



# THE PEMAYANGTSE AND TAWANG MONASTERIES IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA: A COMPARATIVE STUDY

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**Abstract:** *The monastery of Pemayangtse and the monastery of Tawang are two prominent Buddhist monasteries situated in the Eastern Himalayan region of India. The Pemayangtse monastery, located in the state of Sikkim belongs to the Nyingma tradition and was established by Master Lhatsun Namkha Jigme in 1642 CE. It was later re-established in 1705 CE during the reign of Chakdor Namgyal, the third king of Sikkim. From the time of its foundation, it remained under the control of the kings of Sikkim, being guided by their policies of the elite class. The Tawang Monastery of Arunachal Pradesh is influenced by the Gelugpa sect and was founded by Marak Lama Lodre Gyatso around 1680–1681 CE. In contrast to Pemayangtse, the Tawang Monastery has been thriving and is being nourished by the services and deeds of the common people belonging to the tribes such as Monpa and the Sherdukpen. While both are Buddhist institutions, they appear to differ in their role and functions. In this paper, an attempt has been made to identify the major similarities and differences between these monasteries which are influenced by different Buddhist traditions of Tibet by analysing their politico-social conditions. The paper is based upon field study supplemented by secondary sources.*

**Keywords:** *Tawang, Pemayangtse, Tribe, Lhopo, Monpa, Sherdukpen, Gelugpa, Nyingma*

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## **Introduction**

Buddhist monasteries functioning in the Eastern Himalayas, particularly in Sikkim and Western Arunachal Pradesh, represent the living tradition

and quite popular in these areas. As these monasteries play a pivotal role in the cultural and economic life of the society at large, it is important to understand their nature, which appears similar

in the eyes of the common people. This research paper focuses upon the nature of these pre-colonial religious institutions that not only shaped social behaviour, including economic decisions like production, exchange and distribution, but also took the initiative to formulate social rules and formal norms in a contemporary system. Both the Pemayangtse monastery of Sikkim which is affiliated with the Nyingma School, and the Tawang monastery of Arunachal Pradesh affiliated to the Gelugpa School not only exercised political authority, but are also interconnected with the philosophical traditions of Tibet which impacted the different parts of Eastern Himalayas (Thakur: 2022: 133-63). There are very few relevant research works and studies on Pemayangtse and Tawang monasteries. Only a few papers or manuscripts published by some individuals or some institutions help in understanding the different aspects of Buddhist monasteries of Sikkim and Tawang. However, Colonial historiography on the Eastern Himalayas is available in the form of Gazetteers, and British trade and military mission reports, to Sikkim, Tibet and Bhutan. Apart from these, there are canonical and secular literature preserved at both monasteries which have been utilised as primary sources. Through the qualitative and comparative analysis, this paper examines both the monasteries with relation to their origin and functioning at all levels. While attempting a comparative study of these monasteries, the method of dual attestation has been adopted in this paper in which literary sources have been correlated with archaeological sources. The trans-Himalayan socio-cultural and economic relations are also discussed while examining the nature of the Pemayangtse and Tawang monasteries, their closeness to a state authority.

In the region of the Eastern Himalayas, the present Indian states of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh are two Indian states that have had contacts with Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal and Myanmar in early times, i.e. prior to the advent of Colonialism in the Indian sub-continent. Buddhism developed

a legacy of material and spiritual cultures of the Himalayan people, especially in Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh. Due to Indo-Tibetan cross border trade, economic development of Sikkim and Arunachal Pradesh provided the solid ground for the emergence of the Buddhist monasteries of different sects in these regions. One of the striking characteristics of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition that needs to be mentioned here is the assimilation of Buddhism by the masses and society to a great level. This is visible not only at one end of the Eastern Himalayas, but also in Tibeto-Mongol society at the other end. This culture gives an important place to the common people and their traditional clan deities. Tsong Khapa, the founder of Gelugpa, like his forefathers, distanced himself from politics. He was also against sexual practices in monasticism, a common practice in other traditions.

With the passage of time, the Gelugpa sect became one of the most prominent of the Tibetan tradition. It attracted the common man mostly because of its indifference to political participation (Powers: 2007: 163-81). In the late sixteen and seventeenth century, with the support of various Mongol chieftains and the Manchu dynasty, the Gelugpa sect gained a quasi-monopoly over the Tibeto-Mongol monasteries. Shakyapa, Karmapa/Kagyü and Nyingma seemed to have almost disappeared before the popularity of the Gelugpa. The Red Hat orders of Tibetan Buddhism (i.e. the Shakyapa, Karmapa/Kagyü and Nyingma) attempted to make inroads among the Mongols as early as the thirteenth century, yet very few of their monasteries were established. During the Yuan dynasty, their isolation in the political sphere or their inability to reach the conscience of the people was the main reason for their failure. However, many Nyingma lamas received favours from the Yuan emperors. The Red Hat monks were in competition with their rival Gelugpa in order to convert and infiltrate Genghis Khan's descendants into Mongolia. However, the various tribes of Mongolia eventually gave prominence to the Gelugpa sect which was a part of their

socio-religious life. The ambition of the Gelugpa missionaries in Mongolia to be closer to the daily life of the people and also the recognition of the Mongolian prince, Yonten Gyatso or Yon-tan-rgya-mtsho (1589–1617 CE) as a fourth Dalai Lama resulted in the young faith being completely in favour of Gelugpa. After this, the construction of Gelugpa monasteries in Mongolia began rapidly. Gelugpa saints replaced the former Shamanist practices with Buddhism. Consequently, ordinary Mongols voluntarily turned to Buddhism over the next few decades. The Gelugpa order became more popular among the Mongol tribes as it was supported by the Manchu dynasty, however the Gelugpa or Yellow Hat tradition gained an effective foothold in Mongolian society and acquired full religious power. The year 1635 CE is marked by various scholars as a turning point in the history of Southern Mongolian Buddhism. By this time the Gelugpa sect had established its hegemony almost everywhere, except for a limited range of the Red Hat traditions. After 1635 CE, the Red Hat tradition from southern Mongolia almost disappeared. In central Tibet also, the Gelugpas progressively superseded the other sects at the political level, after gaining Qoshud's support. However, the Nyingma was never completely wiped out as there is evidence of the presence of Nyingma monks in Mongolia during the nineteenth century. Unlike others, the Nyingma order of monks was loosely organised. Many scholars claim that the Red Hats were characterised as being more “meditating in solitude”, and they became popular as monks, maintaining less closeness among common Mongols, in contrast to the Yellow Hat tradition (Charleux: 2002: 168-32). The Nyingma, known for its transmission of Tantric teachings and lineages, evolved into an institutional form as a distinct tradition from the eleventh century onwards. In the Tibetan cultural sphere, the military and political establishment of Buddhist ruling families and the formation of governments, especially the charismatic Tantric Buddhist masters and their positions, prestige, etc., played an important role in these events.

Even after the emergence of new sects in Tibet, the influence of old sects such as the Nyingma remained on the elite and ruling class (Singh: 2001: 19-30). During the political upheaval of the seventeenth century, the Nyingma sect gained a strong patronage in the form of the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngagwang Lobzang Gyatso or Ngag Dbang Blo Bzang Rgya Mtsho (1617–1682 CE). Under his patronage, this period saw a considerable increase in the establishment of large and new Nyingma monasteries throughout central and eastern Tibet.

The Nyingma school has had a deep influence on Pemayangtse monastery and it is closely related to the Namgyal royal family of Sikkim, whose dynasty lasted from 1642 CE until its end in 1973 (Census: 2011: 8-10). The Pemayangtse monastery was started by the master Lhastsun Namkha Jigme in 1645 CE as a small shrine called *Tsangkhang*. However, it was re-established in 1705 CE under the third king of Sikkim Chagdor Namgyal (1686-1717 CE). First Chogyal (King) Phuntsog Namgyal (1742-70 CE) was enthroned with the help of Nyingma saints. With the support and patronage of a particular authority, the Nyingma sect tried to dominant the other sects through these institutions in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries. As Melanie Vandenhelsken (2003: 55-73) has mentioned in her article, the functional principles of the Pemayangtse monastery were setup at the founding time of the Namgyal Monarchy in Sikkim. The lamas of the Pemayangtse monastery were not only the spiritual guides of the Chogyal, they were also the only lamas responsible to hold the rituals for the king and his family. Moreover, only the Pemayangtse lamas were empowered to perform the major public annual ceremonies at the royal chapel.

Only the twelve noble Lhopo clans who were the direct descendants of *Khye Bumsa* (the mythical first inhabitant of Sikkim) were eligible to get admission into this Buddhist institution. Therefore, it can be said that the Pemayangtse monastery was founded and funded by the Lhopo

aristocrats for their own interest. In the society of Sikkim, we find dominance of two major classes - Lhopo and Lepcha. The hegemony of these two classes is seen in different aspects, from control over land to the administrative level. Despite this, the main reason why the Lepcha class did not get selected in an institution like Pemayangtse monastery was that they were not considered equal to the highly respected aristocracy such as the Lhopo, who considered themselves superior among all classes and the Emperor himself considered it fit to share power with their descendants. As the Lhopo supremacy continued since the founding of the Pemayangtse monastery and they had imbibed the Buddhist culture, the Chogyal was also devoted to Buddhism in all its socio-political ramifications. Therefore, state authority and the Lhopo aristocracy always retained the monopoly of their high clan. The Lepchas, who later adopted Buddhism, in spite of their superiority in pastoralism and agriculture, were always relegated to a lower social status than the Lhopo. Secondly, the reason for the decrease in the incidence of political intrigue in Sikkim is that the position of the Chogyal was only of symbolic importance. There was no power struggle among the many sons of the Chogyal. Thus it was totally different from the court conspiracies of other parts of India. It appears that real power lies in the huge faction of the Sikkimese elite standing behind the Chogyal. The Chogyal was not the chief architect of the section of the lower classes in Sikkim. The Pemayangtse lamas, who were involved in the work of tax collection from the *raiyat*, was also ordered not to harass the *raiyat* in any way and they were warned that those who worked against this order would be punished severely (Tran: 2012). However, we do find instances where the religious monopoly of Buddhism and the Pemayangtse monastery were threatened or a competing leader in Sikkim opposed the Chogyal. These were forthwith attempted suppressed by the lamas of the Pemayangtse monastery. According to Limboochronicle, Teyongshi Sirijunga, a learned Limboo man who revived Kirat literature

and taught the Kirat people in different parts of Sikkim, was put under arrest, bounded to a tree and shot dead by the lamas of Pemayangtse. The assassination of the Limboo leader Sirijunga, who had challenged the supremacy of the state and the religious monopoly of Pemayangtse, sparked outrage in public, resulting in the then Bhutia ruler of Sikkim fleeing to Tibet.

The royal monastery of Pemayangtse not only provided a moral and religious justification for the state's social sovereignty, but also displayed a military like aggression in the administration of Sikkim to safeguard the interests of the Chogyal. The assassination of an official of Nepali origin by Pemayangtse lamas in 1880 CE as reported by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma can be regarded as an action of the national army as the Pemayangtse lamas functioned as the king's (Chogyal's) army (Tran: 2012).

The formation of the social structure of Sikkim is reminiscent of the early medieval Indian society. Just like the Brahmana – Shudra relations of north and south India, where religious institutions like Brahmana's temple advocated and protected the upper-class rights, we find similar circumstances in the case of the Pemayangtse monastery and the society of Sikkim. Just as the Brahmanical hegemony over the lower classes in India weakened after the arrival of Turkish invaders, the entry of the Nepalese clan in Sikkim challenged the monopoly of the nobility such as the Lhopo. The Lepcha and Limboos were also suppressed.

But in the case of Arunachal Pradesh, the social structure was different from Sikkim and for this reason the expectation, affection, and attachment of local sympathisers with the Tawang monastery were varied in nature. And this may have been the reason why the Nyingma school famous for its Tantric philosophy and royal patronage in Tibet, fought for its existence from the very beginning in western Arunachal Pradesh or the Monpa region. Through materialistic structures in the form of monasteries, the Nyingma sect tried its best to make inroads into

western Arunachal Pradesh from the eleven and twelfth century onwards. In this effort, there were several attacks on the Gelugpa sect from the Bhutanese side after the sixteen and seventeenth century, which took the form of sectarian wars. Consequently, in western Arunachal Pradesh, we also find mention of warrior-lamas. This religious and sectarian division further took the form of border clashes and territorial disputes between Bhutan and Tawang (Nanda: 1982: 68-76).

The Tawang terminology is technically a combination of two words- 'Ta' and 'Wang' where *Ta* denotes the Horse and *Wang* is for Chosen or blessing. So Tawang means "Chosen by horse or the place chosen and blessed by the horse." According to a local tradition, Mera Lama Lodre Gyatso' horse had chosen the site of the Tawang Monastery. After that Tawang city developed around the monastery. Before the establishment of Tawang Monastery in the seventeenth century, the history of Arunachal Pradesh is the history of ethnic groups (Laskar: 2001). However, it is not a history of isolation. Western Arunachal Pradesh, the habitat of the Monpas (Nath 2005), Sherdukpens (Sharma 1961), Akas and Nishis had trade and cultural relations with Tibet, Burma, Bhutan and Assam. Due to the respectability towards the Mera Lama and Tawang Monastery which is influenced by the Gelugpa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, tribes such as Monpa and Sherdukpens adopted Buddhism which ultimately became dominant in that region (Verma: 2017: 1-12). The Tawang Monastery locally known as Tawang Galden Namgyal Lhatse meaning Celestial Paradise, is strategically located at about 10,000 feet above the mean sea level, where the trade routes from Tibet, Bhutan and East Kameng meet. It is the second largest in Asia and largest of its kind in India. It is estimated that the monastery possesses more than five thousand rare Buddhist manuscripts (Motebennur: 2009: 120-7). The assemblage of different monasteries including Tawang were the main centres to teach skills and earning methods to the people in the pre-colonial period. The predominant Monpa tribe have been

the custodian of Tawang Monastery (Thakur 2014). The Monastery was authorised to collect taxes from Monyul areas (Tawang and its adjacent district, West Kameng) which were divided into administrative centres or *dzongs* (meaning fort or district). *Dzongs* were used for political and administrative purposes in the Himalayan states but in the post-colonial period only religious activities were carried out (Habung: 2016: 53-64). As Tawang Monastery was the spiritual and administrative centre in Monyul areas, it used to depute an officer who was a senior monk called *dzongpon* to the *dzongs* to oversee the collection of agricultural levies, and to settle local disputes in pre-colonial time. The *Shyo Basti* (meaning lower part or place below), a village just below the Tawang Monastery, was established during the construction of the Tawang Monastery to supply the daily needs of the Monastery. The monastery in turn, looked after the needs and problems of the people of the settlement. In the pre-colonial period, there was an impression of a patron-client relationship between the surrounding villages and the Tawang Monastery which is reminiscent of the Nalanda Monastery (Sharma 2013) of Bihar. The Tawang Monastery also has some subsidiary monasteries and nunneries in the Tawang region. Similar to the practice of the Pemayangtse monastery, it was compulsory for each family in the surrounding villages of Tawang, which had three sons or more, to send their second or middle son (*bu sum barma* or *tib bugsum barpa*) to become a monk. In February 1951, a paramilitary expedition to Tawang led by Major Bob Khating of the Indian Frontier Administration Services puts an end to the Tibetan tax collection and established the first Indian administrative post in the region. On the basis of fieldwork, Swargajyoti Gohain claims that elderly Monpa villagers and locals rejoiced when the Indian Army ended Tibetan jurisdiction (Gohain: 2017: 87-94). As the Tibetan tax authorities were infamous for their cruelty, it is a certain fact that the Tawang Monastery faced financial difficulties during colonial times. It is worth noting that, both the

Pemayangtse and Tawang monasteries, despite being under the umbrella of Tibetan Buddhism, had different characteristics mainly due to different political situations. The Pemayangtse was dominated by the ruling family of Sikkim, while due to the geographical distance between Tawang and Lhasa the monastery was not very tightly controlled by Tibet, but was freely active in social and religious works. Buddhism assumed a distinct form in Monyul (the lowlands) which was also different from the Buddhism of Tibet. A major reason behind this was that the majority Monpa (lowlanders) community of Tawang were essentially organised as democratic, self-governing communities and led by *Tsorgens* who differed from elected or semi-hereditary chieftains (Nanda: 2020: 29-40).

When Bhutanese *Drukpas* became more aggressive against the Tawang Monastery and the Gelugpa during sectarian struggle in the sixteen and seventeenth century, Mongol and Tibetan troops sided with the Tawang Monastery which sought to pacify those raiders (Namgyal: 2020: 59-70). The steps taken to help the Monyul and Tawang Monastery did not materialise. Nevertheless, the secular image created by the Gelugpa school was maintained from the Tibeto-Mongol border to the Indo-Tibetan areas of eastern Himalayas through the organisations like the Tawang Monastery. An important reason for the large-scale assimilation of Buddhism by local communities in the Monyul region was the liberal, democratic and secular aspect of the Gelugpa institutions through which primitive beliefs were absorbed into Buddhism. It is also worth noting that Buddhist monks became more skilled in non-Buddhist practices, such as the worship of local spirits, receiving oracles, and fortune-telling, than did Bon believers (Bon was the traditional religion of the Monpas). In comparison to the Pemayangtse, the monastery at Tawang was not attached to any high clan, but was accountable to all the tribes that were under its religious and administrative territory. Part-time monks were played important roles to connect the common person of society to the

monastery (Mizuno and Tenpa: 2015: 57-110). It was because of the high attraction of the tribes towards Buddhism and the Monastery and in turn the affection of the monastery for the area, that the designation of the sixth Dalai Lama was adorned by a Monpa of the region. It is believed that the present Dalai Lama is an incarnation of the sixth Dalai Lama Tsangyang Gyatso (1683-1706 CE). Apart from agricultural and pastoral occupation, tribes like Monpa and Sherdukpens were actively engaged in trading between the foothills of the Himalayas and internal parts of Tibet and Central Asia via Tawang. The Tawang monastery was not only a protector of commercial activities but actively participated in trade dealings by giving equal rights to all merchant tribes (Dutta and Jha: 2002: 61-71). Almost all the tribal communities were going through a period of the complex economic transition where physical strength and labour were necessary to conquer each other. Women in tribal society were compelled to seek the protection of men. We do not know of any major restrictions imposed by Buddhism and Buddhist monasteries regarding tribal women in western Arunachal Pradesh, but it can be said that these institutions expected women to discharge their responsibilities within the limits of the rules made by them (Thakur: 2003).

## Conclusion

Tibetan Buddhism or Lamaism has been famous for the monastic culture in the Himalayas. Due to cross-border connectivity and people to people contacts and cultural assimilation, Buddhism has developed a legacy of material and spiritual cultures of the Himalayan people. After the emergence of Buddhism from Tibet, its different schools developed where their character was dependent on the diverse socio-political formations of the Himalayas. According to their distinct character, schools of Tibetan Buddhism, particularly Nyingma and Gelugpa took separate paths from the Tibeto-Mongol border to the Indo-Tibetan extent in the Eastern Himalayas. On one side, the Nyingma were close to royal

patronage and Tantric practices in Tibet, while the Gelugpa was opposing the sexual practices in Tantrism and attempted to distance themselves from affairs. In reality, the Gelugpa were less connected to the ruling classes in comparison to the Nyingma and due to this they benefited from this secular and democratic image in society. Secularisation in Tibetan Buddhism began from the seventh century onwards with the complex relationship between religion and politics, after that attempts were made to institutionalise it (Schwerk: 2019: 1-16). Through the universal representation and mass acceptance of Gelugpa philosophy in contemporary society of 16th-17th century, this school gained a quasi-monopoly over the Tibeto-Mongol monasteries. At the same time, the Nyingma School lagged behind. The arrival of the Nyingma in the Sikkim area became possible with the blessings of the ruling class of Tibet and Sikkim. Political patronage has been the backbone of Nyingma from the very beginning in Sikkim and Eastern Himalayas. While the advent of Gelugpa in the Monyul area started with social work where the first Gelugpa Saint of this area, Thangston Gyalpo (1382-1462 CE), built many iron-chain suspension bridges for the welfare of society (Sarkar 1981). Later monks of the Gelugpa school always tried to maintain this secular image in society which they got from pioneer saints and were validated by local inhabitants. In the case of the origin of Pemayangtse and Tawang Monasteries, we find the major participation of a ruling class of Sikkim in the establishment of Pemayangtse while another side, trade, tradesmen and commercial activities played a greater role in the development of the Tawang monastery.

We can thus conclude from the foregoing discussion that while the Pemayangtse monastery belongs to Nyingma sect the Tawang monastery belongs to the Gelugpa sect. Both schools have been based on different translations of religious scripts and different ideologies. Their separate philosophies guide their monastic rules regulations and ritual activities.

While the Pemayangtse monastery was an elite monastery founded and funded by a noble class, such as Lhopo for their own interest and benefits the Tawang monastery was not attached to any such high clan, but was accountable to all the tribes that were under its authority. The Pemayangtse monastery was closer to state authority and a partner in administrative and military work with the ruling class. It had political interests and participated directly in state sponsored works. However, the Tawang monastery had royal patronage, but its role in state politics was limited and their inclination was much more towards social and economic welfare of the local tribes like the Monpa.

Both monasteries have different socio-political backgrounds. Pemayangtse has been more effective in society through their ritual ceremonies and with the help of the aristocratic classes of Sikkim. The Lhopo and the Royal family of Sikkim were directly connected with Pemayangtse while the Lepchas were effective in administrative works. These noble classes have been propagators of Pemayangtse philosophy in society. But the Tawang monastery has been effective within some Buddhist tribes in the limited areas of western Arunachal Pradesh without any nexus, playing a passive role. The reason behind it is that the geographical distance between Tawang and Lhasa is reflected in the feeble political orders and restrictions that governed the monastery.

As the Pemayangtse monastery served as an exponent for the ruling class, the women's empowerment par with men in pre-colonial Sikkimese society was not facilitated by a monastery. Gender discrimination was linked to social class distinction, which was also supported by monasteries like Pemayangtse. But the social condition of Western Arunachal Pradesh was different from Sikkim where tribal conflict was in extremity. The tribal communities were going through a period of a complex economy where physical strength and labour were necessary to conquer each other. This factor was going opposite to women in contemporary tribal conflict society.

Women were compelled to seek the protection of men. However, in the absence of the knowledge of any restriction imposed by Buddhist monasteries on tribal women, it can be assessed that Buddhist institutions expected women to discharge their responsibility within the limits of the rules made by them. After an absolute assessment, it can be well said that notwithstanding the complex social structure, no major restrictions found against gender equality are reported by Buddhist institutions such as the Tawang Monastery, while despite the more social progress in comparison to western Arunachal Pradesh, a monastery like Pemayangtse of Sikkim remained insensitive to women's rights keeping in mind the needs of the upper class.

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