a *duchhin*, older women of the community, known as Aimonepos, also consider it a holy day and gather at the gumpa for Padmasambhava worship.

The Shertukpen perform circumambulation (Lhagang) 108 times in an anti-clockwise direction around gompas and other religious structures like manes, chhorten, darshing, and phanshing (prayer flag poles) (Thongechi Jr., et al., 2019, p. 130-132). This practice is believed to accrue religious merit and extend their lifespan. The number 108, or *jo dangeyh*, holds significant religious meaning for the Shertukpen, possibly linked to the 108 volumes of the Kangyur (the words of Buddha in Tibetan). This number is integrated into various aspects of their rituals, including redemption, salvation, expiation of sin, and penance. For example, 108 butter lamps are lit during death rites, and rosaries contain 108 beads. Beyond rituals, the number has also entered their social customs; for instance, a hunter who ceases hunting after killing 108 animals is believed to be absolved of the sin of those killings.

### **Buddhist Monasteries of Western Arunachal Pradesh**

Buddhism, as it evolved into a religion, distinguished itself from other contemporary faiths primarily through its monastic institutional culture. In general, and particularly in Western Arunachal Pradesh, monasteries serve as central hubs for both congregational worship and individual spiritual practice. They fulfil two main functions: housing the teachings of the Buddha and accommodating those who follow them. The teachings are physically represented through sculptures, paintings, and manuscripts, while the followers include resident monks and novices. Additionally, monasteries provide a space for lay followers to engage with Buddha's teachings and perform their religious duties.

In Western Arunachal Pradesh, larger villages often feature a monastery or a standalone prayer hall/temple, known as a 'Gumpa'—a Tibetan term for such structures of any size, with or without resident monks (Mizuno, et al., 2015, pp. 64-75). These are collectively maintained through the financial contributions and labour of nearby villagers. Some Gompas in the region are privately owned. Most monasteries typically have at least one resident monk responsible for daily rituals and upkeep. However, some operate without resident monks, relying on visiting monks from neighbouring monasteries for their care. While 'Lama' is now broadly used for all Tibetan Buddhist monks and novices, it originally referred to a "mentor priest in Tibet" (Mizuno, et al., 2015, p. 66). Alongside full-time resident monks, there are also part-time monks, known as *tsepa lamas*, who lead regular village lives, often engaging in farming, but perform monastic duties as needed. These individuals dedicate years to mastering astrology and are sometimes identified by affiliations such as *minakpa lama* or *ngkpa lama*. Every village typically has several part-time lamas who are invited to conduct rituals for marriages, births, illnesses, and deaths. These lamas also engage in animist and shamanist practices and provide traditional medical care. Unlike full-time resident monks who observe celibacy, part-time monks are permitted to marry.

The essential components of a monastery include a prayer hall and residential quarters for monks. Other common structural additions include an entrance gate (*kakaling*), stupas (chorteng), prayer wheels (*mane*), a library or storage for religious scriptures, a residential building and kitchen for monks, a community hall, classrooms, a museum, and a guesthouse. Some monasteries also feature a *choemey khang*, a house specifically for offering butter lamps.

The architecture of most Buddhist monasteries of the region is designed to stand out from surrounding residential and other structures. The prayer hall is the most significant building, as it houses the main

object of veneration, usually an image of the Buddha. Consequently, the community's religious and cultural activities largely centre around the prayer hall. The monastery grounds are defined by a boundary wall made of bamboo, stone, or brick. The prayer hall is typically situated at the far end of this boundary, facing east or south. An entrance gate at the opposite end of the boundary leads visitors directly to the prayer hall. Ideally, the entrance gate and prayer hall are aligned, with a pathway connecting them. These two structures, located centrally, form the largest unit of the monastery, occupying roughly one-third of its total area. Other monastic buildings are arranged along both sides of this pathway. The entrance gate and prayer hall also feature a grander architectural style and design, contributing to the monastery's distinctive appearance.

However, this ideal layout is not always maintained in all monasteries. For instance, monasteries on hilly terrain may not be able to align the prayer hall and gate linearly due to uneven ground, a common situation in Western Arunachal Pradesh. The layout can also be altered in monasteries where the prayer hall has been rebuilt and its location shifted. Many of these monasteries have been in continuous use for centuries, undergoing multiple repairs or reconstructions. During these processes, the main prayer hall, or even the entire monastery, may be relocated

**Figure 1: Prayer Hall, Tawang Monastery, Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh.**



In certain monasteries, such as the Tawang monastery (Figure 1), a central courtyard is present, around which the prayer hall, kitchen, and other monastic structures are arranged. This courtyard serves as a venue for community gatherings during festivals, as well as for performing monastic dances, which are a vital part of Buddhist culture in Western Arunachal Pradesh. It is also used for outdoor ceremonies. A large flagstone with a prayer flag pole, locally known as a *dharsheng*, is installed in this courtyard and is replaced annually (Norbu, 2016, p. 37). Despite these variations, the entrance gate, prayer hall, and the

pathway connecting them collectively form the central and largest unit within the monasteries of the region.

### Prayer Halls

The prayer hall's importance is underscored by its impressive architectural design. In Western Arunachal Pradesh, these prayer halls are robust, multi-story structures built from stone and mud bricks, reinforced with wood and mud mortar. Their floors and roofs are constructed from wooden planks. This architectural style and material selection are a direct response to the region's geography and climate, as much of Western Arunachal Pradesh lies within the lower Himalayan belt, experiencing consistently cold temperatures and heavy winter snowfall. These enclosed buildings, similar to local dwellings, offer crucial protection from the severe weather.

These cubical, multi-story prayer hall buildings feature a front courtyard, around which other monastic structures are arranged. Typically two or three floors high, the most significant section is the main assembly hall, known as the *dukhang*, located on the ground floor. At the far end of the *dukhang*, an altar holds the primary object of veneration, usually an image of the historical Buddha, accompanied by other religious figures and subsidiary deities arranged hierarchically. The prayer hall's entrance is opposite the altar. Often, an entrance hall or vestibule, called the *gokang*, precedes the *dukhang* (Dondrup, 2006, p.132). Staircases within the *gokang* provide access to the upper floors. A circumambulatory path encircles the building, utilized by devotees and monks in a clockwise direction, with prayer wheels installed on the ground floor's exterior wall for use during this ritual. Unlike Tibetan architecture, these prayer halls feature sloping roofs—either two or three-sided. In some instances, the roof has a two-tiered appearance with additional windows on the upper level. A decorative, bell-shaped gilded copper dome, known as a *seirtok*, crowns the centre of the roof.

**Figure 2: Prayer Hall, GRL Monastery, Bomdila, Arunachal Pradesh.**



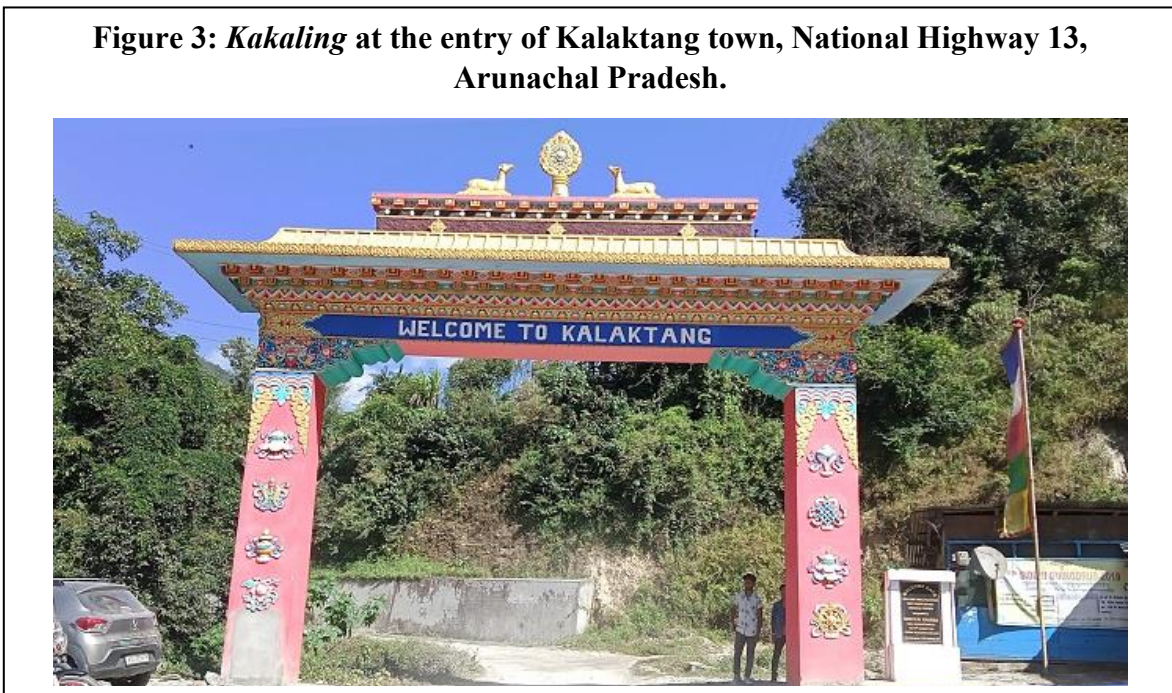
Inside, the *dukhang* is a spacious, tall, multi-pillared hall without a separate area for the altar (Figure 2). Its pillars are ornately carved and painted. Natural light illuminates the hall through numerous windows

located on the lower and upper sections of two opposing walls. A large door serves as the entrance. Generally, the wall behind the altar lacks windows or doors; however, some Gelugpa tradition monasteries include a door near the altar leading to a small, additional chamber. This chamber, housing various deity images, is reserved for the lama presiding over religious rites and is not accessible to general visitors. Seats for teacher monks and novices are arranged hierarchically within the hall.

### ***Kakaling- Entrance Gate***

*Kakaling*, the Tibetan term for the entrance gates of monasteries in the region, are considered sacred objects capable of bringing good fortune. Passing through a *kakaling* is believed to bless individuals with good luck in their current and future lives, and even animals are said to be reborn as humans in their next life (Dash, 2006, p.136). Due to this association with good fortune, *kakalings* are not exclusive to monasteries. Western Arunachal Pradesh features numerous freestanding *kakalings*, often placed at the main entry points to villages or towns to ward off evil spirits and prevent epidemics (Figure 3). Their construction is also thought to bring peace, prosperity, better harvests, and disease eradication to the village residents. Some monasteries have multiple entrance gates, primarily to accommodate newly built motorable roads.

**Figure 3: *Kakaling* at the entry of Kalaktang town, National Highway 13, Arunachal Pradesh.**



These entrance gates typically feature a post and lintel structure, consisting of two vertical pillars supporting a horizontal lintel. They are adorned with embossed geometrical patterns, floral motifs, and mythical animals painted in vibrant colors like red, blue, green, and yellow. Some *kakalings* have prayer wheels attached to their sides and are topped with a roof. Most are inscribed with the Astha-Mangalas, the eight auspicious symbols of Vajrayana Buddhism, and the entire structure is usually crowned with a dharma chakra flanked by a pair of deer.

Interestingly, in Western Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhist architectures, and *kakalings* in particular, have gained significance beyond their religious function. Built as entrances to public and civic spaces, they have become an integral part of Western Arunachal Pradesh's visual cultural identity. For example, visitors entering Western Arunachal Pradesh from Assam are greeted by a large *kakaling* at the famous Sela Pass,

one of India's highest motorable roads. Additionally, the District Commissioner's office in Bomdila, West Khameng district, also features a kakaling as its entrance. The Jaswantgarh War Memorial in Nuranang district, developed by the Garhwal Rifles, has incorporated designs from popular Buddhist architecture in the region.

### **Chroten- Stupas**

In the monasteries of Western Arunachal Pradesh, stupas, locally known by the Tibetan term "*Chroten*" are prominent structures alongside prayer halls. These solid hemispherical domes have been fundamental to Buddhism since its inception and are among the oldest Buddhist artifacts discovered (Dutta, Sristidhar, et al., 2006, p.118). Initially, stupas were built to house the Buddha's relics after his passing, serving as an aniconic representation of the Buddha in early Buddhist art. Later, they became sacred sites, also enshrining relics of his disciples and revered monks. As Buddhism expanded, stupa construction evolved into an art form with diverse styles and designs. While often containing relics, stupas also symbolically represent the historical Buddha and his teachings, with numerous symbolic stupas within monastery premises contributing to a distinct Buddhist visual culture.

In Western Arunachal Pradesh, stupas are found both within monastery grounds and as standalone structures. Those inside monasteries typically hold relics of deceased revered monks who resided there, though larger stupas without relics may contain religious materials and scriptures. Standalone stupas are also prevalent in the region's Buddhist culture, dotting the landscape. These are often built by lay practitioners for community well-being, to appease perceived benevolent forces, or by families of the deceased as a religious practice to wish for a favourable rebirth. The former category usually contains sacred images and scriptures, while the latter holds either the mortal remains or personal belongings of the deceased. Although "*chroten*" is the general term for a stupa in the region, a stupa containing mortal remains is specifically called "*kudung*," and one with personal possessions is known as "*dungten*" (Dutta, Sristidhar, et al., 2006, p.118).

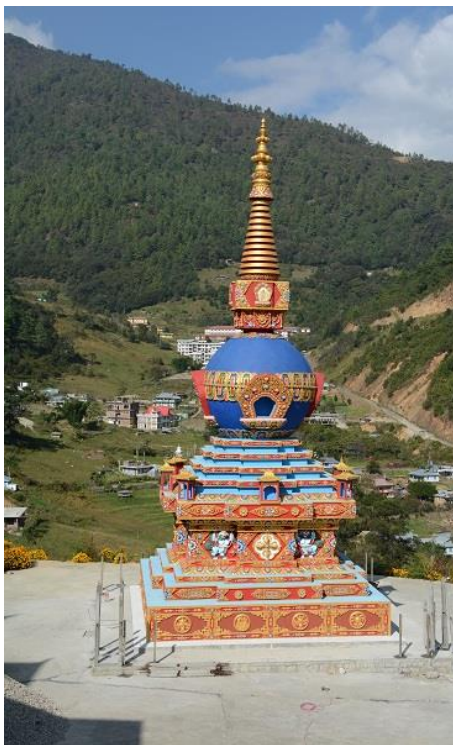
**Figure 4: Stupas, Ugyanling Gompa, Arunachal Pradesh.**



Architecturally, stupas in Western Arunachal Pradesh adhere to a Tibetan prototype (Figure 4), comprising three main parts: the Lion Throne (*seng khri*), the intermediate section, and the upper section (Dorjee, 1996, p.61-66). A notable example of this Tibetan style is found at Ugyanling Gompa, the birthplace of the sixth Dalai Lama, where eight stupas are housed in a confined room on the ground floor.

Recently constructed stupas differ from older ones by being significantly more decorated. While still following the Tibetan prototype for their basic structure, these newer stupas feature additional motifs on various parts, including the dome or "anda," which deviates from the traditional Tibetan design. For instance, the colossal stupa at the entrance of Thupsung Dhargye Ling (TDL) Monastery in Dirang is elaborately embellished from the Lion Throne to the umbrella's base (Figure 5), with the dome even adorned with jewels emerging from yaksha/Kiriti mukha's mouths. This practice of decorating the entire stupa, including the dome, is now common in the region.

**Figure 5: Colossal stupa, Thupsung Dhargye Ling (TDL) Monastery, Dirang, Arunachal Pradesh.**



### ***Mane/Mani- The prayer wheels***

Prayer wheels, which are vertical cylinders containing religious hymns, are essential to monasteries in Western Arunachal Pradesh (Figure 6). These monasteries are designed for a ritualistic circumambulation called Kora, performed clockwise by devotees, keeping the object of veneration to their right. This ritual can involve circumambulating the entire monastery, the prayer hall from the outside, the altar, a Buddha image, a stupa, or a prayer wheel. The most common practice is to walk around the outer boundaries of prayer halls, turning the prayer wheels attached to their outer walls, monastery boundary walls, and kakalings. Recently, freestanding prayer wheels have gained more popularity. Spinning these wheels is believed to offer the same benefits as reading the texts within them (Martin, 1987, p.18), and even wind

passing over them is thought to cleanse sins and obstacles to enlightenment. Consequently, numerous prayer wheels, similar to kakalings, are found outside monastery grounds in Western Arunachal Pradesh, situated in both busy urban areas and remote hilltops.

**Figure 6: Prayer wheel, GRL Monastery, Bomdila, West Kameng, Arunachal Pradesh.**



Additionally, in Western Arunachal Pradesh, the terms 'Mane' or 'Mani' refer to stone/wall shrines, which are essentially roofed walls. These shrines feature small niches holding multiple stone tablets inscribed with Buddhist hymns. They are constructed within monastery premises and as independent structures. Local beliefs suggest these shrines are built in places where there is a perceived danger from demons or unusual noises (Dash, 2006, p.136).

## Conclusion

Buddhism in Western Arunachal Pradesh presents a compelling tapestry of cultural adaptation and historical resilience. From its initial Tibetan Mahayana roots in the eighth century, the religion has not only thrived but has also uniquely integrated elements of Bhutanese Buddhist traditions and indigenous Bon practices. This synthesis is particularly evident in the Monpa and Shertukpen communities, whose distinct regional affiliations have nonetheless fostered a "merging" of traditions, even allowing co-existence of different sects within the same monastic settings.

The profound connection between the Monpa community and its monasteries, exemplified by the Tawang Monastery's central role, underscores the integral place of Buddhism in their daily lives, from calendar synchronization to communal upkeep. Similarly, the Shertukpen, while maintaining a more distinct separation between Buddhist and Bon rituals, demonstrate a deep reverence for both, with practices like Yonchhap Phyibah and the observance of *duchhin* days illustrating their syncretic faith.

The architectural landscape of Western Arunachal Pradesh further reinforces Buddhism's pervasive influence. Monasteries, with their robust prayer halls, entrance gates, and ubiquitous stupas and prayer wheels, are not merely religious centres but cultural landmarks. These structures, built to withstand the harsh Himalayan climate, serve both as spiritual havens and as visual identifiers of the region's rich Buddhist heritage. The evolution of stupa decoration, the dual function of *kakalings* as both sacred and

civic entrances, and the widespread placement of prayer wheels attest to a living, evolving faith that continues to shape the physical and spiritual contours of Western Arunachal Pradesh. The enduring presence and unique adaptations of Buddhism in this frontier region offer a vibrant testament to its capacity for cultural integration and spiritual continuity.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. Verbal consent has been taken from all the participants to include their names and other information.

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