

## **Advent of Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh**

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### **Abstract**

The entire Himalayan region was known as a gelid region and it is believed that Lord Buddha himself came here and preached Dharma. Many Pali Sutras give information in this context. A few centuries later after the Lord Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, the great dharma king Ashoka sent venerable Majjantika to propagate Buddhism in Kashmir and Gandhara. Subsequently, Majjima and his colleagues Kaspagot, Alakdev, Dundubhisar and Sahdev were sent to Himalayan regions to spread Buddhism. They set up monks' association and expand Buddhism thereafter. Thus, in this way, the Indian Buddhism spread in the mountains of Himachal Pradesh. The second dissemination of Buddhism is the Tibetan Buddhism that came with the life of great Tibetan King *SongtsenGampo* in the seventh century but the actual advent of Tibetan Buddhism spread after the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Himachal Pradesh.

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### **Keywords:**

Geographical Structure of Himachal Pradesh; Dissemination of Indian Buddhism; Dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism;

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## 1. Introduction

Buddhism came into existence amidst the Brahmanism and Jainism in India around 563 BCE and became the mass religion because of its undefiled views and conducts. Gautama Buddha gave his teaching through the medium of Pali, which was known to be the language of common people at that time, so that the Dharma can be easily understood by all. During the lifetime of Buddha, king Bimbisara (generous dharma king) supported Buddhism to flourish and disseminate. Later, in the third century BCE, during the reign of the King Ashoka, Buddhism began to spread from India. By the first Century, Buddhism was well established in Gandhara patronized by the Kushana king Kanishka, who was then ruling these areas. As the Empire's sphere of influence moved further eastward along the silk route, so did the Buddhism. Thus, Buddhism made its way from northwestern India to modern Pakistan, ancient Afghanistan, Central Asia, Xinjang, China, Korea, Japan and Tibet. Kanishka not only believed in Buddhism but also encouraged its teachings to spread across the corners of Central Asian countries. Buddhism reached its pinnacle during this time, and due to this, the fourth Buddhist's council was also held in Kashmir. During this king's lifetime, many of Buddha images erected in human form in Gandhara style. Thus, Buddhism became one of the ideal religions among India, China, Korea and Tibet and in the Indian Himalayan regions.

## 2. Geographical Structure of Himachal Pradesh

The political and geographical structure of Himachal Pradesh occurred after the Independence of India. It was formed as a state on 15<sup>th</sup> April, 1948, having brought together 31 petty princely states. On 1<sup>st</sup> November 1966, Nalagarh, Bilaspur, Kangra, Kullu, Una, Lahoul, Spiti and Kinnaur were separated from Punjab and merged with Himachal Pradesh. We know that in the history these places were part of greater Himalaya. The actual enforcement of Buddhism came here two thousand years ago with the spread of Buddhism in India. Therefore, to know the history of Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh, we should keep in mind about its ancient cultural and geographical development.

To understand the prevalence of Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh, we have to discuss it through two aspects. The initial spreading of Buddhism, and its expansion that started from the time of Buddha up to the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century when the trans-Himalayan regions were

connected to the plain area of India. The Second Advent and influence of Buddhism began in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century from Tibet.

### **3. Dissemination of Indian Buddhism**

During the time of Buddha, the entire Himalayan region was known as a gelid region and it was agreed that Lord Buddha himself came here and preached Dharma. Many Pali Sutras give information in this context. A few centuries later after the Lord Buddha's Mahaparinirvana, the great dharma king Ashoka sent venerable Majjantika to propagate Buddhism in Kashmir and Gandhara. Subsequently, Majjima and his colleagues Kaspagot, Alakdev, Dundubhisar and Sahdev were sent to Himalayan regions to spread Buddhism. They set up monks' association and expand Buddhism thereafter. Moreover, by the first century A.D, Buddhism was well prevailed in the trans-Himalayan regions as well as reached up to China by crossing the remote areas of central Asian countries.

As far as present geographical location is concerned, Himachal is quite close to Kashmir and due to this, Sarvastivada school of Buddhism primarily reached here. During the Hsuan-Tsang's visit, both the Hinayana and Mahayana (Sarvastivada School) were prevalent. If Buddhism had not reached during the lifetime of Buddha, it would have prevailed in the beginning of Christian era, as there are many evidences available for its prevalence in Himachal Pradesh. For example, Buddhism was proliferated by the great King Ashoka and Kanishka as well as constructed many Stupas. The existence of Kanishka's Stupa in Zanskar and of Ashokan period Stupa of 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. built in the memory of Buddha's arrival in Kullu reinforce the historical fact of Buddha's arrival in Kullu.

At present time, the travelogue of the great Chinese traveller Hsuan-Tsang who visited around early 7<sup>th</sup> century gives reliable evidences of the existence of Buddhism in Himachal Pradesh. The period of Chinese traveler was around 620 A.D. early in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. His main purpose of coming to India was to study Buddhism, and during his trip, he visited many places of India. He came across to the places like Jalandhar, Kangra, Tamsavan and Kullu where he stated Buddhism to be alive. He has given very important information regarding the Kullu valley. He mentioned that there were twenty monks association where more than thousand monks were living. All of them study Mahayana Buddhism and here he referred Mahayana to Sarvastivada school of Buddhism. He further stated the existence of fifteen Hindu temples as well. In between these temples, there was the Stupa of the great king Ashoka, built in the memory of Lord Buddha's arrival and sermon in Kullu valley.

Furthermore, he describes that in the next mountain range at 1800 li (meter) exists the place called La-hu-lo. This proved that Lord Buddha had visited here and later king Ashoka built up the Stupas. Buddhism was widely flourished in this mountain range when Hsuan-Tsang crossed these places during his trip to India.

King Ashoka possibly built another Stupa at Paonta Sahib. In this regard, the famous archeologist, Sir Cunningham stated in his archeological report that iron pillar was taken from here by Sultan Ferose Shah Tuglaq and re-installed near the Ferose Shah Kotla in Delhi. Besides this, two more Stupas of the king Kanishka's period exist in Hatkoti and Pabber valley (hill resort of Shimla). Similarly, one of the King Ashoka's edicts found in 'Kalsi' area is adjacent to the Kinnaur valley.

From the archeological sources, we came to know that Buddhism was wide spread in Kangra during the period of Kushana king. The Brahmi and Kharosthi inscriptions, found in the monastery, that is six miles away from this place on the bank of river Chanru near Pathiar, reveals about the constructions of Buddhist monasteries.

Similarly, Hsuan-Tsang's account reveals about flourishing of Buddhism in Tamsavan, which must be the present Kangra and Chamba areas. It says, during that time 300 Buddhist monks were studying who belonged to the Sarvastivada school of Buddhism. He further stated that there were 50 monasteries and around 2000 monks were living there who were studying both Hinayana and Mahayana Buddhism. He also mentioned about the existence of Buddhism in places like Shrugna and Shatadru and these places probably located on the border of Kinnaur and Simour. He writes that monasteries in the city of Shatadru were empty and few monks engaged with religious practices. This situation was also same in all nearby places of Shrugna. These places were at the border of Sirmour and near to Kalsi in Jaisar. Perhaps, current Ponta Sahib was also included in above places, which used to be a Buddhist Centre. Hsuan-Tsang writes Sangharam was also lying vacant, monks had gone somewhere else, and yet there were 1000 monks who had faith in Hinayana Buddhism. Thus, we find numerous remains like, inscriptions, temples, stupas, statues of Buddha and Bodhisattvas and others religious symbol of pre-common era to the 11<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> century B.C. Hence, this clearly proves that during that time, Buddhism was dominant religion in these regions.

When Hsuan-Tsang mentions about Kullu, many historians believed that it includes Mandi and Suket under it. In ancient times, Mandi was known by the name of Zahor. During the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism was a dominant religion here. Acharya Shantarakshita was also associated with this area as well as the great Tantric master Padmasambhava where he

performed many miracle acts. Therefore, even today, Rewalsar Lake is regarded as one of the holy shrines of Buddhism representing the life of Guru Padmasambhava.

The name Jalandhar that found in the ancient Indian geography was also one of the famous Buddhist shrines. During that time, Jalandhar was known for a larger area under which present Punjab, Jammu, Kangra and a bigger part of Chamba in Himachal Pradesh were included. It was home for many Buddhist meditators or Siddhas. The scattered archaeological remains in the Kangra region are sufficient proof of the presence of Buddhism in ancient times.

Avalokiteshvar temple of 9<sup>th</sup> century located at Udaipur in Lahoul and the marble statue indicate the Buddhist prevalence before 9<sup>th</sup> century. These kinds of many other marble statues of Avalokiteshvar of 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> centuries do not have influence of Tibetan Buddhism. Although there is no definitive historical evidence when these idols were established yet being a famous pilgrimage sites many pilgrims visit since ancient times.

The Gandhola temple at Gurughantal Mountain (Dril-bu-ri) in Lahoul is believed to be built around the 8<sup>th</sup> century. This temple has remarkable statue of Avalokiteshvar but only the upper part is available of this marble statue. Legend has it that Guru Padmasambhava established the temple here. It also refers to the famous Ghantapad who is one of the eighty-four siddhas and it is his place of asceticism, where he visited around 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> century. The ancient temple of Vajravarahi in Margul (Udaipur) in Lahual is said to be DorjeyPhagmo's temple according to the Buddhist legends. It admits that the Goddess in this temple is built around 7<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and later Raja Udai Singh of Chamba made restoration of the temple. However, the then king of Chamba sets up the current goddess in 1600 A.D. Hence, from the above evidences, it is proven that Buddhism was being practiced here during the 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> centuries. At that time, Buddhism was also fully flourishing in neighboring states particularly in Kashmir so it is quite natural to have an impact from there. Thus, we can conclude here that Buddhism made its way to Himachal Pradesh before the Common Era. But, due to the different ups and downs the ancient Buddhism was not alive except the mere remnants.

#### **4. Dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism**

A new era began in the trans-Himalayan region after the 7<sup>th</sup> century. We know that in 7<sup>th</sup> century Buddhism started spreading in Tibet from India. The King SongtsanGampo, and his descendants propagated and given a huge importance towards Buddhism. Particularly, The King TrisongDetsan who invited AcharayShantarakshita from India in 8<sup>th</sup> century and

later he invited great Tantric master Guru Padmasambhava as consulted by Acharya Shantarakshita. In this period, an extensive translation work of Buddhist scriptures from Sanskrit into Tibetan had taken place.

When we look behind at the seventh century, we get an additional reference of Zhang-Zhung state as well where Bon was then the dominant religion and it spread up to Satluj. It appears that at that time, a considerable part of Himachal Pradesh included in Zhang-Zhung. In the year 643 A.D. Tibetan King SongtsanGampo attacked and defeated the then king Leg Mintsang of Zhang-Zhung.

There is not any substantiated evidence of Himalayan region being a part of Zhang-Zhung but in the published Zhang-Zhung language dictionary, we find abundant of terms that are being used in the tribal languages of Himachal Pradesh i.e. Lahaul, Spiti, Kinnaur and Kullu as well as Ladakh, Uttarakhand and Nepal. Apart from this, many beliefs and worship traditions, which are incompatible with Buddhist principles, somehow indicate us that in ancient times the above places were part of Zhang-Zhung.

With the subjugation of Zhang-Zhung by SongtsanGampo in 7<sup>th</sup> century, Buddhism started flourishing subsequently. However, from the Tibetan history, we know that Buddhism had been flourishing until the ninth century but it was not stable. In 9<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, there was dissolution of Tibetan dynasty and SkitdeyNyima Gon had fled to western Tibet and became the King of (upper Tibet). Later, he was given some inhabited lands in Ladakh by Gyapa Jo as a gift for his assistance in the war against Khotan. Soon, he also won the heart of Ladakhi people and became the king of Ladakh. In the last period of his life, he divided his kingdom among his three sons. Ladakh was given to his eldest son Spal- ge- Gon, Guge and Purang to his middle son Tashi Gon and Spiti and Zaskar to his youngest son Detsuk Gon.

After the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the impact of Tibetan Buddhism can be seen in Himachal Pradesh. Ngari King Lha- Lama Yeshe- Od sent Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (958-1055 A.D) to Kashmir in order to study Buddhism. After his return from Kashmir, the then king appointed him as his Rajguru (master). Thereafter, Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo built many monasteries like, Tholing in Guge, Nyarma and Alchi in Ladakh, Tabo in Spiti, and Khochar in Purang. It is said that he constructed 108 monasteries in the Himalayan regions and some scholars believed that he built nine monasteries in Spiti only. Kanam, Ropa, Chini in Kinnaur and Lotsa Lakhang in Nako and Joling, Gumrang monasteries are famous monasteries among the monasteries built by Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo. He brought skillful artisans from Kashmir in order to build the monasteries because of which today Himachal

is being famous for its arts and temples. The paintings and Statue of Tabo monastery are beautiful and magnificent that today's artists called it Ajanta of Himalayas. Thus, at the end of the tenth century Tibetan Buddhism started flourishing in the northeastern border of Himachal Pradesh.

But, the Buddhism that prospered in Kashmir was gradually declining at the end of the eleventh century and the first half of the twelfth century. In such time, the relationship of the Himalayan people with Tibet strengthened and people from Himachal started going to Tibet to study Buddhism. Among these, many learned scholars and practitioners, returned to home, and remained engaged in the propagation of Buddhism. Rangrig-Raspa-Kunga Gyatso was one of them who belonged to Drukpa Kagyud tradition. He was born in the Rangrik village of Spiti in 1619 A.D. The effect and influence of Drukpa Kargyud today in Himalayan regions was due to him and probably all the credit goes to him.

The Gelugpa school of Tibetan Buddhism came into being with the coming of StodJangsemShesrabZangpo who was one of the six students of Lama Tsongkhapa. He founded some biggest monasteries in the Himalayan regions including Kyi monastery in Spiti. Among the six students of the great Tsongkhapa three of them were from Himalayan regions. The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1682 A.D) made a tradition to study in three great monasteries in Tibet and established separate hostels for the Himalayan students. This study program produced exclusive scholars like DangkharpaPaldanGyaltsan, who was born in a place called Dangkhar in Spiti and went to study in Lhasa. There he was allotted in Choskhor-Gyal-Ngari hostel and after doing intensive study on Sutra and Tantra texts, he became the 40th GaldanTripa, the successor of the great Tsongkhapa of Gelugpa tradition, which is the highest rank in this tradition and carried out his responsibility from 1654 to 1662 A.D.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, the Himalayan regions particularly Kinnaur, Lahoul, Spiti, Ladakh and Zanskar came into contact with Tashi-Lhunpo monastery. ShantipaLotosGyaltsan was appointed as abbot of TashiLhunpo monastery of Gelugpa School from 1437 to 1567 A.D. He traveled to the Himalayan regions and preached Buddha Dharma.

LochenRinchen-Zangpo and his incarnations have provided a new horizon for Buddhism in the Himalayan regions, particularly Kinnaur, Lahoul, Spiti and Ladakh. From the first LotsawaRinchenZangpo to his eighth reincarnations were great meditators and scholars. However, their influences seem do not have much effect in these areas. From the ninth incarnation of LochenRinchenZangpo to the present are being born in Kinnaur and all of

them pursued study from TashiLhunpo monastery in Tibet. This considered the most prestigious tradition of the TashiLhunpo monastery. When the third Panchen Lama accepted China's invitation and went to China, the tenth Lochen Rinpoche Tenzin Gyaltsan was assigned as the in charge of the monastery in his absence. After that, regular students from Spiti, Kinnaur, Lahoul and Ladakh began to go there in order to study Buddhism. In this series, twelfth Lochen Rinpoche YongzinLobzangPaldan Gyatso was appointed as the tutor of the ninth Panchen Lama and he became the fifty-one-throne holder of Kil-khangas a Khenpo. Later, he also seated on the throne of 'Kyi' monastery in Spiti as an abbot and since then his lineage uninterruptedly have been successors of the 'Kyi' monastery.

Tibet and the neighboring regions of Ladakh and Zanskar have played very important roles for the propagation of Buddhism in Lahoul, Spiti and Kinnaur. In the thirteenth century, Yogi GyalwaGotsangpa (1189-1258) belonged to the Kargyud Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism made his impact in the Himalayan regions. He visited twenty-four Tantric Buddhist seats in India. Subsequently, he also travelled to Ladakh, Lahoul, Spiti and Kinnaur. He arrived to Lahoul via Kinnaur from Tibet. Thus, even today his hermit is famous as Gotsang-Drukpa in Kinnaur. There are many such places in Lahoul as well that are considered as spiritual practice sites of him. One of the famous caves is located at the top of the Gandhola Mountain. In the same period, it laid the foundation of KardangGonpa (monastery) in Lahoul. The saint Gotsang pa preached Buddhism to the local people and expanded it. Most probably all the Lahouli became followers of Tibetan Buddhism at that time, especially in Kargyud tradition which is still vibrant and intact. The impact of this Lama was such that one of the villages in this region is named after him and is called as the 'Gotsang' village.

Later, between the sixteenth and seventeenth century (1564 A.D) Lama Stagtsang Raspa, who belonged to the tradition of Gotsang pa, came here from Ladakh. He was appointed as the root Guru of Ladakhi King SingeyNamgyal and at that time, Lahoul was under the kingdom of Ladakh. He travelled to Lahoul and strengthened the Buddhism more effectively. After Lama Stagtsang Raspa, another scholar named Deva Gyatso visited Lahoul at the end of sixteenth century. He made ShashurGonpa (monastery) as a centre of Kargyud pa tradition, which earlier affiliated to the sect of Nyingma pa tradition of Tibetan Buddhism. Lahouli people still worship to Deva Gyatso as an adorable Guru.

Consequently, in the first half of the 18th century, one of Zanskar Siddhas AcharyNgawangTsering reached Lahoul. He came here for a pilgrimage, but at the request

of Local people, he gave teaching and spent many days, particularly, in Pattan valley of Lahoul. He has been known by the name of Lama Zongkhul. In the mid-twentieth century, a Tibetan master Tulzhuglingpa had spent some time in Lahoul and made many people satisfied with his Dharma teachings.

In the twentieth century, many Siddhas, meditators and scholars who lived in these areas of Himachal Pradesh had given their huge contributions to keep Buddhism alive. Among them, the most famous was the Khunu Lama TezinGyaltsan, who went to Tibet for study and gained the reputation of expertise; he came back and served for the revival of Buddhism in the entire Himalayan regions. The current Dalai Lama often mentions Khunu Lama's name in his teachings. Similarly, the great practitioner GesheRigzinTenpa was also one of the notable Lamas. The famous Yogi, Lama Norbu who founded the KardangGonpa and established the monk order. Similarly, astrologer Lama Sonam Drugye of Kinnaur and other lama's contributions are not to be overlooked. Even today, many reincarnations of Lamas are involved with this land especially we may respectfully take the name of Lotsawa Rinpoche.

After the Chinese invasion over Tibet, the tradition of going to study in Tibet from Himalayan regions discontinued. On the other hand, after the independence there was no place for studying Buddhist Philosophy in Indian Himalayan regions as well as in the education system of India. Informational knowledge has given more importance in place of ideal educational life. Leaving one's own mother tongue, people of the Himalayan regions started learning Urdu, English, and Hindi that have least link with their culture. Thus, under an undeclared policy, the new generation started forgetting their language, religion and culture. Consequently, today in the Himalayan regions the faith and interest towards Buddhism is fading away. Due to its coming into contact with other religions and beliefs, people started accepting other religions and ignorantly leaving their rich culture and tradition.

## **5. Conclusion**

Thus, some parts of Himachal Pradesh where Buddhism was much prevalent earlier got diluted by coming in contact with many other religions. Today, the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama's coming into exile is partly fortunate for the Indian Himalayan people because he once again revived Buddhism in many parts of India especially in Dharamshal in Himachal Pradesh where he founded his Dharma Centre and exile Tibetan government. Soon, Tibetan Buddhism became successful in attracting immense national and international

attention. His Holiness has played a huge role in bringing peace, happiness and unity in the world. Today, Dharamshala has become a Buddhist learning centre for many Buddhist and non-Buddhist followers around the world. There are many Tibetan learning centres and monasteries in Dharamshala, like Library of Tibetan Work and Archives, Namgyal Monastery, Tushita Meditation Centre, Norbulingka Institute and so on.

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