

Buddhist Paintings of Darjeeling: Identification and Interpretation

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Abstract: *The time has not yet come to write a history of Buddhist art. Such a study needs a detailed description of all the collections of Buddhist art preserved in different parts of the country and outside the country. The Buddhist painting of Darjeeling characterized the pantheon of northern Buddhism. It is very difficult task to distinguish and classify the host of many-armed and many-headed divine beings, armed with whole arsenal of warlike attributes, the numerous figures of saintly lamas, abbots of monasteries, who appears on painting side by side number of religious symbols gives multiple meaning and disseminate the idea of direct intuition along with ethnographic variation.*

Keywords: Buddhism, Paintings, Darjeeling, Takling Phunchok Choling Monastery, Tamang

Introduction:

Lama Taranath in his History of Buddhism furnished huge information on Buddhist religion and culture though all that he wrote is not beyond historical controversy. The author completed the text in 1608 i.e. long after the hey-days of Buddhism. But, still it seems the core of the book may not be regarded as totally unrealistic, inspite of some historical element ingrained in it. Regarding Buddhist religion especially its sculptural and painting traditions during the Pala rule in Bengal, Taranath's view should be treated with proper importance. According to the author, painting tradition of eastern countries was Dhiman, the brother of Bitpal. Taranath further adds that Nepali Sculpture and developed after the tradition of Eastern School of Painting. So in any discussion on art of Painting in the region of eastern Himalaya is essentially connected with Buddhism especially the Tantric Buddhism of Tibet and Nepal¹.

Origin of Buddhist Paintings:

The earliest Buddhist art may be traced back to the Buddha's life time although some art historians are of the view that it originated some centuries after the Buddha's great *parinirvana*. We find many exegetical references to strengthen evidences in the

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sutra text; i.e. vinaya and tantra, including *Manjushrimulakalpa* and so on. It appears that Buddha himself considered paintings to be an important subject as he mentioned methods of paintings in sastra such as *Buddha pratimalaksana sutra*. This is apparently a very late Buddhist text perhaps after 10th century A.D. These scripture explain how to make the image of deities and spiritual figureⁱⁱ. During the time of Lord Buddha, there were two great kings, Bimbisara of Magadha and Udayana of Srasgrog (Vatsa). Both were contemporaries of Lord Buddha in the 6th century B.C. and were close friends. King Udayana sent a priceless gift of a coat that mailed to king Bimbisara which could ward off the effects of weapon, poison, fire etc. The latter could not find a suitable return (present) and was depressed. Then his Prime Minister Dbyar Tsul (Varshakara) suggested that since Lord Buddha was residing in his kingdom and as he was the most precious jewel in the three worlds, it would be a fitting present if a painting of Lord Buddha was presented to king Udayana (U-tra-ya-na). Therefore, Bimbisara requested Lord Buddha to permit him to draw his portrait on cloth. The artist found it impossible to draw the portrait, due to a brightness that radiated from Lord Buddha's body. The artist finally finished the portrait looking at the reflection of Lord Buddha in a pond. This painting of Lord Buddha was called 'Thub-pa-chhu-lon-ma' which means Buddha's portrait made from the reflection in waterⁱⁱⁱ. This paintings of Buddha supposed to be the first painted image of Buddha and of Buddhism.

The paintings of Darjeeling are supposed to be the succession of Nepalese-Tibetan Buddhist art which is transmitted to Tibet in around 7th century A.D. To trace the history of Buddhist art in Nepal one has to go through the history of Licchavi period (464-880 A.D.) which is said to be the golden age of Nepalese Art. It is well known that Buddhist art was introduced into Tibet from Nepal in the Seventh century when Tibetan King Srong-btsan-gampo (617-650) married the Nepalese Princess Bhrikuti Devi. The presence of Newar artist in Tibet from the early 7th century to the mid-ninth century is frequently noted in the Tibetan historical records^{iv}. The Manikabum mentions that Nepalese artists, commissioned by King Srong-bstan gam-po produced the statue of eleven-faced Avalokiteshvara together with statue of Bhrikuti, Arya, Tara, Marici, Saraswati, Hayagriva and many others in Jokhang^v Temple of Lhasa. For example Srong bstan gampo commissioned the celebrated Nepalese craftsmen Khre-ba to have eleven images of Avalokiteshvara made which were to be of same size as the king himself. The chronicle of the Fifth Dalai Lama also refers to the presence of Nepalese artist in Tibet at the time of the early kings. Many skilful artists were called from Nepal to Tibet where they developed unique artists tradition^{vi}. The spread of Nepalese paintings and art throughout the Tibet is being well sited 'with the caravans which toiled their way through the Himalayas from Sikkim and Nepal in the 7th century A.D. Buddhism came to Tibet and its influence soon spread with the help of the great king Song-tseen Gam-po who had married a Chinese princess of Buddhist faith. The king was converted to Buddhism and

sent his chief minister to the sacred places of India to study the teachings of Gautama the Buddha. A century later in about 750 A.D. an Indian Buddhist monk named Padmasambhava crossed the mountains into Tibet and preached a doctrine known as Tantrism. This was a mixture of Mahayana Buddhism and certain magical and mystical doctrines derived from Hinduism. In its popular aspects it involved prayers, rituals dances and the exorcism of devils. Padmasambhava founded the branch of monks or lamas known as the "red caps" and transformed a nation to warriors into a vast community of monks. Today at the great monasteries hidden among the Himalayas, on the high plateaux of Tibet and Nepal or scattered over the Tibetan countryside, thousands of Buddhist prayer wheels turn endlessly in the wind. Here on the "roof of the world" the people are among the most religious of any on earth and it has been estimated that a quarter of the entire male population enters the priesthood. In Tibet Buddhism brought forth a strange art in which influences from India, China and Central Asia were intermingled. A whole world of symbols came to life in sculpture and painting. Artists monks made spiritual preparations including fasting before painting the than-kas or temple banners which are a special feature of Tibetan Buddhist art. Painted on silk or other fabrics these banners usually contain a spiritual portrait of one or other of the saints and deities and also many other figures and scenes which tell the story of the central personality^{vii}.

Classification of Buddhist Paintings:

Painting anciently called *Varnana* evolved in India, through a fusion of various cultures. The earliest paintings in India are rock paintings of prehistoric times, found in caves or rocks of India primarily related with day today's life of early man. The ancient Indian literacy compositions like Ramayana and Mahabharata, Kalidasa's *AbhiganaSakuntala* and Dandin's *Dasakumarachaita* make many references to art and painting. The Silpa Sasta texts of art and architecture deal with the art of mural and miniature painting and also painting executed on wood and cloth. *Kamasutra* (2nd C.B.C.) of Vatsayana enumerates the *Sadanga* or Six limbs of painting. The *Sadanga* developed the principles of paintings; these are *rupabheda* or the perception of difference in appearance, secondly, *pramana* or valid perception, measure and structure, thirdly, *bhava* or feelings expressed in forms, fourthly, *lavan yayojna* or infusion of grace in artistic presentation, fifthly, *sadrasya* or similarities and finally, *varnikabhanga* or identification and analysis of colour and hue. These ethics of *sadanga* are the basis of Indian painting that mainly classified in mural and miniature painting. The mural paintings are executed in solid wall and miniature paintings are mainly executed in books, albums and in perishable items like cloth and paper.

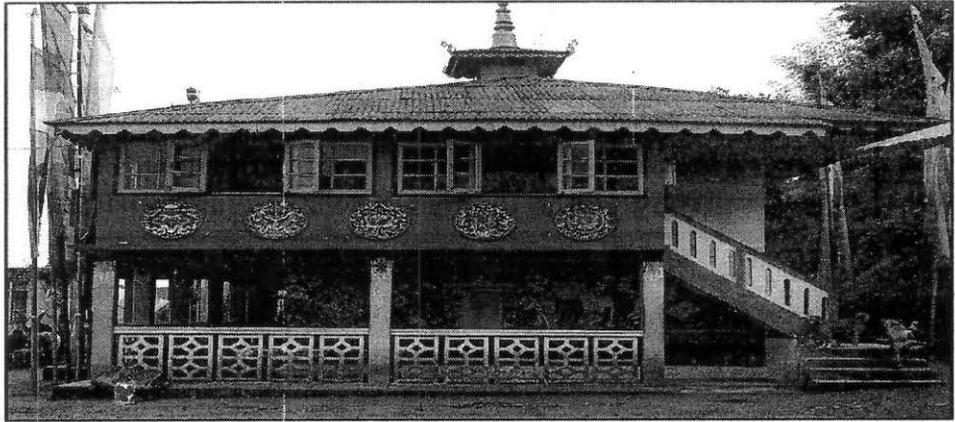
The Buddhism has adopted both the forms of painting that can be seen in various caves, rocks, walls of monasteries and scroll painting. The Tibetan style of Buddhist painting is supposed to be started from 7th century A.D and it was again reformed with

the establishment of 'Lamaism' by Guru Padmasambhawa. The earliest Tibetan Buddhist painting which was influenced by Nepal's Buddhist artists may be classified in five types; 1) Illustrated manuscript, 2) Scroll painting, 3) Narrative scroll painting, 4) Mural or Wall painting, 5) Miniature painting. The almost all the Buddhist monasteries of Tibet, Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh, Manali, Dharmasala, Nepal Darjeeling and so on are been tinted by the paintings of Buddhism in different subjects in various forms as said above. The basic themes of the painting are; Buddha's life and his previous life stories; Buddha and Bodhisattva; Meditational deities; Dakas and Dakini; Dharmapala; Mandala and Stupa; and Illustration of the Dharma^{viii}. Most of the Buddhist painting basically confined around the above mentioned themes and with the development of Lamaism in Tibet and its expansion into the sub-himalayan states, the *Guru Padmasambhava* sometime occupied the position of central deity in the paintings and altar of the monasteries.

The high mountain ranges which on all sides surround the table-lands of Tibet did not stop the penetration of foreign influences. In the early days of Tibetan history the trade routes from Tibet into the plains of India passed across western Tibet. By these routes, often not more than narrow mountain trails, Indian artistic traditions reached Tibet^x. This is hoping that Buddhist painting of Darjeeling may have been returned from Tibet in around 17th century with its introduction in Sikkim. Therefore most of the paintings of Darjeeling reflect the nature and similarity with Tibetan style.

Buddhist Paintings of Darjeeling:

There are many Buddhist monasteries in the Darjeeling hills preaching and propagating the doctrine of Buddhism but my focus is on Takling Phunchok Choling Monastery. This monastery is one of the first Tamang Buddhist monastery established in 1915 in the wood-cat year by Lama Urgen Tenzin Sangpo at an altitude of 3950 fit above the historical river Teesta^x. Takling is a village under the post office of Teesta Bridge in Darjeeling district, West Bengal, India with a hope and aspirations of spiritual development radiating the message of universal peace and brotherhood.



Source: plus.google.com/106946586761462590153/photos, talking phunchok choeling gonpa, 05/10/2015, time: 1.22 pm

The paintings in the monasteries of Darjeeling has similarity with Tibetan style of art and even more with that of Sikkim, Bhutan and other too are from same origin, though some regional variations are been reflected. We can see the images of Buddha, arahat, bodhisattva and many more preachers of dharma and their life stories. The paintings of Darjeeling are been influenced by the art style of Tibet but still sense of regional interest has make the style, fresh and different.

The wall paintings of Takling monasteries show the Dhyani Buddha. The fresco painting of Dhyani Buddha in all his yogic posture (*Mudra*) basically intended to guide the meditational exercise of the devotee. The wall is decorated in such way that each and every picture looks alike and it will show the linearism of paintings and as well as it enhances concentration. The central position is occupied by the Buddha in *Bhumisparsa* posture. The colour combination is highly aesthetic and it symbolise the purity and ethical.



Source: Photo taken by researcher at Takling Monastery.

The Buddhist pictorial art has also been influenced by primitive bon religion of Tibet and with the introduction of *Lamaism* by Guru Padmasambhawa, a new look of Buddhist art developed. This wall painting shows the Avalokiteshvara, the bodhisattva of compassion. The whole wall is surrounded by wrathful deity, considered to be the fierce and powerful emanation of Avalokiteshvara. This tutelary deity is one of the Dharamapalas in Vajrayana Buddhism who defends the Dharma from corruption and degeneration and from forces hostile to it. To keep the monasteries and site of ritual free from impure thoughts and actions and also to guide and to protect the individual followers of Dharma from all kinds of deception and provide the power to overcome the struggle and to eliminate one's obstacle and impediments and hindrances.

Although, the Mahakal or Bhairab has number of forms. He is nude, dark, blue and sometime is white. He has rolling eyes, many arms but usually one head. In his hands are weapons, skull-cup, and a wand with 3 skulls and has skulls in his crown^{xi}. His hairs are unruly. The depiction has been made of almost all forms of Mahakal. This is one of the examples of Buddhist paintings in Tamang monastery.



Source: Photo taken by researcher at Takling Monastery.

The next set of wall painting is about the whole life cycle of Goutama Buddha, portraying the details of from the days of inception by his mother and till the *parinirvana*. This has been done by good colours depicting the picture by very bright paint, which will give the visitors very sense of reality and lively touch this is very popular theme of paintings that expose the life stories of Buddha. The picture is one kind of manual, through which Budhist followers get to know all major incidents of the Buddha's life.



Source: Photo taken by researcher at Takling Monastery.

As in the Vajrayana and Lamaism sect of Buddhism Guru padmasamvawa occupied the central position. This set of painting proves above statement where *Guru Rimpoche* has occupied central position, basically Tamangs are ardent followers of *Nyingmapa* sect of Tibetan Buddhism, in which *Guru Rimpoche* is regarded as principal

deity. The paintings show the all other deity surrounded Guru Padmasambhawa, it will clear the importance of the *Guru Rimpoche*.



Source: Photo taken by researcher at Takling Monastery.

The Darjeeling has become the centre of Buddhist art after being influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and it followed the rich traditions of various crafts, such as weaving, sculpture, carving, metal work, carpentry, and so forth. But here I would like to explain the implications of thangkas or Tibetan pictorial scrolls as an example of these crafts. Thangkas are an upright rectangular form mounted and framed with silk or brocade. They are sacred objects hung on the walls of temples and in shrines as objects of homage and as the support of spiritual practice. But nowadays we also find them as decorations in houses and hotels.

There are various kinds of thangkas; firstly, silken pictorial scrolls, and the secondly, the painted scrolls. In terms of manufacturing of thangkas, there are many ways in respect of forms and design: like hand-embroidered pictorial art using silk threads of different colours. The different coloured silks are cut into designs and glued into figures. The variety of size of the silk scroll can be from 30 by 20 centimeters to 55 by 47 meters. The Thangkas has occupied the very important position in Buddhism and as well as in the rituals of Buddhism. The artistic expression reveals either in the silk woven cloth or in embroidered cloth with various colours and design in the background. The scrolls mainly decorate the various deity of Buddhism and beautify the altar of the monasteries. This monastery has preserved the some old scroll thangkas in the hall of gumpa premises. This kind of preservation will provide the positive enthusiasm to new painter and artisans of such article.



Source: Photo taken by researcher at Takling Monastery.

The paintings give the themes, meaningful expressions and deeper and more fundamental significance. The painting was considered as an essential social accomplishment not only in cities but even in such rough highland track like Takling. According to both Buddhist and Jain conceptions painting are the product of the visual faculty of mind, seeing without the operation of the sense of sight, and proceeds from the *pratyaksha* or direct intuition, not from *paroksha* or sense knowledge by perception. Painting is thus said to originate from the *darsana* activity of the mind, as distinct from its *jnana* function^{xii}. Thus, the history of Buddhism has not only brought to people of hills a charismatic change in their belief even it gave the aesthetic touch of painting that has been portrayed in different walls of monasteries, houses and so on. The painting of Takling monastery has peculiarity of its kind, because this is the first monastery of Tamang community in the region, which reflect the ethnographic variation from others.

Notes and References:

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ⁱⁱ Shakya, Min Bahadur, *Paubha or Thangka Paintings of Nepal*, Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, Chakupat, Patan,

ⁱⁱⁱ Rechung, J.K. *The Buddhist Paintings and Iconography, according to Tibetan sources*

^{iv} Shakya, Min Bahadur, *Paubha or Thangka Paintings of Nepal*, Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, Chakupat, Patan,

^v At Lhasa itself local tradition maintains that the 'Phrulnang or Jokhang temple was built by Princes Bhrikuti, Nepalese wife of Srong bstan gampo.

^{vi} Shakya, Min Bahadur, *Paubha or Thangka Paintings of Nepal*, Nagarjuna Institute of Exact Methods, Chakupat, Patan,

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^{ix} Roerich, George, *Tibetan Painting*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 1977, p 13

^x Sata Barsiki Mahotsav Smarika, Funshok Choiling Gumba, Takling

^{xi} Short Description of Gods, Goddesses and ritual objects of Buddhism and Hinduism in Nepal, Compiled by Jnan Bahadur Sakya, Handicraft Association of Nepal, Kathmandu, 2000

^{xii} Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan , The Classical Age, (Ed) R. C. Majumdar, Mumbai, Fifth Edition: 1997, p. 543