



## From Monastery to Household: Material and Ritual Continuities among the Monpas of Tawang

Millo Hakhe

*History department, Neelam Taram Government College Yachuli, Keyi Panyor District, Arunachal Pradesh*

\*\*\*

**Abstract** - Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh stands as a vital center of Tibetan Buddhism, influencing both monastic and domestic life among the Monpa community. While prior studies have emphasized its history and architecture, the material culture of the monastery and its integration into everyday religious practice remain underexplored. This study adopts an object-centered approach to examine sacred artifacts from the museum, monastery, and local households, focusing on metallic and non-metallic objects such as butter lamps, prayer bells, offering vessels, and ritual flags. Field surveys reveal that household objects often replicate monastic prototypes, reflecting the monastery's enduring influence on domestic religious practice. Although some objects are of recent manufacture, their forms, functions, and symbolic meanings maintain continuity with centuries-old ritual traditions. The study demonstrates that material culture functions as a living medium, mediating faith, cultural identity, and communal memory. By foregrounding the role of sacred objects, this research provides a nuanced understanding of Tawang Monastery as a dynamic institution where ritual, art, and everyday life intersect. It underscores the significance of material culture in sustaining Tibetan Buddhist practices and preserving cultural continuity in Northeast India.

**Keywords:** Tawang Monastery, Material Culture, Monpa Community, Ritual Objects, Tibetan Buddhism

### Introduction:

Buddhist monasteries have, since ancient times, played a pivotal role in preserving and disseminating Buddhist doctrines and practices. Beyond their religious functions, these institutions significantly shaped the socio-economic, political, and cultural dimensions of Buddhist communities. Monasteries not only nurtured spiritual life but also contributed to the material and intangible heritage of their followers, thereby strengthening the broader fabric of society.

During the Mauryan period, Buddhist monuments emerged as powerful symbols of the faith, and monasteries functioned as vital centers of learning, residence, and ritual practice. Under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka, enormous resources were

devoted to the construction of stupas and monasteries throughout the empire, reflecting a deliberate effort to encourage and institutionalize Buddhism. Royal patronage was complemented by the generous support of merchants, bankers, guilds, and caravan leaders, whose donations facilitated the expansion of monastic establishments. Several of these early rock-cut monasteries survive in present-day Maharashtra, including the Ajanta Caves, Karla Caves, Kanheri Caves, and Bagh Caves, which flourished approximately between the third century BCE and the twelfth century CE.

However, between the fourth and sixth centuries CE, Buddhism in India began to experience a gradual decline, particularly during the Gupta period, which witnessed a revival of Brahmanical traditions. Accounts of the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang (Hiuen Tsang) provide valuable testimony to this changing religious landscape. Several scholars, including L. M. Joshi, P. C. Bagchi, Randall Collins, and Richard Gombrich, have supported the view that Buddhism faced significant institutional weakening during this era.

By the twelfth century CE, following successive Turkish invasions and the destruction of major Buddhist centers, Buddhism in India appeared to approach extinction. Many assumed that the Buddhist worldview had been permanently erased from its land of origin. Yet Buddhism demonstrated remarkable resilience. From as early as the seventh century, it had already begun spreading beyond India, adapting to diverse cultural and geographical contexts across Asia. In regions such as China, Japan, Korea, and Southeast Asia, Buddhism evolved into distinct traditions while maintaining its philosophical core. Wherever it took root, it generated monumental architectural expressions—monasteries, temples, and stupas—whose styles harmonized with local environments and artistic sensibilities.

From the seventh century onward, Buddhist traditions exerted sustained influence on the Tibetan Plateau. Despite formidable geographical challenges, Buddhism not only endured but expanded, gradually supplanting the indigenous Bon religion and establishing itself as the dominant religious and intellectual system. From its institutional center at Lhasa, Tibetan Buddhism extended into adjoining Himalayan regions, including present-day Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh.



Historically, many tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh—except groups such as the Monpas in the west and the Khamptis in the east, who migrated comparatively later—were organized through indigenous customary laws rather than centralized political structures. Owing to their geographical proximity to Tibet, the Monpas of the Tawang region maintained sustained cultural, religious, and political ties with Tibetan authorities. They adopted the Tibetan script and historically rendered tribute to Tibetan rulers. While animistic and shamanistic practices prevailed among several tribal groups of the region, Buddhism established a strong presence in the western and northern areas, predominantly following the Gelugpa school of the Mahayana tradition. In contrast, the Khamptis of the eastern foothills practice Theravada Buddhism, reflecting a distinct historical trajectory of religious transmission (Dutta, 2008).

Among all religious monuments in Arunachal Pradesh, Tawang Monastery stands as the most iconic. It is not merely an architectural structure but a living institution that embodies perseverance, continuity, and the sustained vitality of Tibetan Buddhism within the framework of Indian sovereignty. For the local community, it remains a functioning and dynamic center where faith, history, culture, and resilience converge.

### **Buddhism in the North East**

Arunachal Pradesh, located in the easternmost part of India, is home to several significant Buddhist monasteries and sacred sites. Geographically, the northwestern and northern regions of the state are predominantly influenced by Tibetan Buddhism, while the eastern districts are inhabited by communities such as the Khamtis and Singphos, who practice a Theravada tradition often associated with Southeast Asian (Tai/Thai) Buddhism.

The northwestern belt presently comprises the districts of West Kameng district and Tawang district, where Tibetan Buddhist traditions are deeply embedded in social and cultural life. These areas are primarily inhabited by ethnic groups such as the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Akas (Hrusso), Mijis (Sajolang), and Membas. In contrast, Theravada Buddhism is largely concentrated in Changlang district, particularly among the Khamti and Singpho communities, whose historical connections extend toward Southeast Asia.

With the exception of Sikkim and certain parts of Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhism did not establish a strong institutional base across much of Northeast India in the past. Historical and textual records indicate that the Brahmaputra Valley—corresponding largely to present-day Assam—was predominantly ruled by Hindu dynasties, which limited the

consolidation of Buddhism as a dominant religious tradition in the region (Barpujari 1990: 306).

In the contemporary period, the religious demography of Northeast India reflects significant diversity. States such as Mizoram, Nagaland, and Meghalaya, along with parts of Manipur, have Christian majorities. In contrast, Tripura and much of Assam are predominantly Hindu. Alongside these major religious traditions, indigenous belief systems rooted in animism and spirit worship continue to be practiced, particularly in Arunachal Pradesh and Meghalaya. This plural religious landscape provides the broader context within which Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh must be understood—not as an isolated phenomenon, but as part of a dynamic and historically layered religious environment.

### **Previous Works on Tawang:**

Academic engagement with Tawang Monastery and the broader Tawang region remains relatively limited. Although a few scholars have made important contributions, the existing literature is largely descriptive, historical, or ethnographic in orientation, with little sustained focus on material culture or object-based analysis.

One of the earliest notable studies is that of Niranjana Sarkar (1981), who undertook a cultural and ethnological examination of the Tawang region. His work relied primarily on physical observations of the monastery and field-based documentation of Monpa life. Sarkar provided valuable firsthand descriptions of the monastery's architectural and artistic features, including wall paintings, prayer wheels, a large gilded Buddha statue, and intricately carved wooden doors with brass fittings. While his documentation remains useful as an early record, his analysis did not move beyond descriptive ethnography. The ritual, symbolic, and material dimensions of these objects were not examined within a broader theoretical or material-cultural framework.

A more historically grounded intervention appeared in 2013 with the publication of *A Brief History of the Establishment of Buddhism in Monyul* by Lobsang Tempa and Thupten Tempa. This work represents an important synthesis of textual and historical sources relating to the introduction and consolidation of Tibetan Buddhism in the Monyul region. It situates the rise of monasteries within larger political and religious developments linked to Tibet. However, its primary emphasis remains institutional and historical; the study does not extend into an analysis of sacred objects, ritual implements, or their role in shaping everyday religious life.



Other works, such as H. G. Joshi's *Arunachal Pradesh: Past and Present* (2005), provide broader socio-cultural overviews of the state and its tribal communities. While such studies offer contextual value, they do not engage in focused inquiry into the monastery as a living material and ritual space. Much of the remaining literature consists of administrative, strategic, or policy-oriented reports that treat the region from geopolitical or developmental perspectives rather than from a cultural-historical or art-historical standpoint.

Therefore, although previous scholarship has documented the historical development and cultural setting of Tawang, there remains a significant gap in systematic studies of its material culture. In particular, the sacred objects housed within the monastery and those used in Monpa households have not been examined through a structured analytical framework. The categorization of these objects of Museum, Monastery and Household, and the exploration of their ritual functions, craftsmanship, symbolic meanings, and cultural continuity, has not yet been undertaken in a comprehensive manner.

Though this paper covers only few tangible objects of significance, it attempts to address the lacuna by adopting an object-centered approach to the study of Tawang Monastery and the sacred household objects of the Monpa community. By foregrounding materiality, ritual usage, and cultural symbolism, this research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how religious life is sustained through tangible forms in both monastic and domestic contexts.

### **Objective:**

While the historical trajectory of Buddhism provides the broader framework, the present study shifts its focus to the material culture of Tawang Monastery and the sacred household objects used by the Monpa community of Tawang. Rather than examining the monastery solely as an architectural or institutional entity, this paper emphasizes the ritual and cultural significance of objects that function within both monastic and domestic spheres. These objects—embedded in everyday religious practice—serve as tangible expressions of faith, identity, and continuity.

The study argues that sacred objects are not merely ritual instruments but carriers of layered meanings that reflect theological principles, artistic traditions, and socio-cultural values. In order to provide a systematic analysis, the surveyed materials have been categorized into two primary groups: metallic and non-metallic objects. This classification enables a closer examination of their material composition,

craftsmanship, ritual function, and symbolic significance. Through this object-centered approach, the paper seeks to highlight how material culture sustains religious life and preserves cultural memory among the Monpas of Tawang. In nutshell, this paper is an attempted documentation and analysis of the surveyed traditional objects of Tawang which functions on a broader framework of Gelugpa sect of Buddhism.

### **Case Study of Objects: Museum, Monastery, and Household**

The objects displayed in the museum gallery of Tawang Monastery are largely attributed to the seventeenth century onward, with some items dated to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Notably, no objects predating the seventeenth century are exhibited, which aligns with the traditional date of the monastery's establishment. The artifacts are housed within enclosed glass galleries and accompanied by brief descriptions outlining their significance, function, and presumed period of manufacture.

However, methodological constraints affected the documentation process. Direct physical examination and measurement of the objects were not permitted due to institutional restrictions imposed by the monastic authorities. Photographic documentation was also partially hindered by reflective glass surfaces, limiting visual clarity. Although the display labels attribute many objects to the seventeenth century, no scientific analyses—such as metallurgical testing or laboratory-based dating—have been undertaken to authenticate these chronological claims. Consequently, the dating of these artifacts remains reliant on institutional tradition rather than empirical verification.

Most of the objects—particularly ritual pots, bowls, cups, and offering vessels—are composed primarily of copper and brass, with occasional references to silver usage. According to the museum descriptions, these objects were principally intended for ritual purposes, though some were used for cooking and for serving the monastic community. For example, a large cooking vessel (identified as *Thro Therp*), reportedly used in the seventeenth century for preparing barley gruel, is displayed in



the museum. A similar utensil was also observed within Khinme Monastery, sharing comparable size, structure, and material composition. Such similarities suggest continuity in utilitarian and ritual culinary practices across monastic spaces.

Other ritual objects—including butter lamps, prayer bells, and vajras (dorjee)—are displayed in the museum and are likewise commonly found within both monastic and domestic devotional contexts. The butter cup (locally known as *Nyul kong*) is described as having been in ritual use since the seventeenth century, originally crafted in silver. These observations indicate that copper, brass, and silver were the principal metals employed in ritual craftsmanship from the seventeenth century onward. Whether these objects were locally manufactured or imported remains uncertain. The absence of evidence for historical metalworking sites in the Tawang region suggests the possibility that many objects were acquired through trade networks linking the region with Bhutan, Nepal, and Tibet.

While museum labels describe monastic usage, they do not clarify whether such objects were historically accessible to lay communities. However, contemporary field observations reveal that many similar ritual objects are presently found in local households, raising important questions regarding the historical diffusion of monastic material culture into domestic spaces.

### **Survey Report on Local Household Objects**

The household survey revealed that material expressions of Buddhism extend beyond the monastery into everyday domestic life. A majority of surveyed houses displayed a traditional prayer flag erected on the rooftop. In addition, many households maintained a small rectangular outdoor structure, typically not exceeding one and a half meters in height, used for burning leaves to produce ritual smoke. This act is understood as a gesture of peace, purification, and auspiciousness. For instance, during the visit of Dalai Lama to Tawang, residents reportedly burned leaves to release sacred smoke as a sign of welcome and reverence. According to interviews with resident lamas, this practice has been observed since the early establishment of Buddhism in the region.

Architectural elements of several houses—particularly window frames, wall motifs, and decorative woodwork—bear resemblance to monastic design features. However, when questioned about direct monastic influence on residential architecture, most respondents denied formal institutional involvement. They emphasized that such designs were adopted voluntarily rather than imposed by religious authority.

With regard to ritual obligations prior to house construction, responses were more nuanced. While there is no formal compulsion from the monastery to perform rituals before building a dwelling, many households acknowledged seeking monastic guidance to conduct purification rites intended to ward off malevolent forces from the proposed site. Although described as voluntary, this practice appears culturally embedded and widely observed, especially in earlier decades. Informants suggested that adherence to such rituals was more prevalent five or six decades ago than in the present day.

Of the more than twenty households surveyed, nearly all maintained a designated prayer space—either a separate room or a defined altar area within the house. These spaces contained images of deities, ritual implements, butter lamps, bells, and small statues finished in gold or silver hues. Many of these objects were reportedly procured from Nepal, Tibet, or other parts of India. While some objects were of recent manufacture, the tradition of maintaining a domestic altar was described as longstanding.

One interviewee explained that before installing a statue in the prayer room, household members recite prescribed scriptures, after which the statue is placed within a cabinet or altar space. The deities are typically displayed only on special occasions, during which the statues are cleaned and polished. The principal deity commonly observed in these domestic shrines is Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), revered as a foundational figure in the transmission of Buddhism to the Himalayan region.

The practice of erecting prayer flags is common to both monastery and household, differing primarily in scale. Monastic flags are significantly larger, while domestic flags are smaller but symbolically analogous. These flags are generally replaced annually during the Tibetan New Year (February–March), reinforcing cyclical ritual continuity within both institutional and domestic spheres.

### **Finding Analysis:**

After assessing the total material and non-material evidence observed during the field survey, it is established that the



material evidence is mostly ceremonial and ritual objects. Most of the material evidence are in the form of objects and some in the form of structural remains which is very scanty. Many new religious, traditional structures are also seen built in the town which was not the part of the original tradition as per history of local people. The recently built huge and tall Chorten in the town in the name of the current chief minister of Arunachal Pradesh for the sake of prestige and status is one fine example of new traditions followed up. Remains such as the skull of the warriors are also preserved in the museum. The skull according to the given information of the museum belongs to the warrior of the nineteenth century. Maybe or may not be a useful source for my analysis but one thing that fascinated me was that why only top skull of the warrior preserved and what about other bones of the body? If it is the skull of the warrior, can it justify that Tawang certainly had a threat from the enemies? And who were the enemies? As acclaimed by the scholars like Niranjana (Niranjana 1981: 6-7) that the Tawang monastery often played a political role in protecting the people of this region from the enemies of Bhutan who were of a different sect. Whether in terms of material object, painting, or structural evidence, the field survey did not yield any strong material evidence which could strongly support the fact that military was posted in the monastery in the past. But this query still needs to be discussed with further supporting evidence.

Most of the objects displayed in the museum do not seem to be very old. Instead, the objects displayed are probably the replication or of the same genre of previously used objects. But it has become apparent that the objects and the monastery are co-related to one another as can be seen from those preserved in the museum that was primarily used in the monastery since the seventeenth century. These objects are primarily made up of metals and mostly belonged to the period of seventeenth century. However, it cannot be ascertained that those preserved objects in the museum uncertainly belonged to the seventeenth century as no scientific analysis have been done to generate the genuine epoch of these objects. The head in charge of the museum did not allow me to touch the object due to the strict security reason, the authenticity of the age of these objects still remains unaddressed. In a recent interview with one of the Lama, it was said that the objects displayed in the museum were undoubtedly ancient but he added that it was difficult to affirm the exact date of these objects. Thus this course of survey compelled me to assume that the objects that are displayed in the museum were assuredly used during the seventeenth century, but they may be the generic version that was used in a later period. But if the epoch of these objects is true, then the seventeenth century is a very significant phase for the region of Tawang as we see that it was during this period that Tawang monastery was established and most of the objects displayed in

the museum are tagged belonging to the seventeenth century. The objects generally have certain designs and symbols fitted to it. And as I believe that every object has a particular purpose, so, therefore, the analysis of the designs and symbols of the objects shall be covered in the subsequent chapter.

Most part of the monastery is renovated and painted, therefore it became difficult for me to examine the age of the material used in the monastery. But the recent interview with the Lama described me that even though many of the material evidence exists no more but the traditional aspects of peoples association with the material remains the same. Objects and monastery have become a very important part of the daily life of the people. Every house that I visited was kept with objects of worship inside the chapel. And all these objects are also kept in the monastery. The tall wooden flag that is erected in the monastery is also erected in the roof of the house. The only difference was the size of the flag where the former is very tall and later is not more than two meters tall. It seems even though people deny the influencing role of the monastery in their material life, unconsciously they are still influenced by the Tawang monastery but the question still remains to what extent?

### **Conclusion:**

The present study underscores the centrality of material culture in sustaining Buddhist religious life in Tawang, revealing how sacred objects mediate between monastic and domestic spheres. Through the survey and analysis of artifacts from the museum, the monastery, and Monpa households, it is evident that material objects—whether ritual implements, ceremonial vessels, or domestic icons—function not merely as tools of devotion but as carriers of symbolic, cultural, and historical meaning. The predominance of copper, brass, and silver in ritual objects, alongside their continuity in design and use from the seventeenth century onward, highlights the persistence of ritual traditions even amidst changing socio-political contexts.

The study demonstrates that Tawang Monastery operates not only as a religious and institutional hub but also as a cultural reference point shaping domestic religious practices. Household surveys reveal that residents maintain designated prayer spaces, ritual implements, and symbolic features such as flags and small outdoor altars, reflecting a deep, albeit informal, connection to monastic practices. While some objects are of recent manufacture, their forms and functions replicate traditional prototypes, indicating that continuity is maintained more through ritual and symbolic reproduction than through physical antiquity.



Furthermore, the research highlights the adaptive nature of Buddhist material culture in Tawang. Despite periods of historical disruption and the introduction of newer religious structures, the monastery and its objects have sustained a living tradition that informs the everyday life of the Monpa community. This continuity underscores the inseparability of religious practice and material culture, illustrating how tangible objects serve as mediators of faith, identity, and cultural memory.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of Tawang Monastery not merely as an architectural or historical site but as a dynamic locus of religious and cultural life. By foregrounding an object-centered approach, it bridges a critical gap in the scholarship on the region, demonstrating that the study of sacred objects provides valuable insights into both the spiritual and material dimensions of Buddhist practice. The enduring presence of these objects in monastic and domestic contexts affirms the resilience of Tibetan Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh and its capacity to shape cultural continuity across centuries.

#### Reference:

- Barpujari, H. K. (Ed.). (1990). *The comprehensive history of Assam* (Vol. 1). Publication Board, Assam.
- Choudhary, J. (1979). *Arunachal Panaroma*. Shillong: Director of Research, Arunachal Pradesh Administration. (2011). *District Census Handbook Tawang, Series-13, Part xii A*. Directorate of Census Operation Arunachal Pradesh. Census of India 2011.
- Dutta, D. (1999). *The Monpas of Kalaktong*. Guwahati: Department of Cultural Affairs, Directorate of Research, Government of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Joshi, H.G. (2005). *Arunachal Pradesh: Past and Present*. New Delhi: Mittal Publication.
- Dutta, B.A.S. (2008). *Religious history of Arunachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Gyan Publishing House.
- Sarkar, N. (1981). *Tawang Monastery*. Shillong: Assistant director of Research (culture) Arunachal Pradesh.
- Si-Yu-Ki. (1884). *Buddhist Record of the Western World: Translated From the CHinese of Hiuen Tsang (A.D 629)* (Vol. 1). (S.Beal, Trans.) London: Ballantyne Press.
- Tenpa Lobsang; Thupten Tempa. (2013). *A Brief History of the Establishment of Buddhism in Monyul...Tawang and West Kameng Districts*. Department of Karmik & Adhyatmic Affairs, Govt. of Arunachal Pradesh.
- Vinayapitaka. (1938). *The Book of The Discipline*. London: Pali Text Society: Luzac & Company LTD.
- Waddell, L. (1895). *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism: With Its Mystic Cults, Symbolism And Mythology, And Its Relation With Indian Buddhism*. London: W.H. Allen & co., Limited.
- Wijayaratna, M. (1990). *Buddhist Monastic Life*. (C. Grangier, & S. Collins, Trans.) New York, USA: Cambridge University Press.