

# Early Nyingmapa Monasteries of Tawang

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## **Introduction**

Situated on the Eastern Himalayas, the Northeastern most state of India, Arunachal Pradesh, is the home of more than a hundred tribes and sub-tribes, professing various cult and living harmoniously since early period making the settlement pattern a cultural mosaic. Here one can notice, belief in simple nature worship. Animistic cult as well the efflorescence of Hinayana and Vajrayana form of Buddhism in various pockets. As many as a dozen of tribes follow Buddhism. While the Khamtis, Singphos, Tikhakh sub-tribe of the Tangsas, have their faith in Hinayana Buddhism, the tribes like the Monpas, the Sherdukpens, the Nahs, the Membas, the Khambas profess Vajrayana form a Buddhism, which can be seen in the western and extreme northern portion of the State, bordering Bhutan as well as Tibet. As the oral tradition goes, it was no other than the Great Buddhist teacher, Padmasambhava, locally known as Lupon Rimpoche, who planted Vajrayana Buddhism in Monpa-Sherdukpen area. The growth and popularity of Buddhism, in this part of the country can be gleaned from decorated Buddhist monuments – both monasteries and stupa, with exquisite sculptures and mural paintings, depicting Buddhist gods, and goddesses, with their iconographic peculiarities and elaborate rituals.

## **Rise of Buddhist Schools in Tibet**

The introduction of Buddhism in Tibet in the eight century A.D. by Padmasambhava was a turning point in the history of Buddhism of Tibet. Credit goes to the Tibetan scholar, Rinchen Sangpo (AD 990-1055) for establishing as many as 108 temples and monasteries in the length and width of Tibet, which paved the way for the overall development of Buddhism and religio-scholastic resurgence in the Tibetan world. It was in one of such monasteries, that the great Buddhist scholar of India, Atisha Sojourned on his arrival in AD 1042 and tried to reform the existing Buddhism with various reformatory measure, thereby giving birth to a semi reformed sect, the Kahdampa. This action set in motion a process of

formation of several semi-reformed and reformed schools and sub-schools out of the existing ones, in the Tibetan Buddhism world.<sup>1</sup> In this aspect, mention can be made of the Kahdampa, Kargyupa, Karampa, Northern Dugpa, Southern Dugpa, Drigungpa, Talungpa, Nyingmapa, Dzokchhenpa, Mindol-Lingpa, Kartokpa, Nadakpa, Lhotrak Lhalungpa and Lha-Tsun-Pa, Sakyapa, and Gelukpa schools of Tibetan Buddhism.

Those of the Buddhist monks, who could not reconcile with the reforms brought in the religion chose to adhere to the old order, its beliefs and practices and were identified as the Nan-pas (the followers of the order), who later on organized themselves under a new identity in C AD 1062, and that unreformed sect came to be known as the Ninmapa or Nyingmapa.<sup>2</sup> The Nyingmapas believe Padmasambhava as the highest apostle of this sect, and follows the Tantra doctrines that were introduced in Tibet by Padmasambhava. The Terma literature, supposed to be written by the great teacher and his followers form the bedrock of the Nyingmapa school. The Nyingmapa monks are identified by the Sa-mar, i.e., red hat and because of the red colour of the hat of the monks, some call this sect as the Red Hat sect. The Nyingmapa is said to have three sub-sects namely Tersar, Konchochindu and Peling in this region. The Nyingmapa sects are credited to have established dozens of Vajrayana Buddhist monasteries in modern Tawang and Western Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. Though Tawang is famous worldwide for the wonderful Tawang monastery, belonging to Gelgukpa sect, here one can come across few early Nyingmapa monasteries, which are of immense significance for the study of popularity of the Nyingmapas in this area during medieval period. In this aspect mention can be made of the Urgyellinga, Sangyellinga and Tsorgyellinga Gonpas (monasteries), of Tawang, which are considered as the earliest Gonpas of Tawang.

### **History of the early Nyingmapa Monasteries**

The Nyingmapas are credited to have constructed three early Buddhist Gompas of Tawang. Tradition says that it was Padmasambhava, who predicted the construction of the three oldest Buddhist temples. As if to fulfill it, a Nyingmapa Lama Sherbun by name built these three temples of Urgyelling, Sangyelling and Tsorgyelling collectively known as Lingsum or three stones near Tawang. It is told that Padmasambhava believed to have hidden his precious teachings Terma in the caves for future revelations and one of such Terma was said to have been discovered by one Pema Lingpa of Bhutan and it was his third son, Sherbum, who

migrated to Tawang and built the three Gompas and established the sub-sect Peling among the Monpas.<sup>3</sup> The Peling sub-sect got its name from its terma, Peling-Norbu-Giacho, which was discoursed by Pemalingpa. Waddle mentions the sub-sect at :Lhobrag- Lha Lun-Lunpa.<sup>4</sup>

It is known from the history of Tibet and Bhutan that the struggle for supremacy between the Dukpas of Bhutan and the 'Gelugpa sect of the Tibet started in 1643 AD.<sup>5</sup> It was in AD 1644 the fifth Dalai lama requested the Mongol Prince to help Tibet in their war with Dukpas of Bhutan. After Mongol Prince Gusri Khan and the chief attendant of the fifth Dalai Lama and chief administrator, Sonap Chespel had investigated the situation, the Mongol troops invaded Bhutan and established the supremacy of the Gelugpa over the other sects there.<sup>6</sup> The lama of Tawang monastery refers to one Mongol commander, Sokpho Jomkhar,<sup>7</sup> a legendary figure, who helped the Gelugpa in their struggle with Dukpas of Bhutan and also instrumental in establishing the Gelugpas in their local struggle of supremacy against the Nyingmapas and Karamapas. He even marched upto Mon-yul (Tawang area) to remove the growth of other rival Buddhist sects and said to have thoroughly ransacked the three monasteries of Ugyelling, Sangyelling and Tsorgyelling of the Nyingmapas. Subsequently Nyingmapas could re-built the Gompa at Ugyelling and Sangyelling but Tsorgyelling laid in ruins.<sup>8</sup> The two existing Gompas, though reconstructed but much reduced in size than the original.

### **Ugyelling Gompa**

From Tawang town Ugyelling is hardly at a distance of only 2 kilometres by a track and five kilometers away by the main road. Set against the background of snow capped mountain beautiful valleys and amidst, serene atmosphere the exquisite Gompa is notable for its art and architecture.

The Gompa is at present a double storied structure made of clay, wood and stone. Three sides of the monument, along the base is covered with as many as seventy-one wooden manes inscribed with Tibetan letters. A short flight of stairs from the ground floor leads to the outer-hall of the first floor, where one can notice various representations of Buddhist images and saints. In the main alter, on the left hand, deities like Khadupche, Chongaba and Kechopche grouped as Jeyapchesum can be identified. Next to Jeyapchesum is Nanche – the god of wealth, who is represented mounting on a lion. He is shown holding a mouse in the left hand and duk, an umbrella in right hand. Behind Nanche is Kechopchen,

a venerable Lam Sherbun, the founder of the Gompa. Left to him is Geoya Dorjee Chang, Tsang Wur Bakme and then Lapsang Gyatso, the fifth Dalai Lama. The image of Tsangyang Gyatso, the sixth Dalai Lama is next to it. In an enclosed glass almirah is the deity Thinley Gebo, with three pairs of hands, also locally known as Nyechung Choigong.

Various clay models are noticed in the inner portion of the hall. These are of Drema Wanmo, Palden Atisha (Dipankar Shrijnana); three images of Chenreji, Chanting Chatong and Phakpa Netan Chetuk. Chenreji – the Avalokitesvara is the patron God of Tibet and is the god of mercy and divine protector. These clay images are beautiful pieces of Vajrayana sculptures and display Tibetan traits.

On the left hand of the walls, as one enters the second floor, can be seen magnificent mural paintings in the inner hall. The paintings of Lha Chham Mandaraoya, Lopon Rimpoche, carrying a bowl made of human skull – Kabeli and a Dung – a triangular iron pong, painting of Khando Eschiehoige, Lama Urgen Tsangpo, founder of the Gompa with a bell and Dorje in his right and left hand respectively, paintings of Father of sixth, Dalai Lama, Tashi Tenzin, mother of sixth Dalai Lama, Tsowangt Lhamu, holding a chebong a in her left hand are decorated. The last painting is that of Palden Lhamo – mounted on a horse, who is considered as the tutelary deity of Tibet. Just near these paintings, a Thangkas, brought from Bekhar Gonpa can be seen.

On the right side of the wall are the pictures of Tsong Khapa, the founder of Gelugpa sect, Mera Lama – founder of Tawang monastery, Deshi Sangey. Gyatso – the regent of Tibet at the time of fifth and sixth Dalai Lama, Tamjen Gardya mounted on a goat, Karma Thinley, Ningme clan – the fearsome guardian deity of Tawang mounted on a house. Here it may be mentioned that Ningmechan was the guardian deity according to old Bon religion of Tawang but after the Buddhist domination of the area, the deity was incorporated in Buddhist pantheon and worshipped accordingly without animal sacrifice.

In the portico murals, depiction of Tswering Drukpar, Tsok Tajon and Riksin Gombu can be identified. On the left hand side is the Korchor – a rectangular drawing explaining details of nine chorten down stairs. On the right hand side, are the pictures of Tsering Tukor – a supramundane being shown in human form advocating harmonious relationship of man, animal and nature. On the right hand side of Tsering Tukor is Tsokho Tah Thri, another supramundane being holding a tiger by lash and

trampling two men on the ground. Here he is portrayed as protector of virtue and all that are good and destroyer of evil. Tiger debar the entry of evil doers and the two men on the ground represent the evils who are trampled by Tsopkho Tha Thri. Next representation is a sequence from Jataka story on harmonious living and its local name is Thumpo Punshi. The mural depicts four friends – and elephant, on it a monkey, over the monkey is the rabbit, and on it a bird, which is shown catching the fruits of a tree and passes to rabbit, which then gives it to monkey and ultimately the fruit reaches the elephant. The morale of the sequence is good fellow feeling and ideal living. Besides, the portico murals, one can notice a footprint and head print of sixth Dalai Lama on a slab stone, preserved near the left side of the main altar.

The ground floor of the Gompa contains nine chortens. Two of the chortens face Lumla, as the people of Lumla desired that at least two should face them. These chorten are constructed in early forties of twentieth century by twelfth incarnation of Thirda Rimpoche of Khardung village of Kipti area. The construction of nine chortens at Ugyelling Gompa took one year and people from all nearby villages voluntarily participated in its construction. Sacred scriptures like Kanjur and Tanjur along with valuables are said to have put inside the chorten. Besides these chortens, a stone grinder, belonging to the mother of VI Dalai Lama can be noticed on the ground floor.

The Ugyelling Gompa is said to be associated with the birth of the VI Dalai Lama.<sup>9</sup> It is told that the VI Dalai Lama Tsanyang Gyatso, was born at Urgeyelling. Legend said that Mera Lama, the founder of Tawang monastery requested, the V Dalai Lama, Lobsang Gyatso for a visit to Tawang, but he could not do so. Hence to redeem the promise made to the people of Tawang, he took his birth at Urgeyelling in the person of Tsanyang Gyatso. The Gelugpas took over the monastery after the birth of VI Dalai Lama (AD 1683-1707).

Two festivals are observed in the Gompa. The first is Theju, which is a Nyingmapa festival observed on the tenth day of every Monpa month known as Chichu. The other festival is Chokor, which is held by the laity voluntarily on the thirteenth day of each Monpa month known as as Tongji. Regarding the date of the monument, it can be inferred that originally the Gompa would have been built in 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century and later on, in 17<sup>th</sup> century, it was reconstructed after the Mongol Invasion.

## Sangeyling Gompa

The Sangeyling Gompa, can be approached at a distance of 8 km. from Tawang town. Approximately the Gompa is of 39 feet of length, 19 feet of breadth and 22 feet of height. Built of clay, wood and stone this is a single storey building and is of modest size. The structure consists of two rooms – the entrance room (locally known as Gogong) and the other room i.e., the prayer hall (locally known as Dukhong). One small caretaker's abbey can be noticed near the monument.

The Dukhang have preserved various clay as well as metal sculptures. Among the clay sculptures, mention can be made of various Buddhist saints like Lopon Rimpoche in eight forms – locally known as Urgen Guru Padma Buyung Gnas, Guru Urgen Dorjee Chang, Guru Padmasambhav, Guru Blodan Mebong Sred, Guru Padma Reyal – Po, Guru Sakya Senge, Guru Senge Sgra Sgrogs, Guru Dorjee Grol Glod. Three small Buddhist images of alloys metal can also be noticed on the altar. Besides, wall paintings and few Buddhist Thankas can also be seen. The wall depict images of Buddha, Padmasambhava and many Buddhist saints and demons. Religious scriptures named Gui Bum (Nyingmapa Bum) 48 bundles in total are preserved in a wooden showcase on the left side of the Dukhang. In the entrance room, a few musical instrument associated with the Gompa have been preserved.

Still today this Gompa is following its old tradition and faith. As per our field study,<sup>10</sup> the Gompa was once upon a time a flourishing one and having a number of monks and famous for fantastic monastic dances. However, after the Mongol invasion of Sokpho Jomkhar, this Gompa, lost its past glory and prestige and the monks attached to the Gompas reduced to nil, as a result the Gompa had to run without a monk for sometimes. However, later on this Gompa was to be administered by two villages such as Totey and Shurpie, who appointed certain village priests to look after it. This system is still going on. These two villages are at present responsible for undertaking any kind of maintenance and renovation works. In every holy day of the Buddhist, some rituals are performed in the Gompa by the people of these two villages through a rotation system.

All the images are kept in the prayer hall. The chief deity of the Gompa is that of Guru Padmasambhava. A few images of Gelugpa sect are also noticed here. There is no reliable information whether all these images were kept in the Gompa from the time of its construction or some were brought after the post Jomkhar raid. It is generally believed that the

Urgyelling Gompa and Sangelling Gompa were constructed by Lama Urgyen Tsangpo Terten Pema Lingpu the other name of Lama Sherbum who was the younger son of Lama Urgyen Rinchin. It is also informed that Sokpho Jomkhar did not destroy the Gompa<sup>11</sup> and the caretaker of this Gompa used to get various special concessions from the Tibetan authority in those days. Till today, the Gompa follows the same Nyingmapa religion.

As far as the date of the monument is concerned, it is generally believed to be constructed before the establishment of the Karampa temple at Kimnash in 12<sup>th</sup> century AD. But as we do not know exactly the date of Urgyen Tsangpo or of his father Urgyen Richin to give a precise date for the monument is a difficult task. However, taking the oral tradition, legends and history of Buddhism in Tibet into consideration and on circumstantial evidences, the Urgyeling and the Sangeylling Gompa can be dated to 12<sup>th</sup> – 13<sup>th</sup> century AD in its original form, which was reconstructed sometimes in late 17<sup>th</sup> century after the raid of Sokpho Jomkhar.

## Conclusion

In retrospect, we can notice that the Nyingmapas had a strong hold in Tawang area, before the ascendancy of the Gelugpa sometimes in 16<sup>th</sup> or at least before the construction of Tawang Monastery. The Urgyellig, Sangelling and the ruined Tsorgeylling were considered as the most sacred monasteries of the Nyingmapas. The early Nyingmapas monasteries are notable for their clay sculptures as well as fine wall paintings depicting various Buddhist gurus, gods and goddesses, and personalities, associated with Nyingmapa sects of Tibetan Buddhism. The sectarian struggle for supremacy between the Nyingmapas and the Gelugpas, is also reflected in the history of these monasteries.

## Notes and References

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2. Austine Wadell L. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*, First published in 1899, Reprinted 1999, Delhi, pp. 72-74.
3. Niranjana Sarkar, *Buddhism Among the Monpas and Sherdukpens*, Shillong, 1980, pp.3-4. Also see, Mehara G.N., *Bhutan: Land of the Peaceful Dragon*, Delhi, 1974, pp 70-71.

4. Austine, Wadels L. *op. cit.*, p. 74.
5. Tsepon W.D. Shakabpa, *Tibet: A Political History*, London, 1967, p. 112.
6. Ram Rahul, *Modern Bhutan*, New Delhi, 1971, pp. 23-24.
7. A mural painting of Sokpo Jomkhar can be seen with others in the eastern wall of the assembly hall of Tawang monastery. He is said to have visited the monastery and donated to it a set of Kanjur.
8. Sarkar, *op. cit.*, p. 10.
9. Bhattacharjee, T.K., Tsangya Gyatso: *The sixth Dalai Lama and Urgeyling Gompa in Resarun*, *Journal of the Research Department, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh*, Vol. IX, No, 1, 1983, pp. 1-11.
10. Information from Dhamma Gyalsey Tulka, Ex. Abbot, Tawang Monastery during an interview on 12.10.2001.
11. Information collected from Lama Pema Wangcha, caretaker of the Sangeyling Gompa, during an interview on 22.09.2001. There are various oral traditions, prevalent among the Lamas regarding the onslaught of Mongol Invasion on the Sangelling Gompas. According to one legend, when the news of demolition of Urgeyling and Tsorgeyling Gompa reached the abbot of Sangelling Gompa, he made a plot and went to Tawang monastery and borrowed the Geluga dress and Gelugpa scriptures. When Sokpho Jomkhor came there, he found the Abbot wearing Dagam, a Gelugpa dress and patiently reciting the Gelugpa scripture. This made confusion in the mind of the Mongol general, and believing that the Gompa belonged to the Gelugas, he withdrew his forces and did not destroy the Gompa. Another legend reveals that how by knowing the future onslaught of the Mongol general, all the Monks of Sangeyling Gompa unanimously took decision to flee away and when Sokpho Jomkhor came there along with his troops, there was no body in the monastery and consequently he retreated with his troops by feeling that there was no need to destroy the Gompa.