



Exploring Tsuklakhang through the Lens of Visual Anthropology

GARIMA THAKURIA*, PRADIPTA ROY**, PARISHMITA KASHYAP**

Visual anthropology follows from the idea that culture is expressed through observable symbols incorporated into gestures, ceremonies, rituals, and objects found in both man-made and natural surroundings. It entails the addition of images through photographs, video, and film, in ethnographic investigations to improve the communication of anthropological observations and insights. Schwartz (1989) argues the use of photographs as both a methodological tool as well as a means of presenting research. In the context of visual anthropology, photographs, videos, drawings, audio-visual recordings etc. are used to represent as well as analyse the social reality.

Through this visual anthropological study, an attempt has been made to portray the journey of Tsuklakhang from being a royal chapel of the *Chogyal* to being a full-time monastery. As Chio (2021) proposes that both text and image are complimenting to each other rather than photographs supplementing the writings only, the present study tries to analyse Tsuklakhang through photographic representation in the larger Sikkimese society. Though some of the aspects of Tsuklakhang have changed after Sikkim's merger with India over a period of time, however, its royal legacy and heritage have been kept alive through various cultural practices by the people.

The Indian state of Sikkim is known for its scenic beauty and a significant number of monasteries scattered around its hills. Every year, these monasteries attract many tourists and followers of Buddhism. Tsuklakhang is one of such monasteries of Sikkim located at 1,437 meters above mean sea level. Though it is not one of the top tourist attractions, it is, however, one of the most important monasteries of Sikkim from a historical and religious point of view. It is the official royal state monastery of Sikkim.

* Garima Thakuria, Assistant Professor, Dept. of Anthropology, Sikkim University; E-mail: gthakuria@cus.ac.in,

** Pradipta Roy (PhD Research Scholar, Dept. of Anthropology, Sikkim University) Parishmita Kashyap (MPhil Research Scholar, Dept. of Anthropology, Sikkim University)

The term Tsuklakhang comes from two words - 'Tsuk' meaning main or premiere, and 'Lakhang' meaning prayer hall. It was built in the 1920s by the 11th *Chogyal* of Sikkim, Tashi Namgyal; and was designed by Taring Rinpoche. Painters from Shigatse and Gyantse of Tibet were invited to paint the walls of the building. The monastery follows the *Nyingma-pa* school or *Red Hat* school of Tantric Buddhism instituted by Guru *Padmasambhava*.

Prior to Sikkim's merger with India, Tsuklakhang functioned as the royal chapel/temple of the *Chogyals* and fulfilled its purpose as being the centre of religious activities for the royal family, the coronation ceremony as well as the initiation ceremonies of the officials. It was not a fully functioning monastery, which means, it neither had a system of education nor accommodation for lamas or monks. Usually, lamas were invited from the Pemayangtse monastery near Pelling to perform religious and ceremonial duties at Tsuklakhang. This interaction formed a close sisterly relationship between Tsuklakhang and the Pemayangtse monastery. However, as Sikkim joined India in 1975, the monarchy



Figure 1: *Gang-toh* – the only remaining original point from the mountain where the monastery is built

system was abolished, and with it, the royal status of the chapel was also lifted. Eventually, Wangchuk Tenzing Namgyal, son of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the last reigning *Chogyal* of Sikkim, established the Tsuklakhang Trust to look after the affairs of the chapel. These events helped shape the current full-time monastic structure of Tsuklakhang. It now houses full-time lamas and more than hundred young boys who are undergoing their educational training here. Today, the temple serves as the main Buddhist temple for the city of Gangtok, where visitors of all religious backgrounds gather for daily circumambulations.

The selection of a location to build a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery is an important step towards the establishment of the monastery. The place where a monastery stands is considered sacred ground and a site of a magical connection between the universe and the place itself. The place of Gangtok was only a small hamlet until the establishment of the present structure of the Enchey monastery in 1909; which turned the place into an important religious location. This significance probably played a key role in choosing Gangtok as a location for the establishment of Tsuklakhang. While the original highest point of the mountain has been kept, the remaining area was leveled off to build the monastery.

In 2011, Her Royal Highness Princess Hope Leezum, daughter of Palden Thondup Namgyal, the last reigning *Chogyal*, invited Dr. André Alexander of Tibet Heritage Fund, an international non-profit organization, to inspect the condition of Tsuklakhang's murals which became very dark and thus help in conservation. After the inspection, Tibet Heritage Fund and the Tsuklakhang Trust decided to work jointly to restore the murals to their original conditions.

In the present time, the place is easily accessible through local transportation such as taxis. Upon reaching the destination, visitors are welcomed through the main gate of the monastery. The gate is beautifully decorated with floral patterns of various hues such as red, white, green, etc.; and on top of it, the symbol of the eight-spoked *Wheel of Dharma* with two golden male and female deer on both of its sides can be seen. The *Wheel of Dharma* symbolizes the first turning of the dharma wheel by Buddha, and the two male and female deer symbolize two disciples listening to the teachings of Buddha.

The entry leads to a short slopy walkway which eventually leads to the main compound. Upon reaching the main compound of Tsuklakhang, people are welcomed by a huge Peepal tree. In Buddhism, peepal tree is considered sacred and holds great significance as it symbolises the Bodhi tree under which Lord Buddha attained enlightenment; therefore, peepal trees are found in almost every monastery. The tree may not hold much significance for non-Buddhist



Figure 2: The main gate of Tsuklakhang



Figure 3: The Peepal Tree

visitors or tourists, but for those who follow Buddhism and are devoted to the teachings of Lord Buddha, it is considered sacred, and has religious and spiritual connotations. Sometimes, the lamas staying in the monastery do yoga and meditation under the tree as well.

The compound also consists of many buildings; out of which only the main temple and the *Yabring* (conference hall) are the original buildings, and the rest of the buildings have been constructed later on gradually. The luscious greenery of the surrounding hills, the subtle breeze blowing all the time due to the higher altitude, the clean compound, gardens that are well maintained, everything together creates a sense of peacefulness, serenity, and calmness that ease the minds of the visitors.



Figure 4: The main temple

The main temple stands in the middle of the compound facing eastward. It is a three-storeyed square building with an axis-Mundi structure, which symbolizes the ordered world. In front of the temple, there is a flag surrounded by a circular path. This entire setting symbolizes the practice of circumambulation. The area is reserved only for annual festivals. The architectural structure of the building, the colours on the walls, and the way the windows and doors have

been decorated with various floral designs and vibrant colours; not only speak about the monastic architecture of Buddhism and its beliefs but also provide a glimpse into the legacy and heritage of Sikkimese culture.

In Tibetan Buddhism, usually five main colours, viz. blue, white, red, green, and yellow, referred to as *Pancha-varna* in Sanskrit, meaning five pure lights, are seen being used extensively. Each of these five colours has its own meaning – blue depicts purity and healing, white depicts learning and knowledge, red is related to life force and preservation, green signifies balance and harmony, and yellow is symbolic of rootedness and renunciation.

Most Tibetan Buddhist monasteries are coated with white colour only on their walls; but Sikkimese monasteries show the colour vibrancy, especially red colour. Though red colour has its own meaning in Tibetan Buddhism, however, in this context, it is believed that the use of red on the chapel walls is to honour the *Khangchendzonga* mountain deity of Sikkim. While the monastic structure itself speaks of the religious aspect of Buddhism, the colour vibrancy on the other hand, speaks of the Sikkimese heritage. It provides the visitors with a glimpse of how the amalgamation of religion and culture manifests itself through material aspects of a place and its people.



Figure 5: The *Yabring*/ the Conference Hall

Apart from the sight of the vibrancy of colour which appeals to the eyes of the viewers, the monastery is filled with a spiritual ambience which can be felt through the smell of incense and burning butter lamps, the sound of various musical instruments being played such as *Nga Chen* (drums), *Kang Ling* (a type of trumpet), *Silnyen* (a type of cymbal), etc.

In front of the main temple, there is another ceremonial building called the *Yabring*. It has a yellow-coloured roof with an open front and the other three sides are enclosed. During the monarchy days, it was used as a conference hall, or as a sitting space for officials during any festival or ceremony. At present, the building is used by lamas and masked dancers to perform during various ceremonies. Later on, two more *Yabring*s or conference halls were built in the compound.

At present, the monastery celebrates various Buddhist festivals such as the birthday of the Buddha, Guru *Padmasambhava's* birthday, Maha Parinirvana anniversary of various Gurus, *Lo-Sung* festival, *Kagyad*, etc. It also celebrates some of the traditional festivals of Sikkim such as *Pang Lab-Sol*, which is held in the month of September. *Pang Lab-Sol* is celebrated to pay tribute to Mount Kanchenjunga, and to honour the Treaty of Brotherhood between the Lepchas and the Bhutias signifying the unity of the Sikkimese people. A grand carnival is organized and elaborate rituals and dances are performed during this festival.



Figure 6: Building to light Butter lamps

A special dance namely *Pang-Toed Chaam* is performed to invoke the spirit of Mount Kanchenjunga. The lamas wear red-coloured masks and crowns, and ride on snow lions representing the guardian deity of Mount Kanchenjunga. In addition to these festivals, the birthday of *Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal* is also celebrated with great pomp. Moreover, a year long grand birth anniversary centennial celebration to celebrate the life and contributions of *Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal* has been underway in four phases since 22nd May, 2022 to 22nd May, 2023 with numerous literary and cultural events.

On the right side of the *Yabring*, a small glass-enclosed room was built in 2005. This room is used to light traditional butter lamps. During rituals and festivals, a thousand butter lamps are kept lit during the entire night.

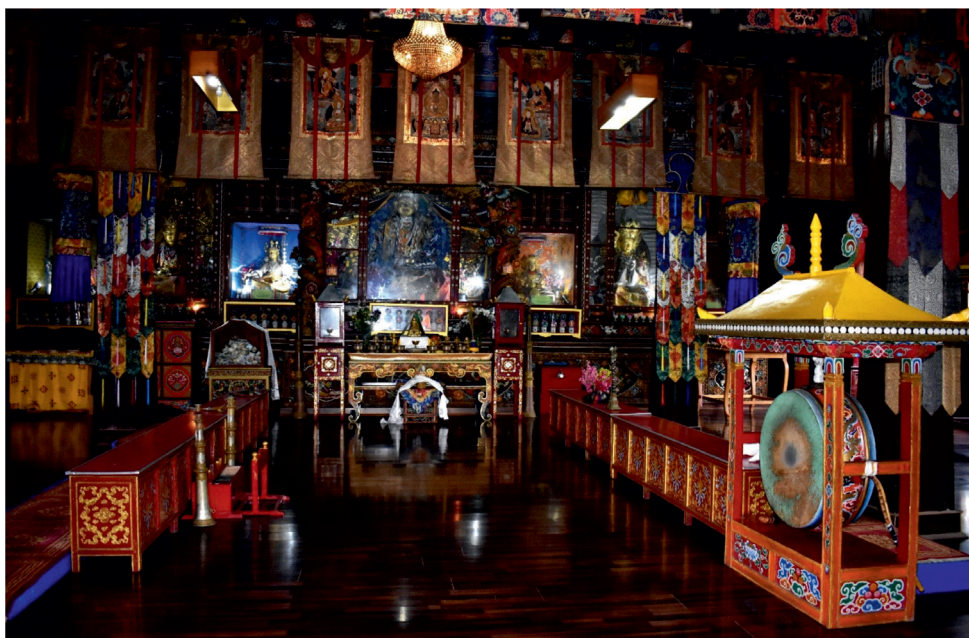


Figure 7: The first/ground floor or the Prayer Hall

The ground or the first floor is a common prayer hall where day-to-day prayers are offered. It has an entrance hallway that has three double doors leading to the main prayer hall. Nine snow lion heads, symbolizing strength and protection, decorate the top of the middle main door. The walls of the hall are filled with *thangkas* of wrathful deities who are believed to be the initial barrier against evil spirits and protect the lamas within. The prayer hall has seven main statues enclosed in glass chambers. The middle statue is of *Padmasambhava* or *Guru Rinpoche*. Next to him on the right side (of the

statue) is *Lha-Tsun-Namkha-jigmeth*, who was a treasure revealer or *Terton* (*The treasures are called Terma and these refer to the teachings of Buddha that were hidden by Guru Padmasambhava for the Terton or treasure revealers to reveal them at auspicious times/occasions*). On his right side is the *Amitabha Buddha* or the *Long-life Buddha*. Next to him is the statue of *Kathok Kuntu Zangpo*. The statue of *Chogyal Phuntshok Namgyal*, the first *Chogyal* of Sikkim is on the left side of *Guru Padmasambhava*. Next to it is the statue of *Tara Devi*, and at the end is the statue of *Nga-Dhak Sem pa Chenpo*. The three lamas namely, *Lha-Tsun Namkha jigmeth*, *Kathok Kuntu Zangpo*, and *Nga-Dhak Sem pa Chenpo*, came from Tibet to Sikkim from the three directions - north, south, and west, and gathered at a place called *Norbhgang* and therein appointed *Phuntshok Namgyal* as the first *Chogyal* of Sikkim. The place *Norbhgang* is presently known as *Yoksam*, which in Lepcha language translates to *Yok* meaning Lama and *Sam* meaning three.



Figure 8: The second floor of the main temple

The second floor houses the two scriptures of *Kangyur/Kanjur* (Translation of the word) and *Tengyur/Tanjur* (Translation of treaties). This floor is mainly used for reading the scriptures and for special occasions like festivals or religious ceremonies. It consists of three statues - the middle statue is of Lord Buddha. Along with him, two small statues belonging to two vikshus, namely

Sariputra vikshu and *Maudgalyayana* vikshu are also kept in the same enclosed glass chamber. To the right of Lord Buddha is the statue of *Vajra Sattva* or *Dorjee Senpa* who is known as the 'great purifier'. To the left of Lord Buddha is the statue of *Guru Padmasambhava*. This floor also includes a balcony-like space from where the royal family used to watch festivals and performances taking place in the front yard.



Figure 9: *Torma*/ Butter sculpture

The first/ground floor also has a *torma* or a butter sculpture dedicated to *Lha-Tsun Namkha jigmeth*. The *tormas* vary in size, shape, and colour depending on to whom they are being dedicated. However, every *torma* has three roots or *Tsa Tsum*— the *lama*/Guru, *Yidam*/deity, and *Khandro*/consort. This particular *Torma* dedicated to *Lha-Tsun Namkha jigmeth* consists of *Guru Rinpoche* in the middle, *Amitabha Buddha* as the deity on the right, and *Dorjee Phakmo Vajrayogini* as the consort. It also consists of six Dharma protectors, who protect the enlightened beings and their dharma of teachings.

Torma use is typical of Lamaistic Buddhist culture, which is prevalent in Sikkim. It is an object of offering made to the deities and demons. It is sculpted with great skill and expertise by the artisan lamas. *Torma* offerings are as important as butter lamps, incense, water, and food (*tshok*) offerings during religious ceremonies. The shape of the *torma* depends upon the requirements

of a particular ritual. They sometimes resemble a miniature *Chorten* (stupa), sometimes a deity, or a decorated candle or cake. The size, too, varies from a few centimeters to a meter according to the specificities of the rituals. As for colour, some common colours are usually used on the body of a *torma*, such as red, white, blue, yellow, etc.



Figure 10: The Palanquin

The Palanquin is kept in the first floor of the main temple. It has a small statue of Lord Buddha in the middle. There is also a small statue of the *Wheel of Dharma* with two deer on both of its sides. During festivities like *Saga Dawa*, the scriptures of *Kangyur* and *Tangyur* are kept on this palanquin and taken out as part of a colorful procession around the locality, where monks play various musical instruments, and the devotees also participate. This festival celebrates the birth and enlightenment of Gautam Buddha.



Figure 11: Offerings

During religious ceremonies and festivals, offerings are dedicated to Lord Buddha. The offering table may include any kind of scented water, fruits, sweets, etc. One of the important components of this offering table is the *Eight Auspicious Things*. These include the treasure vase, golden fish, conch shell, victory banner, precious parasol, endless knot, lotus flower, and dharma wheel. Our informant, one of the lamas of the monastery, explained to us that these eight Buddhist fortunes represent the gifts of the Gods to *Shakyamuni Buddha* right after he attained enlightenment.

Conch Shell

It symbolizes the propagation of Buddhism. The sound of the conch shell awakens beings from their deep state of ignorance and inspires them to pursue their own goals as well as of others.

Precious Parasol

The precious parasol symbolizes luxury or monarchy because one has to be wealthy to own it and to have someone else carry it. It represents the good deeds of protecting beings from the damages of diseases, destructive energies, impediments, etc.

Lotus Flower

It symbolizes the total purification of sins of the body, speech, and mind as well as the full blossoming of good acts in blissful emancipation.

Victory Banner

The victory banner is a representation of how the Buddha's teachings have triumphed over evils like death, ignorance, strife, and more. It also symbolizes Buddhist doctrine's victory over all negative and evil forces.

Golden Fish

The *samsara* cycle and the domain of suffering are both represented by the sea in Buddhism. The golden fish is symbolic of bravery and pleasure since it freely and irrationally swims in the oceans without drowning, much as fish goes through the waves without fear. Due to their limitless freedom in the sea, fish is seen as a symbol of happiness.

Dharma Wheel

It is also known as the Golden Wheel and symbolizes the auspiciousness of the valuable wheel of Buddha's doctrine whirling in all places and at all times, in both teachings and realizations, allowing beings to enjoy the delight of good actions and liberation. According to Tibetan tradition, a monastery that houses both the *Kangyur* (direct teachings of the Buddha) and *Tengyur* (commentaries) text collections should have this deer sign on both sides of the Dharma wheel on the roof.

Endless Knot

The Auspicious or Endless Knot is a geometric figure that represents reality's interconnectivity, and how everything exists solely as a result of karma and its effects. It also represents Buddha's infinite wisdom, and the synthesis of compassion and wisdom because it has neither a beginning nor an end.

Treasure Vase

It stands for an endless stream of success, wealth, and long life, as well as all the benefits of this world and freedom. Also, known as the 'vase of unlimited resources', it is a symbol of the limitless abundance inherent in Buddhist teachings. At monasteries and dharma centers, it is also customary to bury or keep treasure jars at particular locations to promote richness and harmony.



Figure 12: School and Dormitories

Tsuklakhang was initially built as a royal chapel for the *Chogyals* and therefore was only accessible to the royal family and a select few. After Sikkim became a part of India, the royal chapel was converted to a fully functioning monastery. This conversion brought some basic changes. Mainly it turned from being an exclusive chapel for the royals and elites to a monastery for the common people. Moreover, during the monarchy, lamas usually used to come from the Pemayangtse monastery near Pelling to Tsuklakhang to perform religious and ceremonial activities. But now lamas are staying at the dormitories in the compound, which has impacted the close and frequent exchanges with the Pemayangtse monastery. As a fully functioning monastery, Tsuklakhang hosts many important ceremonies and festivals each year and has a school as well as dormitories for the lamas and the students.

In this picture, young students studying at the Tsuklakhang monastery can be seen playing football. It shows how the significance of this place has changed from being a royal exclusive chapel to an all-inclusive full-time monastery; where children live, study, play, and learn the ways of the lamas and the world.

Buddhism has always been an important part of Sikkim, whether from a historical or religious, or cultural aspect; and now even from a tourism point of view. While studying a monastery, especially its architectural and material cultural aspects, a researcher has to consider two things – first, the religious angle of the structure and its elements; and secondly, the cultural influence of the place it is located in. Buddhism can be found in many countries such as India, Tibet, China, Nepal, Bhutan, Korea, Japan, Thailand, Sri Lanka, etc.



Figure 13: Young student lamas playing football

Everywhere it has developed some unique traits through its interaction with the local culture. This can also be seen in the case of Sikkim as well. Here, the interaction of Tibetan Buddhism with Sikkimese culture has resulted in Sikkimese Tibetan Buddhism which can be found in monasteries across Sikkim. Thus, the journey of Tsuklakhang as a royal chapel of the *Chogyal* dynasty of Sikkim to an important state monastery of Sikkim in the Republic of India has witnessed many historical events and has undergone changes with time as well.

Acknowledgement

The authors are grateful to the in-charge and the monks of Tsuklakhang monastery for providing necessary information, their support, and cooperation.

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TO CITE THIS ARTICLE

G, thakuria, P, Roy, & P, Kashyap. (2022). "Exploring Tsuklakhang through the Lens of Visual Anthropology" in *Indian Journal of Anthropological Research*. Special Edition on Visual Anthropology. Guest Editor: Alison Kahn 1(2), pp. 67-82, ISSN : 2583-2417.