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Material culture and Buddhist Monasticism in the Trans-Himalayan Context: A Study of Tawang Monastery

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Abstract - Buddhist monasteries have historically functioned as centres of religious practice, learning, and cultural transmission. Although Buddhism declined in India from the Gupta period onward and appeared nearly extinguished by the twelfth century, it survived and flourished across Asia through regional adaptation. One such enduring manifestation is found in the Himalayan region of Arunachal Pradesh, where Tawang Monastery represents a continuous and living Buddhist institutio. This paper examines Tawang Monastery within the broader trans-Himalayan Buddhist tradition, situating it historically and culturally through textual sources and material-cultural analysis. It explores the evolution and meaning of Buddhist monastic institutions and provides a geographical and ethnographic context of the Tawang region. Particular attention is given to the monastery's architecture, ritual spaces, prayer wheels, chorten, frescoes, and sacred objects to demonstrate how material culture functions as an integral component of monastic life. The study argues that Tawang Monastery is not merely a heritage site but a dynamic institution in which belief, ritual practice, and material forms operate as an interconnected system. Despite modern transformations, the monastery continues to preserve Buddhist doctrine, sustain community identity, and embody cultural continuity in the Himalayan context.

Keywords: *Tawang Monastery; Buddhist Monasteries; Tibetan Buddhism; Material Culture; Himalayan Buddhism; Cultural Continuity*

Introduction:

The Buddhist monasteries since ages played a crucial role in promoting Buddhist doctrines and its practices. It had its implication on the socio-economic, political and cultural aspect of the Buddhist community which in turn shaped the tangible and non tangible aspect of its followers and strengthened the fabric of the society as a whole. During the Mauryan period, Buddhist monuments became an iconic symbol of Buddhism and the monastery provided shelter to the Buddhist community. The Mauryan ruler, Ashoka himself was the sole sponsorer of enarmous resources to construct Buddhist stupa and monastery in different part of his empire to encourage and sustain Buddhism. Apart from royal assistance, wealthy merchants, Bankers, Guilds, and caraven leaders also made a remarkable contribution by sponsering to construct Buddhist monastery. Some of their monastery still survives today in a ruined condition which are still evident in present-day Maharastra such as Ajanta caves, Bagh caves, Karla Caves, kanheri caves and alike which approximately flourished between third century BCE to twelve Century CE. But during fourth century AD to Sixth Century AD, the country witnessed a gradual decline of Buddhism and revival of Hinduism during Gupta period, and this change in atmosphere is evident from the traveller account of famous Chinese traveller Hieun Tsang. Some Indian and western Scholars have also supported the view that Buddhism declined during Gupta period including L.M. Joshi, P.C. Bagchi, Randall Collins and Richard Gombirch.

By the twelfth century CE, following the successful Turkish invasions of India and the deliberate destruction of Buddhist monuments, Buddhism in India appeared to have reached the brink of extinction. Many believed that the Buddhist worldview had been permanently erased from its land of origin. However, despite prolonged neglect, Buddhism demonstrated remarkable resilience. From as early as the seventh century, it had gradually dispersed beyond India, sustaining itself under adverse conditions. Although its presence on Indian soil became increasingly marginal, its influence spread widely across the Asian continent. There, Buddhism evolved into diverse forms, adapting to local cultures, ethnicities, and traditions. It flourished particularly in Southeast and East Asia, including China, Japan, and Korea. Wherever Buddhism took root, it gave rise to iconic monuments such as monasteries, temples, and stupas, with architectural styles evolving in harmony with regional geography and cultural preferences.

From the seventh century CE onward, Buddhist traditions exerted a sustained influence on the Tibetan Plateau, where Buddhism not only endured but expanded despite severe geographical constraints. Over the following centuries, Buddhism gradually supplanted the indigenous Bon religious tradition, establishing itself as the dominant religious and philosophical system. From its institutional and intellectual center at Lhasa, Buddhism extended into adjoining regions, including present-day Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh.

Historically, most tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh—except for groups such as the Monpas in the western region and the Khamptis in the east, who migrated to the area relatively late, around the eighteenth century CE—lacked a centralized political structure and were governed primarily by indigenous customary laws. Due to their close geographical proximity to Tibet, the Monpas of the Tawang region maintained sustained cultural, religious, and political interactions with Tibetan authorities. They adopted the Tibetan script and historically rendered tribute and taxes to Tibetan rulers. While animistic and shamanistic practices predominated among many tribal communities of Arunachal Pradesh, Buddhism also established a significant presence in the western, northern, and parts of the eastern regions. The western and northern areas largely adhere to Tibetan Buddhist traditions, particularly the Gelugpa school within the broader Mahayana framework. In contrast, the Khamptis of the eastern foothill region practice Theravada (Hinayana) Buddhism, reflecting a distinct historical trajectory of religious transmission. But the most iconic religious structure found in Arunachal Pradesh is Tawang Monastery which is a living testimony of perseverance, continuity, preservation and sustaining harmony of Tibetan Buddhism in Indian sovereignty. Maybe that is the reason the locals view Tawang monastery as a *functioning, breathing institution* where belief, history, culture, and resilience intersect.

Meaning and Definition of Buddhist Monastery:

The concept of Monastery and its function have existed in various corners of the world since ancient period. The term *"Monastery"* is derived from the Greek word "*Monasterion*" from "*Monazein*" meaning "to live alone" which is again derived from the root – "*mono*" which generally refers to "alone". In other parts of the world such as Europe, the term initially had a loose meaning that was confined only to the Cathedral church and mainly used for the monastery of England. They were generally referred to the habitation of a bishop and the cathedral clergy who lived apart from the lay community. In literature, we do not find the standard definition for monastery but currently, this term possesses a wider meaning as the term is applicable not only to religious buildings but also equated with other secular buildings.

In the context of Buddhism, the earliest monasteries were oriented towards religious functions. Renowned Historian A.L. Basham contends that they functioned as the focal point for center of religious scholarship and spiritual practice. The Sanskrit and Pali text often use the term 'Vihara' for the monastery which means 'a shelter, a place of dwelling or a residence for the Buddhist community that may slightly very with the Greek term 'Monasterion' that means 'Living alone'. Both denotes the same meaning with a slight nuance where the 'Vihara' denotes a residence for the community of Monks and nuns to live together to practice monastic lifestyle that operates on religious doctrine whereas the western definition of Monastery is often flexible that can denote sacred or a secular buildings.

The meanings and definition of monasteries in Buddhism can be traced in ancient text like *Vinaya Pitaka* where it mentions *Vihara* as a place of living, stay abode or habitation for a Buddhist mendicant, an abode in the forest (*Aranna*), or a hut; a dwelling, habitation; lodging for *Bhikku* (.Vinayapitaka: 207) The Jatakas described *Vihara* as a large building for housing *bhikkhus* or an organised monastery (1877: 126). According to Rhys-David (1925: 101), the present state Bihar bears its name from *Viharas*. Fergusson (1910: 170) viewed *Vihara* as "a group of apartments for a community of monks, a S*angharama* or monastic establishment" and described *Vihara* as a place for the convention of the *Bhikkhus*; meeting place; a place for rest and recreation in a garden or park. Majumdar (1982: 61) explained *Viharas* as a place constituting of various buildings along with *Sangrahama* such as living and sleeping quarters for the *bhikkhus,* a service hall (*upatthana-sala*), a fire-hall (*aggi-sala*), frequently rendered as an open pillared pavilion (*mandapa*), a bathroom, hall for tailoring, a store-room etc. Various units of a monastery, for the most part, were detached structures and thus, the *Sangharama* did not constitute of only one single and comprehensive building but many. According to Wijayaratna (1999), a monastery is a complex of buildings comprising of the domestic quarters and workplace of monks and nuns irrespective of any religion. It is clear that the term monastery is understood differently by different scholars. It is evident that the term given to monasteries varies from region to region and is known by different names in different cultures (Ghosh 1998: 19-70). Buddhist monasteries in India are called *Viharas*, whereas they are known as *Gompa* in the regions lying in Himalayan belt and Tibet. Also, the Monasteries holds a different meaning from culture to culture which range from small-town *viharas* to tiny mountain hermitages, to great monastic universities which also vary in terms of its nature and function (Wijayaratna 1990: xv). Further, regarding architectural design too, the monasteries have different outlook varying from region to region. The monasteries in the Himalayan region are often used as a synonym for the temple. The term *'Gompa'* which functions as a small temple in many parts of the Himalayan region also operates as a monastery having dual function in nature. In light of the above discussion, it is difficult to give a holistic view on the definition of a monastery but the common detonation outlines that, monastery stands for a residence which shelters the saints to practice their philosophy and belief system. Its term, structural form and function may differ from region to region but the fundamental

prospect remains the same i.e., to provide shelter and a dwelling place for the monastic community to practice monastic lifestyle and preserve the Budhist doctrine.

Brief Geographical profile of Tawang District:

The Tawang district, located in the westernmost part of Arunachal Pradesh with Tawang town as its headquarters, holds immense strategic, cultural, and historical significance. Covering an area of 2,172 sq. km, the district lies at an altitude ranging from approximately 2,176 to 3,400 metres above sea level. Tawang is sparsely populated and predominantly inhabited by the Monpa tribe, who are believed to have resided in this region for a considerable period. According to the 2011 Census, the total population of the district was 49,977, comprising 29,151 males and 20,826 females. The population of Tawang Circle alone was recorded as 11,202. Geographically, the district is situated around 27°45′ N latitude and 90°15′ E longitude. Climatically, Tawang experiences cold weather throughout the year, with heavy snowfall occurring from mid-November to February. Annual rainfall varies significantly, ranging from less than 1,500 mm to over 4,000 mm.

Ecologically, Tawang exhibits diverse natural ecosystems, including sub-tropical forests, temperate forests, alpine scrub forests, alpine meadows, and wetland ecosystems. Vegetation patterns vary according to altitude, with dense flora and fauna found in the lower regions, while biodiversity gradually diminishes above 4,000 metres above sea level. The dominant vegetation in the region is alpine in nature, including various species of pine trees. From an ethnic and cultural perspective, Tawang is predominantly inhabited by the Monpas, who follow the Mahayana sect of Buddhism. Anthropologically, they are classified under the Neo-Mongoloid racial group, and their dialect belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family. The Monpas are also significant inhabitants of the neighbouring West Kameng district of Arunachal Pradesh. They possess a distinct culture and tradition that sets them apart from other tribal communities in the state. Due to limited historical evidence, the precise origin of Monpa migration remains uncertain; however, scholars such as Niranjan Sarkar have hypothesised that they migrated from Bhutan, citing strong cultural affinities with the Bhutias. Historically, the Monpas have maintained closer cultural and religious ties with Tibet and Bhutan than with other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. These trans-Himalayan interactions facilitated the gradual proselytisation of the Monpas into Buddhism, culminating in the establishment of the Gelugpa sect.

According to local lamas, the region was once densely forested, with only a small number of settlements located several miles away from present-day Tawang. Following the designation of Tawang as the district headquarters, extensive deforestation occurred, accompanied by increased human settlement in the area. Census data reflects a significant demographic shift: while the rural population of Tawang Circle stood at 13,060 in 1991, it declined sharply to 9,366 by 2001, indicating migration towards the urban centre. Correspondingly, the urban population of Tawang town increased from 8,376 in 2001 to 11,926 by 2011. Despite the rapid influx of modernity and the construction of concrete government buildings and residential structures—which have altered the traditional landscape and affected monastic surroundings—the local population has made sustained efforts to preserve its cultural heritage and its topography. Traditional festivals, rituals, ceremonies, beliefs, and customs remain deeply embedded in local society, and many cultural practices that have been observed for centuries continue to be carefully maintained.

Material Culture and Tawang Monastery:

Tawang Monastery may be perceived as a single architectural complex; however, it is composed of multiple interdependent structural and ritual units, including residential quarters, the main prayer hall, library, wheel temple, and chorten (stupas). Beyond these built forms, the monastery incorporates a range of sacred and symbolic objects—such as the *chod* drum, *dorjee*, prayer drums, *batti* (oil lamps), butter lamps, and prayer wheels—which are integral to ritual practice. These material elements are not ancillary but constitutive of monastic life, and their absence would significantly diminish the religious and symbolic integrity of the monastery. Each architectural form and ritual object functions within a unified sacred system and cannot be meaningfully understood in isolation.

Prayer Wheels (Mani-Khorlo):

One of the most prominent material features encountered upon entering Tawang Monastery is a long row of cylindrical prayer wheels housed within a covered wall structure. Although prayer wheels have been an enduring element of the monastery since its establishment, none dating back to the seventeenth century survive today. The existing wheels are periodically replaced, maintaining continuity of form rather than material antiquity. Older wheels, according to local informants, were primarily made of iron, while contemporary versions are constructed from metal, wood, or stone, replicating earlier designs.

Each wheel bears the mantra *"Om Mani Padme Hum"* inscribed in Bhodic script, symbolising compassion and peace

for all sentient beings. Field measurements indicate that the commonly used prayer wheels are approximately 54 cm in height with a diameter of 27 cm, while larger examples range from one to two metres. In total, more than 200 prayer wheels are installed within the monastery complex, underscoring their ritual significance. The wheels are elaborately decorated with floral motifs in red, yellow, blue, and green, with the mantra rendered in gold or yellow pigment. Monks customarily rotate the prayer wheels clockwise at the beginning of their daily routine. According to lamas, thousands of paper scrolls bearing the written mantra are placed inside each wheel, imbuing it with spiritual potency. Without these inscriptions, the wheel is considered ritually inert, highlighting the inseparability of material form and sacred content.

Entrance Gate:

The main entrance gate of Tawang Monastery, located approximately 30 metres from the primary prayer hall at an elevation of 3,021 metres (27°35.242′ N; 91°51.458′ E), remains one of the oldest surviving structures within the complex. Although the wooden surface has been repainted in recent times—obscuring its original colour—the weathered texture, visible cracks, and surface erosion attest to its age. The gate stands approximately 310 cm high, with a wooden door measuring 255 cm.

Senior lamas assert that while the entrance gate has undergone periodic renovation, its original architectural style has been carefully preserved. Notably, traditional materials such as wooden beams and planks have been retained, rather than replaced with concrete, reflecting a sustained commitment to architectural continuity. The persistence of traditional construction methods serves as a material expression of enduring religious values and collective cultural psychology.

The Main Prayer Hall:

The main prayer hall constitutes the ritual and symbolic centre of Tawang Monastery. Although the structure has undergone multiple renovations, it adheres closely to earlier architectural designs, reflecting continuity in monastic aesthetics. While parts of the interior wooden framework have been replaced with modern concrete elements, the spatial organisation remains traditional. The hall contains a large seating area arranged in rows, flanked by pillars measuring approximately 290 cm in height. A monumental gilded statue of the Buddha, approximately 28 feet tall, occupies the central position within the hall. Crafted by artisans from Nepal and Tibet, the statue is richly ornamented and flanked by subsidiary figures. The inward-sloping walls, inclined at roughly ten degrees, are adorned with fresco paintings depicting deities and spiritual masters of the Gelugpa sect.

According to Lama Thupten, although the frescoes have been repainted, they replicate earlier iconographic representations with careful fidelity. Historically, artists from Tibet, Bhutan, and Nepal were commissioned for this work; over time, local artisans acquired the necessary skills and assumed responsibility for monastic painting. These frescoes are considered exclusively sacred and are not reproduced in domestic spaces, regardless of social status. Within the gallery are three chorten, among which the oldest enshrines relics of the Sixth Dalai Lama. This votive stupa, reportedly imported from Tibet, is richly ornamented with gold embellishments and inlaid with multicoloured pearl-like stones, indicating the historical circulation of sacred objects across trans-Himalayan regions.

Old Library Building:

Adjacent to the main prayer hall on the western side stands the old library building, now defunct. This structure remains largely unrenovated and represents one of the few surviving original buildings within the monastery complex. The exterior wall displays a deteriorating mural, possibly depicting Guru Rinpoche in eight manifestations, similar to representations in the main prayer hall. The painting shows signs of neglect, including faded pigments, soot marks, and surface abrasion. The interior is dimly lit, with only two small windows. The stone-brick walls are bound with clay mortar that has darkened over time. Two decorated wooden pillars support the structure, featuring cloud motifs and painted designs. According to informants, this building is of particular historical importance as one of the earliest extant constructions within the monastery.

Choksam Temple:

Near the main entrance, a smaller shrine known as Choksam Gompa (27°35.258′ N; 91°51.461′ E) is situated at the right side of the entrance. It is constructed of stone bricks, the temple houses eleven prayer wheels along its façade. The Lamas report that although the structure has been renovated multiple times since the seventeenth century, its original form has been retained. Inside the temple are four chorten, including Namgey Chorten, which local belief attributes with supernatural qualities. It is widely believed that its *chibi* (upper finial) grows incrementally each year, necessitating periodic reconstruction of the temple roof to accommodate this growth—an example of how sacred belief shapes architectural practice.

Wheel Temple

Adjacent to the main prayer hall is a small wheel temple containing a large prayer wheel operated daily by a designated caretaker. The rotation of the wheel strikes a bell fixed above it, producing a sound believed to purify the surrounding space. The interior walls are adorned with numerous representations of Guru Rinpoche, underscoring his centrality in local religious consciousness. Visitors are required to circumambulate the paired prayer wheels in a clockwise direction before exiting, reinforcing ritual discipline. According to lamas, the large prayer wheel was imported from Tibet, further indicating historical religious exchange. Notably, Guru Rinpoche appears more frequently in visual representations than the Buddha himself, suggesting a localized hierarchy of devotional emphasis within the monastery.

Conclusion:

The present study has sought to examine Buddhist monasteries not merely as religious structures, but as dynamic socio-cultural institutions that have historically mediated belief, material culture, and community life. By tracing the evolution of Buddhist monastic traditions from their early establishment in India through their trans-Himalayan diffusion, the paper situates Tawang Monastery within a broader historical continuum of Buddhist resilience and adaptation. Despite the decline of Buddhism in its land of origin following political upheavals and religious transformations, the tradition endured and flourished across Asia, taking on localized forms shaped by geography, culture, and historical circumstance.

Within this wider context, Tawang Monastery emerges as a significant living institution that embodies continuity rather than rupture. Unlike ruined monastic sites of peninsular India, Tawang represents an uninterrupted monastic tradition in which religious doctrine, architectural form, ritual practice, and material culture coexist as an integrated system. The monastery's spatial organisation, ritual objects, and sacred architecture—ranging from prayer wheels and chorten to frescoes and libraries—demonstrate that material culture is not peripheral to religious life but central to the reproduction of Buddhist knowledge, values, and collective memory. Each element functions relationally, reinforcing the monastery's role as a centre of spiritual authority, cultural transmission, and social cohesion.

The study also highlights the importance of regional specificity in understanding Buddhist monasticism. In the Himalayan context, monasteries such as Tawang function simultaneously as temples, educational centres, and socio-political institutions, reflecting a fusion of religious and secular roles distinct from early Indian viharas. The prominence of figures such as Guru Rinpoche alongside the Buddha further indicates localized devotional hierarchies shaped by historical and cultural interactions with Tibet. These features underscore the adaptive capacity of Buddhism, allowing it to sustain relevance while preserving doctrinal foundations. Moreover, the persistence of traditional construction methods, ritual practices, and symbolic beliefs—despite the pressures of modernization and infrastructural transformation—illustrates the community's active engagement in cultural preservation. Tawang Monastery thus stands not as a static heritage monument, but as a living, breathing institution where history, belief, and material practice intersect within the framework of Indian sovereignty.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the broader discourse on Buddhist monasticism by foregrounding the role of material culture and regional context in sustaining religious traditions over time. Tawang Monastery exemplifies how monasteries continue to function as custodians of spiritual knowledge, cultural identity, and historical continuity, reaffirming the enduring relevance of Buddhist institutions in shaping both local communities and trans-regional religious landscapes.

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