

Trans-Himalayan Buddhism — Exploring the Cultural Space

A Two Days International Seminar

Organised by

Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Institute of Asian Studies

In collaboration with

Maulana Azad Centre for Research on North East India, Sikkim University, Gangtok

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The majestic Himalayas have been drawing the human imagination as a sacred space from time immemorial. Throughout the ages, the pristine Himalayas have been a refuge for its sacred solitude, contemplation and reinvigoration to many of ancient seers who offered us their enormous wisdom and thus, contributed to the growth of Indian civilisation. Among many other towering personalities of Indian civilisation who hail from the Himalayas, the name of Sakyamuni Gautam Buddha is well known.

The Buddha was born at Lumbini, in the present day's southern part of Nepal and grew up in Kapilavastu from where the majestic mountain peak of Dhaulagiri is visible. We find the narratives of the Jataka story, where the Buddha is asking to his disciple monks, "Do you wish to go a wandering in the Himalayas"? (*Gaacchissatha pana Himavanta carrikau*, Ja V, 415). This is a clear indication that taking refuge to Himalayas for meditative introspection was a common practice pre-existed the Buddha's time. Hence, from this perspective, Buddhism in the present time with its widely varied forms and manifestations are in one way or others are linked to the Himalayas.

In the subsequent periods after the Buddha, his followers developed many sublime thoughts, and beliefs keep on circulating in Tibetan traditions that many earthly paradises are hidden in the Himalayas and many of which are believed to be consecrated by Guru Padmasambhava. Thus, the Himalayas occupy a special position in the later phase of development of the Mahayana traditions. The Himalayan Buddhism or the Mahayana traditions had spread to Mongol regions from the earliest days. It is a well-documented fact that Emperor Kublai Khan made Himalayan Buddhism as state religion across his vast empire in the thirteenth century.

Over the centuries Buddhism evolved as it spread from its place of origin, the Indian subcontinent. Being a liberal religion, wherever the teaching of the Buddha reached it got a new manifestation by the way of articulation of the local myths, symbols and contexts. Thus, the

concept of Naga in its original form of Indian subcontinent turned out to be dragon in Chinese form of Buddhism while articulating the specific metaphorical expression and the context.

Over a vast period of human civilisation, through different waves, Buddhism spread to Central, East and Southeast Asia and at one time or another it influenced most of the Asian continent. No wonder, we find numerous forms, movements and manifestation of Buddhism under the broader schools of thoughts such as Theravada, Mahayana and Vajrayana. Yet, in its all forms and manifestations the fundamental teachings of the Buddha, the doctrine of the four noble truths, the noble eightfold path and the theory of dependent origin remain intact. In fact, in all these traditions the training of mindfulness and achieving psychic power to make one free from sufferings remain objectively the same in all its forms and manifestation, although the techniques might have been different.

For various reasons, Buddhism began to spread in the west from the last century onwards and by now attracted many. Apart from the east, many western scholars are now dedicating their time and scholarly endeavors in exploring, understanding and practicing the wider dimensions of Buddhism and seeking its applicability in resolving the complex social problems of modern time. In a context like these, the members of the Western Buddhist Order are also adding new temperaments in reinterpretation of Buddhism with modern scientific tools and techniques.

In a context like this, the objective endeavors of this seminar on “**Trans-Himalayan Buddhism- Exploring the Cultural Space**” would be looking into the vast constituent elements of the Himalayan Buddhism and their manifestations in the forms of arts and architecture. As these treasures of human experience cannot be appreciated fully without linking it with passing time and evolution patterns, so efforts would be made by the participant scholars to trace out such patterns with explanatory causal variables of the time. Cultural variation in the form of trans-localisation of culture is a part of any human intuitive endeavor. Thus, the diverse aspect of manifestation of Trans-Himalayan Buddhism will be taken care of in the form of case studies by the expert participant of this seminar. Efforts will be made to address the points of interpretative Buddhism in the modern age of scientific outlook and linking the same with different manifestations of Buddhism and western thoughts and philosophies. Thus, the seminar will be divided broadly into four sessions as given hereunder.

Tentative Sessions:

Session-1

Exploring the Constituent Elements, Cultures, Traits, Beliefs, Practices and Myths associated with Trans-Himalayan Buddhism.

Session-2

Manifestation of Trans-Himalayan Buddhism in the forms of Arts and Architecture.

Session-3

Trans-localisation of Buddhist Culture and Case Studies of specific manifestation in the localised context.

Session- 4

Buddhism and Modern Western Thoughts: Interpretative and Explanatory approaches to Buddhism and its applications.

An Edited Volume would be prepared on the basis of the papers received and presentations made at the Conference. For this purpose, a brief paper ranging from 3000-4000 (including 250 words abstract) words with references is to be submitted to MAKAIAS before the Conference. Young researchers are encouraged to apply.