

Digital initiative a pilot project of Buddhist Manuscripts of Arunachal Pradesh, India

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Abstract: The North East India is the meeting ground of various cultures since pre historic period. Before independence, it consisted of independent Kingdom of Assam, Manipur, Tripura and some hill regions. In the present scenario, it is estimated that only in Tawang monastery there are more than five thousand rare Buddhist manuscripts that contains knowledge on religion, philosophy, medicine, Lord Buddha's original preaching's etc. Such rare manuscripts were surveyed and pilot project has been taken to initiate to digitize these manuscripts and preserve for the future generation.

Keywords: Manuscript preservation, Digitisation, Conservation, Mahayana Buddhism, Photo scanning technique, Tanjur, Kenjur

1. Introduction

In the present scenario, it is estimated that only in Tawang monastery there are more than five thousand rare Buddhist manuscripts that contains knowledge on religion, philosophy, medicine, Lord Buddha's original preaching's etc. Besides there are at least five dozens of old Mahāyan monasteries in Arunachal Pradesh where hundreds of Buddhist manuscripts are preserved written in Bodic scripts. In the *Theravād* monasteries of Arunachal Pradesh located in districts Lohit and Changlang more than thousands such manuscripts are preserved written in Monai scripts in fact a number of *Therāvād* monasteries in Assam also contains a number of manuscripts in their position. The largest River Island Majuli (Assam) is the home of a number of Vāishnāvi Sāātras and monasteries contains thousands of manuscripts. The Sāātra at Bardow and Barpeta are also rich in such Vāishnāva manuscripts. A number of manuscripts preserved in the museums, Libraries and individual positions of which we know a very little.

However, North East India has thousands of manuscripts both Vāishnāva and Buddhist. The concepts of preservation, conservation, restoration have not been used so far due to lack of technical knowledge and manpower. Many manuscripts are destroyed due to the prevailing climatic conditions, lack

of preservation and lack of interest. Thus, the manuscripts, which are of at most importance to know the history and culture of the people of the area, are lost forever. The importance of Buddhist manuscripts cannot be overestimated from the simple fact that these manuscripts contain ideas regarding cultural interaction of North East India with Tibet and parts of South East Asia. Like that, the Vāishnāva manuscripts contain the history and culture of mediaeval Assam. No doubt the loss of these manuscripts are great blow for Indian culture it is in this context the early documentation of manuscripts and digitization process should be taken at the right earnest is the need of the hour is to preserve and protect these manuscripts for the posterity. When I registered my Ph.D topic 'Buddhist Manuscripts with special reference to Arunachal Pradesh: Restoration, Utilisation and Digitisation, I started surveying the number of such manuscripts scattered in and around Tawang Monasteries and its adjacent Gonpas. The present paper is just an outcome of my research findings.

2. Mahāyan Buddhist Manuscripts



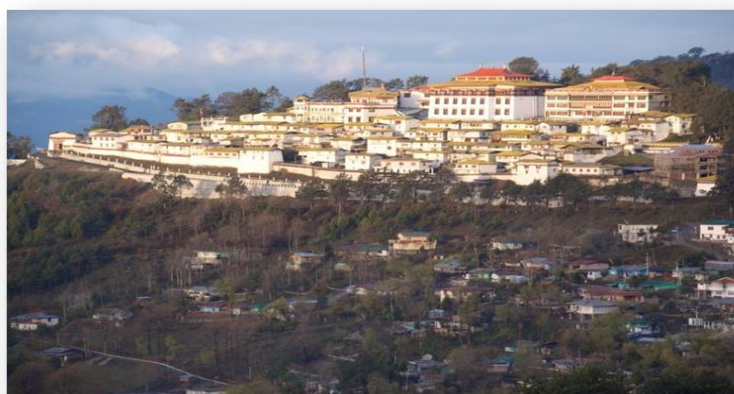
Mahāyan Manuscript (Peichā)

The Mahāyan monastery of Arunachal Pradesh is called *Gonpā* or *Gompā* Sarkar (1980) in Monpa dialect. These *Gonpās* are generally located at some distance from villages and on the face of a cliff, or spur of a hill, offering a commanding and picturesque view of the valley below. The village monasteries are generally built at a higher level than the habitation area. The monastic architecture does not differ much from the architecture of the local houses of the area, only it differs in the magnitude. Generally, the monastic buildings are bigger than the house of the laity. The monasteries are built of stones, wooden pillars and planks. Every *Gonpās*, monasteries, stupas and manes should have manuscripts in Buddhist areas. These manuscripts locally in Monpa language called as *Peichās*, these are tightly wrapped in a yellow silken or cotton long cloth, sandwiched between two wooden pieces. Every family has a small chapel in the shape of an altar called *Chosām* at the rare of the house. It is wooden and has a few shelves on which are kept images of several divinities and ritual articles. The rich have a separate room for the altar. The religious books,

manuscripts (*Peichās*) are if one has, many are stacked in the pigeonholed along shelves beside the altar. Every village in Monpa area has *Gonpā*, according to the size of the *Gonpās* the collection of manuscripts (*Peichās*) varies.

3. Tawang Monastery

Perched atop a hill, overlooking the ridge and surrounded by thick clouds, the legendary 17th century Tawang Monastery is the fountain head of spiritual life of the followers of the Gelugpa sect of the *Mahāyan* school of Buddhism. Majestically seated on a ridge that overlooks the Tawangchu valley of (Tsozum) of Kameng division of Arunachal, at a strategic point where there trade routes from Tibet, Bhutan and Eastern Kameng meets, the *Gonpā* is the heart and soul of the Monpas. Being the biggest monastery of Arunachal and perhaps the second largest of Asia, the monastery is locally known as *Tawang Gaden Namgyal Lhatse* or the Celestial Paradise of the Divine site chosen by horse. Tawang monastery situated at about 10,000 feet above the sea level. The monastery is surrounded on all sides except on the east by mountains with snow-capped peaks and coniferous forest below. Viewed from the distance, it appears like a fort if guarding the votaries in the wide valley below. The impression is not devoid substance in view of the hostility its founder faced from the *Karmapas* and *Nyingmapas*, then dominant Buddhist sects in the area



Tawang Monastery

and more so, from the *Dukpas* of Bhutan, who are said to have attempted to capture Tawang.

This explains well the strategic location as well as the structures purely defensive in nature made in the layout of the Monastery that remains not only a strong base for propagation of religion but in the past was also a military post

against the *Dukpa* attacks. It is apt to know that the founder of the *Gonpā* gave so much importance to defence aspect that he lifted all prohibitions against the military activities from the inmates of the Monastery and out of monthly rations of thirteen bras of cereals, as much as ten given as inducement to actively

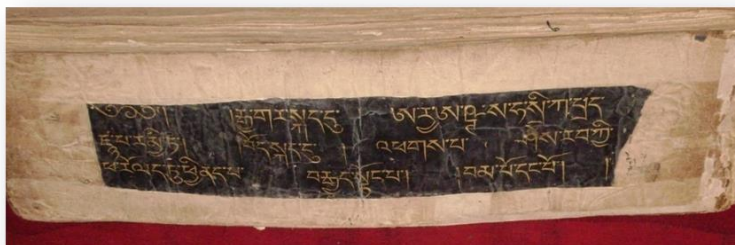


The Tawang monastery Library contains two printed sets of *Tānjur*,

join in the defence of the monastery. The spur on which the Monastery is situated has rivers in the south and west, a narrow ridge on the north connecting it with the range and gradual slope on the east. Thus, the position of the *Gonpā* is very strong as it is difficult to approach the Monastery from the north along the ridge. Even now, one can see many holes in the boundary wall of the Monastery, in which guns were fixed to repulse the attack of the enemy and even used to watch the activities of the advancing enemies. The Monastery covering an area of 135 sq. mts. in length can be approached from the North along the ridge. The Monastery accommodates 500 to 800 lamas and is the largest of its kind in India. A three-storied building stands on the western side of the court, known as *Par-Khang* (Library) and is of (15.3m x 15m x 9m). The Tawang monastery Library is housed in a big square hall, which covers the entire first floor.

Heavy curtains bearing Buddhist symbols are hung over the balcony. An altar with images of divinities and rituals stands on the western side of the hall. The chief image is that of Tsongkhapa. The sacred manuscripts (*Peichās*) are kept on pigeonholed racks on both the sides of the altar as well as on the northern and southern sides of the hall.

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volumes of *Chāngia Sungbum*. Each set of *Tānjur* contains 225 volumes. Among the three sets of *Kānjur*, two sets are hand written and one set printed. The printed set extends to 101 volumes. One hand-written set has 131 volumes and the other 125 volumes. The letters of these one hundred twenty-five volumes set are washed in pure gold. Some of them are written with silver.

There are three pages of the religious text, called *Gyetongpā*, embossed throughout in letters of gold is kept in the museum. Besides other scriptures were *Gyetng*, *Sangdui*, *Seroodramba*, *Sungdrenga*, *Kangso*, *Choiche*, *Manlha*, *Doduipa*, *Sungdui* and *Jirje*. Many of these valuable manuscripts are brittle and edges are broken. The wood protections on both the sides of these manuscripts eaten by wood borer insects and some of these manuscripts have got bores or holes in between, caused by these wood borers. The suggestion has been given to monastery Abbot and *Pārkhāng* incharge, at least for replacing these worms eaten wood supports. The origins of these manuscripts are not ascertained since there are no records. On interview of *Pārkhāng* incharge, the facts were collected about these rare manuscripts Tashi Choephel Lama (2008). Incharge has an opinion that these manuscripts probably brought during construction of Tawang monastery itself, and perhaps more than four hundred years old. The hand written manuscripts are very fragile in nature, some of them are almost in ramshackle conditions. These manuscripts need curative conservation, preservation and digitisation before further decaying. As a researcher the main Tawang Monastery (Gonpa) and other adjacent Monasteries have been personally surveyed and information collected about the present conditions of those manuscripts.

4. A Sample Project

A sample project was undertaken by the researcher, with the objective of better understanding on the different issues pertaining to the digitization of Manuscripts. An excellent *Mahayana* Buddhist manuscript ten folios of *Gyetongpa* was chosen for the sample project. The project was jointly envisaged

and executed by The National Mission for Manuscripts took up the task of preparing *Kritisampada*, in order to document the wealth of Indian manuscripts lying scattered in different organisational and private collection in India and abroad. The National Mission for Manuscripts carries out the methodologies used in a long and effort-intensive process, the documentation of manuscripts through various means. The four important methods such as i) Survey and Post-Survey; ii) Manuscript Resource Centres (MRCs); iii) Manuscript Partner Centres (MPCs); iv) National Informatics Centre (NIC) and Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts (IGNCA). Information format for the data collection employed by the Mission and its partner institutes standardised so that the information made available on the Internet is uniform, as complete as possible and there is no scope for confusion. Questionnaire, CAT-CAT, Manus (data form) has been used. The software used in this effort by the Mission, developed by National Informatics Centre (NIC), is *Manus Granthavali*. It updated frequently and has undergone several modifications with the addition of new fields and the possibility of multiple subject entries for a single manuscript. For digitisation of these Buddhist manuscripts of Arunachal Pradesh, funding external agencies like UNESCO, NMM and other should generously come forward. Universities and other institutions should have MRCs, MPCs and Director of Research, Director of public libraries from the state government should take initiative to digitise this invaluable heritage of the state before it lost forever. These are ultimately useful for the future generations. The above mentioned steps are to be followed for the digitisation of valuable archival materials. Technologies are within our reach and expertises in the field are ready to help.

5. Conclusion

Buddhism plays a major role in developing socio cultural, socio economic and socio religious life of the people of Arunachal Pradesh. Buddhist manuscripts are the means through which people become aware of this culture, heritage etc from generations to generations. With the passing of time, due to various conditions, these 160 manuscripts may be lost, if precautionary measures are not taken. Moreover, due to fragile nature of the materials, paper, ink etc, the durability is minimised and custodians reluctant to allow them to use. People are also, apprehending early loss, stay away from using or consulting the manuscripts. For the benefit of the society, to gather knowledge and expertise, these manuscripts need to be consulted. In the present context, such manuscripts can be used by digitising them. Digitisation facilitate frequent use of such manuscripts, multiplying of copies, accessing from any location, offline or on line, the technique is developing regularly. Buddhist manuscript may be kept in these digitised states with necessary preservation of their longevity, use of them regularly, but content may be made available to the society. The valuable Indian heritage in the form of Buddhist Monasteries, Viharas, Stupas and thousands of manuscripts in such monuments are perishing day by day. It is need of the hour to think and to take suitable steps, to restore and to conserve the Buddhist manuscripts for the future generation. Information technology has come with a

promise and expertise in the field to develop digital initiatives for manuscripts preservation, dissemination and delivery.

It is a sincere efforts on the part of the researcher to initiate such digitisation process for such valuable manuscripts collection of Buddhist monasteries of Tawang area of Arunachal Pradesh, and it is hope that the state government with the help of Archaeological survey of India (ASI), INTAC, NMM and IGNAC shall initiate long drawn process for preservation and conservation of Buddhist manuscripts of Arunachal Pradesh, which will go a long way to understand Buddhist cultural heritage of Arunachal Pradesh in particular and of India in general.

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