

Rituals in a refugee Buddhist Monastery

- Raj Kumar Singh,

Ph.D. Scholar,

Department of Anthropology,

University of Delhi

Buddhism in Tibet

Buddhism as a religion is based on the teachings of Lord Buddha (Siddhartha Gautam) who achieved enlightenment during the 5th century BC. A person can attain liberation (*Nirvana*) through the teachings of Lord Buddha. Buddhism is divided into different sects or schools of Buddhism. Buddhism is divided into different sects or schools of Buddhism. However, the two most widely practiced and followed sects are Theravada and Mahayana Buddhism. Theravada is the doctrine of elders and is majorly practiced in Sri Lanka, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, and Laos while Mahayana Buddhism (Great Vehicle) is practiced in China, Taiwan, Korea, Mongolia, and Tibet (Gellner, 2001).

Buddhism reached Tibet in the 7th century CE and absorbed certain characteristics of the indigenous religion “*Bon*” which includes tantric symbolic rituals and systems of reincarnation of Lamas¹ and the presence of numeral gods in its pantheon. Tibetan Buddhism absorbed the teachings of both the schools and most of its spiritual heritage is derived from both of these schools and is present in the form of the new school known as Vajrayana Buddhism. Vajrayana Buddhism is characterized by many rituals, mantras, and deities.

The arrival of Tibetan refugees in India

Tibetan refugees arrived in India after 1959 when the People's Republic of China started occupying their Land in the name of cultural revolution. His Holiness Dalai Lama fled to India in April 1959 with 10,000 of his followers crossing the Himalayan range and since then Tibetans are living as a refugee in different states of India. The present population of Tibetan refugees is around 80,000 to 1,000,000 and the majority of them are living in Karnataka, Himachal Pradesh, and Delhi. In all these places they were given separate lands as demanded by His Holiness Dalai Lama to develop according to the requirements of the Tibetan refugees. A major chunk of this land was used to develop monasteries and residences for the Tibetan

¹ Lama is the honorific title of the head of the monasteries or venerated spiritual masters.

community. Monasteries were built to provide teaching to the Buddhist monks who came from Tibet and had the responsibility of saving the teachings of the Buddha and the Sangha.²

Delhi from the Lens of Buddhism

The major Tibetan refugee settlement is located in Delhi is Majnu Ka Tila. Majority of the Tibetans refugees are living in there since the Government of India provided them space for living in Delhi. Majnu ka Tila acts as a place for assemblage of the Tibetan refugees living in Delhi. It holds an important space as it acts as a junction for tourists and pilgrimages going to Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh.³

However, this research study is ethnographic in nature and is based in a Tibetan Buddhist Monastery located at Laxmi Nagar in East Delhi. There are various Buddhist shrines in Delhi but this Buddhist shrine holds great importance as it is one of the oldest monasteries built by the exiled Tibetan community at Jagat Ram Park in Laxmi Nagar and it remains totally unexplored in anthropological terms. This Buddhist Monastery was built by Janghchuup Choeling as a division of the Drepung Loseling monastery which is the largest monastery in Tibet and Karnataka for practicing Buddhism and promotes the Buddhist tradition of wisdom and compassion. This monastery belongs to the Gelug pa sect which is the largest sect of Tibetan Buddhism and is headed by His Holiness Dalai Lama. It is a three-story building. On the ground floor, there is a premise in which significant Buddhist festivals like Buddha Purnima are celebrated. The Tibetan mantra “*OM MANI PADME HUM*” was inscribed on the main gate of the monastery in Tibetan language. The monastery acts as a place of resident for monks who are from the Drepung Loseling monastery situated in Bylakuppe, Karnataka. The monastery is a three-floor building with rooms on second and third floor and a common kitchen at the first floor. The praying hall is on the ground floor with stupa and idols of Lord Buddha.

Methodology of the research study

This study will help in providing an anthropological perspective of the ritual practices in Tibetan Buddhism. The present research study is expected to extend the domain of the literature of anthropological knowledge. The projects limit their study in knowing the rituals practices and festivals performed in Buddhism and their importance in the life of the refugee Tibetan Buddhists. The observation was made in the inner sacrum of the monastery and the photographs

² Sangha is the monastic order in Buddhism and Sangha, Dhamma and Buddha forms the three-fold refuge of Buddhism.

³ Dharamshala is the political and religious center of Tibetan refugee community in India.

were captured using a mobile phone. Ten monks and twenty devotees were interviewed for this research study and their interviews were collected using a mobile phone recorder with their permission.

Anthropology of ritual practices in Buddhism

The origin of rituals is believed to be found in totemism and ritual development took place in different stages. It is very difficult to define rituals because of their diverse forms and complexity as a phenomenon. However, ritual can be defined as a set of official activities which possess symbolic value in society. There are different rituals in different societies and in different religions. Victor Turner defines Ritual as: “Prescribed formal behaviour for occasions not given over to technical routines, having reference to beliefs in mystical beings or powers regarded as the first and final causes of all effects” (Geertz, 1973). Scholars like Edmund Leach defined rituals as culturally defined behaviour which can be regarded as a form of social communication (Leach, 1968). This definition of rituals by Edmund Leach in which he regarded rituals as a cognitive category was accepted by other scholars such as Roy Rappaport.

In the case of many scholars like Emile Durkheim believed that Buddhism is an atheistic religion as there is no existence of supernatural beings in it and the whole of Buddhism is based on meditation and prayers (Durkheim, 1912). However, Durkheim was criticized by Marco Orru and Amy Wang in their article “Durkheim, Religion, and Buddhism” by stating that due to the long journey of Buddhism (since 580 B.C.) and due to formation of different schools of Buddhism, a lot of doubts have risen regarding Buddhism being a religion or not and whether Buddha was a god or not. In reality, in Buddhism there exist multiple supernatural beings as deities do exist especially in Mahayana Buddhism (Maitreya Buddha, Amitabh Buddha, Medicine Buddha, and several other deities) which proves that Buddhism is a theistic religion. (Marco Orru and Amy Wang, 1992).

Major findings of the research study

Tibetan Buddhism is divided into different sects with presence of different deities. The majority of them believe in tantrism and perform rituals. Tibetan Buddhism has developed a variety of rituals and practices. Most of these rituals are performed on the altar which is used to purify the negative karma of the practitioners. Rituals are performed by Buddhist Lamas and lay practitioners in order to visualise a given deity and mandala and in turn it helps devotees to undergo alteration in their observation of realism. The ritual can be divided into two categories: Individual or Private ritual and Community Ritual.

Private Rituals of the Tibetan monks and Lay Tibetan Buddhists

Although, private rituals are not part of a performance and neither they are socially meaningful as they don't have public content and as Spiro mentions Private rituals don't qualify to be studied by anthropologists (Spiro, 1966). However, in this case, it becomes a necessity to study the private rituals of the monks as they are here to learn and practice these rituals moreover according to the monks although they are performing private rituals, they are able to synchronise their mental level with others so, the performance of ritual by a single monk is beneficial to all the person present in the monastery. The private rituals include meditation, chanting mantras, revolving the prayer wheels, and presenting various offerings to the deities.

During my interview with one of the monks naming Tenzin⁴ he told me that in early morning most of the monks meditate in their own room as it helps them in attaining better mindfulness. The mantras are recited with 108 beads rosary or a prayer wheel and it is the most common form of worship. The two foremost formulas are "*OM MANI PADME HUM*" which is recited for Avalokitesvara who is the bodhisattva of kindness and can release human beings for the six realms of rebirth and "*OM VAJRA GURU SIDDHI HUM*" which is the mantra of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche) (Lopez, 1997).

Incense sticks are also lighted and offered to the deities, bodhisattvas, and Lord Buddha. The lighting of the butter lamp in the butter lamp house is also one of the daily rituals performed by them as it signifies the removal of darkness present and their movement towards enlightenment. They pray to Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and deities by offering sacrificial cakes (gtor ma) which are made from cereals and butter.

These cakes are a part of the eight offerings of external worship (phyi-mchod) and also part of the offering of the five senses. Sand mandalas are created and are offered to the deities but they are also destroyed at the end of rituals and this destruction is explained by the monks as a symbol of the temporariness of the all-material things in the life of the people.

Community rituals of the Tibetan monks and Lay Tibetan Buddhists

Community rituals involve ordination rituals of the novice and ordained abbots and purification rituals which are performed every month, rituals of the accord to higher positions in the monastic hierarchy. However, in this monastery, communal rituals were performed only at the time of the birth anniversary of Lord Buddha (Buddha Poornima). As Buddha Poornima is a

⁴ The name of the monk has been changed because of ethical concern and on the demand of the monk.

propitious event all the lay Tibetans also join the monastics for celebration. They light butter lamp and incense sticks and prostrate in front of the deities as a symbol of respect and asks them for blessings. Some of the lay Tibetans also offer food, butter tea and give donations (Dana) to the monasteries which are later utilised for buying necessary products for the monastic or for building rooms or statues (Stupa). As per the lay people giving donations to the monasteries add merit to the Karma of the individual. Community rituals are also performed for the local deity who is the custodian of a particular region.

Conclusions

Tibetan Buddhist rituals are an important part of the devotional life of refugee Tibetans and many of these rituals are actually part of *Bon* religion which was the dominant religion before the arrival of Buddhism. Rituals performed by the practitioners are also a form of expressing gratitude to the Lord Buddha. Monks are the religious leaders of the Tibetan refugee community and through rituals, they are able to make contact with the local refugee Tibetan and transmit the teachings of His Holiness Dalai Lama and Lord Buddha and continue their support for preserving Tibetan Buddhism and culture. Ritual practices are a primary way of attaining enlightenment and at times can help the people in taking care of the uncertainty present in their life. Community rituals are helpful in binding the whole Tibetan community and help in the social integration of the Tibetan society which is living in India and still hopeful of returning to their homeland 'Tibet'.

A future area of Research

The incompetency to understand the Tibetan language was one of the major drawbacks from the researcher's side although most of the Tibetan monks and lay Tibetan Buddhists were able to understand and speak both English and Hindi. Textual knowledge of Tibetan Buddhist philosophy would have given more perspective to the study and in the future more ethnographic data should be collected from different sects of Tibetan Buddhism which will lead to a much better understanding of ritual practices.

Conflict of Interest

This is an original piece of work and has not been published/sent for publication.

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