



Research Paper

The Arrival of Buddhism in Ladakh from Kashmir: A Historical Analysis

Tsewang Dolkar

PhD Scholar

Department of History University of Jammu

ABSTRACT: The transmission of Buddhism from Kashmir to Ladakh marks a significant chapter in the religious and cultural history of the region. This paper examines the historical roots of Buddhism in Ladakh, tracing its origins from Kashmir and analyzing the role played by Buddhist missionaries, trade routes and royal patronage. By drawing on archaeological evidence, inscriptions, and literary sources, the study explores the integration of Mahayana Buddhism in Ladakh and the influence of Kashmiri artistic and religious traditions. The paper also considers the role of Silk Route in disseminating Buddhist teachings and iconography. While political control over Ladakh fluctuated, Kashmir remained a vital religious and cultural bridge. The findings highlight the importance of Kashmir as a conduit for Buddhist philosophy and monastic institutions in Ladakh, shaping the region's spiritual and artistic heritage.

KEYWORDS: Buddhism, Kashmir, Ladakh, Mahayana, Silk Route, Art and Architecture

Received 18 Mar., 2025; Revised 28 Mar., 2025; Accepted 31 Mar., 2025 © The author(s) 2025.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

I. INTRODUCTION

Buddhism has played a crucial role in shaping the religious and cultural landscape of Ladakh, leaving a lasting imprint on its traditions, artistic heritage, and societal structures. The spread of Buddhism to this trans-Himalayan region can be traced back to its historical connections with Kashmir, which was once a prominent center of Buddhist learning, philosophy, and artistic production. The influence of Kashmir on Ladakh's Buddhist heritage is evident in the region's monastic traditions, architectural styles, and iconographic depictions, many of which bear striking similarities to the artistic legacy of the Kashmir Valley.

The transmission of Buddhism from Kashmir to Ladakh was facilitated through multiple channels, including missionary activities, vibrant trade networks along the ancient Silk Route, and the active patronage of local rulers who sought to establish and strengthen Buddhist institutions. The Silk Route, a crucial artery of commerce and cultural exchange, enabled the movement of Buddhist monks, scholars, and artisans between Kashmir and Ladakh, fostering a continuous exchange of religious ideas and artistic motifs. Missionary monks from Kashmir played a pivotal role in propagating Buddhist teachings, translating scriptures, and establishing monasteries that would serve as centers of spiritual and intellectual activity. Additionally, Ladakhi rulers and noble patrons, influenced by their Kashmiri counterparts, contributed to the construction of stupas, temples, and monastic complexes that reflected a fusion of Kashmiri and Tibetan artistic styles. This paper explores how Buddhist traditions and artistic styles from Kashmir influenced Ladakh, examining key sources that provide insight into this religious transmission.

EARLY BUDDHIST PRESENCE

Kashmir was an important hub of Buddhism from the Mauryan period onwards. Emperor Ashoka (3rd century BCE) is traditionally credited with promoting Buddhism in the region and establishing monastic institutions, laying the foundation for its emergence as a center of Buddhist scholarship (Thapar, 1997). While textual sources such as the *Rajatarangini* suggest Ashoka's involvement, direct archaeological evidence remains limited.

By the time of the Kushan dynasty (1st – 3rd century CE), Kashmir had become a key center of Mahayana Buddhism. The Fourth Buddhist Council, traditionally associated with Kanishka I which had taken place in Kashmir, played a crucial role in shaping Mahayana doctrines (Ganhar, 1957). Scholars such as Vasumitra and

Asvaghosa are said to have contributed significantly to this process. Kashmir became key center for the transmission of Buddhism to neighboring Ladakh, Tibet, and Central Asia, influencing the religious and cultural landscape of these areas for centuries.

The transmission of Buddhism from Kashmir to Ladakh was primarily facilitated by Buddhist missionaries who traveled along established trade routes, founding monasteries and stupas at key locations to promote religious and cultural exchange (Snellgrove & Skorupski, 1977). The Fourth Buddhist Council, contributed to the broader dissemination of Buddhist doctrines, which eventually reached the region through network of scholars and monks. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence, including inscriptions in Kharosthi and Brahmi, suggests that Buddhist influence in Ladakh dates back to the Kushan period (Francke, 1914). These inscriptions, found along trade routes and near early monastic sites, indicate the presence of Buddhist communities and the gradual integration of Buddhist thought into the region's sociocultural landscape.

The Silk route played a crucial role in the dissemination of Buddhism, particularly through the trade link connecting Kashmir and Ladakh. This route served as a medium for cultural exchange, facilitating the transmission of Buddhist texts, artistic traditions, and religious practices (Neelis, 2011). Traders and pilgrims traveling through Ladakh contributed to the region's transformation into a center of Buddhist culture. The presence of numerous rock carvings and stupas along these trade routes provides tangible evidence of these exchanges (Bellezza, 2014).

KASHMIRI INFLUENCE ON LADAKHI ART AND ARCHITECTURE

The Buddhist art and architecture of Ladakh exhibit strong influences from Kashmir, reflecting historical and cultural exchanges between the two regions. The monastery of Ladakh, particularly Alchi Sumtsek temple, showcase artistic styles that closely resemble Kashmiri Buddhist art, which itself was shaped by Gandhara traditions. The murals and sculptures at Sumtsek, attributed to Kashmiri artists, provide some of the most compelling evidence of this connection. These artworks, characterized by intricate detailing, delicate shading, and the use of mineral-based pigments, align closely with those found in medieval Kashmiri Buddhist sites (Dewan, 2004).

Furthermore, the presence of Gandhara-style Buddhist figures in Ladakh supports the notion of artistic transmission from Kashmir. The iconographic representations in Ladakhi monasteries, including bodhisattvas adorned with elaborate jewelry and distinct facial features, are reminiscent of Kashmiri Buddhist bronzes and mural paintings (Goepper, 1996). The sculptural style seen in early Ladakhi monasteries, with its emphasis on graceful folds drapery and expressive gestures, further reflects the aesthetic principles of Kashmiri craftsmanship.

The transmission of Kashmiri artistic traditions to Ladakh was facilitated by both trade and religious exchanges, as Buddhist scholars and artisans traveled between these regions. The establishment of Buddhist centers in Ladakh during the 10th to 13th centuries coincided with the flourishing of Kashmiri Buddhist art, reinforcing the influence of Kashmiri styles on Ladakhi religious architecture and iconography (Linrothe, 1999).

BUDDHISM IN LADAKH DURING THE PRE-TIBETAN PERIOD

Before Tibetan influence, Buddhism reached Ladakh from Kashmir, likely during emperor reign of Ashoka as we discussed earlier. However, evidence suggests its presence even earlier, as Kalhana's Rajatarangini mentions Buddhist viharas built by King Surendra (Stein, 1900). Additionally, the Mahavamsa records that Buddhist missionary Majjhantika introducing the faith to Kashmir and neighboring regions in the 3rd century BCE (Geiger, 1912).

Under the Kushan emperor Kanishka, Buddhism flourished in Ladakh, evidence of which we get in Suru and Zaskar valleys. As part of his broader efforts to expand Buddhist influence across the region, monastic institutions and religious structures were established. However, deeply rooted indigenous religious traditions might have limited its widespread acceptance and slowed the process.

With the decline of the Kushans and subsequent invasions by the Huns on Kushans, Buddhist influence weakened significantly in their territories. The loss of royal patronage and disruption of cultural exchanges with Kashmir might have gradually declined, allowing earlier local belief and practices to regain prominence. Despite, remnants of early Buddhism survive in the form of rock carvings and sculptures found in Kargil, Zaskar, Drass, Khalatse, and Mulbekh. Among these, the 8th century Bodhisattva Maitreya at Mulbekh stands out as a remarkable example of early Buddhist art in Ladakh (Rizvi, 199), reflecting the region's historical connection to Indian Buddhism before later Tibetan influences reshaped its religious landscape.

II. CONCLUSION

The transmission of Buddhism from Kashmir to Ladakh was a complex and multidimensional process shaped by monastic networks, trade routes, and cultural exchanges. As a prominent Buddhist center, Kashmir played a crucial role in disseminating religious, philosophical, and artistic traditions, which became deeply ingrained in culture of Ladakh and spiritual landscape. The stylistic and philosophical ties between Kashmir and

Ladakh highlights the extent to which early Buddhist thought and practices in Ladakh were shaped by interactions with the northwestern Buddhist center of India. Although, Tibetan influences eventually redefined the religious identity of Ladakh, the foundational role of Kashmir in introducing and fostering Buddhism in the region remains a critical aspect of its historical development. Future research should continue to explore archaeological, textual and artistic sources to further understand the depth of this historical connection.

REFERENCES

- [1]. Thapar. R., *Asoka and the Decline of the Mauryas*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997.
- [2]. Ganhar, J. N., *Buddhism in Kashmir and Ladakh*, Tribune Press, Ambala, 1957.
- [3]. Snellgrove, D. L., & Skorupski, T., *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*, Aris & Phillips Ltd. Warminster, England, 1977.
- [4]. Francke, A. H., *Antiquities of Indian Tibet*, Superintendent Government Printing, Calcutta, 1914.
- [5]. Neelis, J., *Early Buddhist Transmission and Trade Networks*, Brill, Boston, 2011.
- [6]. Bellezza, J. V., *The Drawn of Tibet: The Ancient Civilization on the Roof of the World*, Rowman & Littlefield, London, 2014.
- [7]. Dewan, P., *Jammu Kashmir and Ladakh*, Manas Publications, New Delhi, 2004.
- [8]. Goepper, R. *Alchi: Ladakh's Hidden Buddhist Sanctuary*, Serindia Publications, London, 1996.
- [9]. Linrothe, R., *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art*, Shambhala, Boston, 1999.
- [10]. Stein, M. A., *Kalhana's Rajatarangini: A Chronicle of the Kings of Kashmir*, Archibald Constable and Company Ltd., Westminster, 1900.
- [11]. Geiger, W., *Mahavamsa or The Great Chronicle of Ceylon*, Oxford University Press, London, 1912.
- [12]. Rizvi, J., *Ladakh: Crossroads of High Asia*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1998.