



TABO MONASTERY AND CONSERVATION CHALLENGES DUE TO THE CLIMATE CHANGE

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LAHUL AND SPITI DISTRICT MAP



LEGEND

- Intl. Boundary
- State Boundary
- District Boundary
- Major Road
- District Headquarter
- Major Town
- Other Town
- ~ River

TABO

Map not to Scale

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(Last Updated on 12th June 2013)

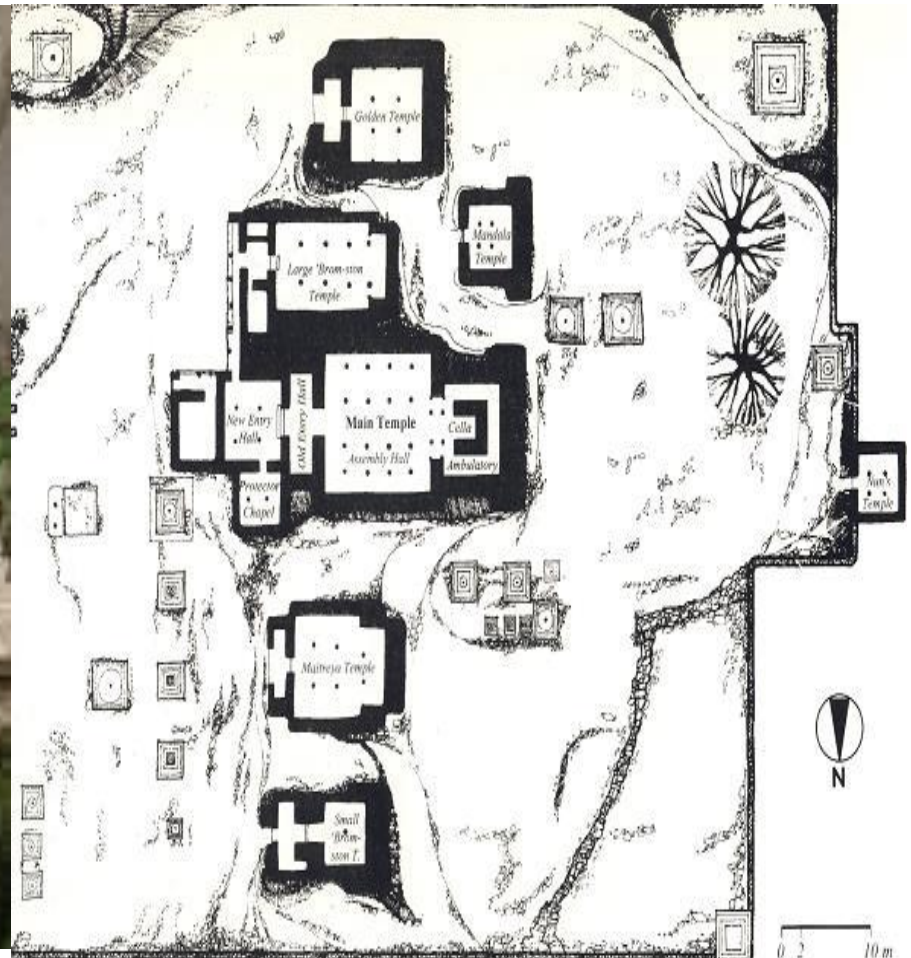


Road from Sumdo to Tabo in Spiti

Half Tunnel on Hindustan Tibet Road



INTRODUCTION



The Tabo complex contains eight temples. The Group is enclosed by a wall of mud and stone. Each temple is single storied externally non descript building.



- The walled temple complex of Tabo blends itself into the surrounding village of mud and wooden beam buildings. The modest exterior of the ancient monastery hides the splendor of murals, stuccos and scriptures that are preserved inside for more than thousand years.
- “Tabo monastery is of singular importance because of its art as well as its pivotal role in the transmission of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism and culture to Tibet in the 10th/11th century when it was degenerating in country of its origin-India. Tabo is the oldest continuously functioning Buddhist monument in India and the Himalayas with its original decoration and iconographic program intact.”

- “While Muslim armies were advancing to the north and south and instability prevailed in Kashmir to the west; in the Guge area a succession of forward thinking leaders, both kings and priests, were focused on promoting a Buddhist renaissance to purify the degenerated practices in the region.
- This renaissance was initiated around 985 AD by King Yeshe O (959-1036 AD), third king of the dynasty known by his monastic name, who took monastic vows of renouncing war.”

- Over a relatively short period, a sizeable monastic population was created and educated. Scores of temples were constructed and decorated with elaborate wall paintings. Teachers and artists were brought in, copper statues were produced and imported in large quantities from Kashmir; texts were translated, published and used to educate the clergy.”
- “throughout the 11th century these monasteries were unparalleled for their artistic, literary and philosophical achievements.”

Patrons



**Lama Ye-she-'od
(959-1036)**

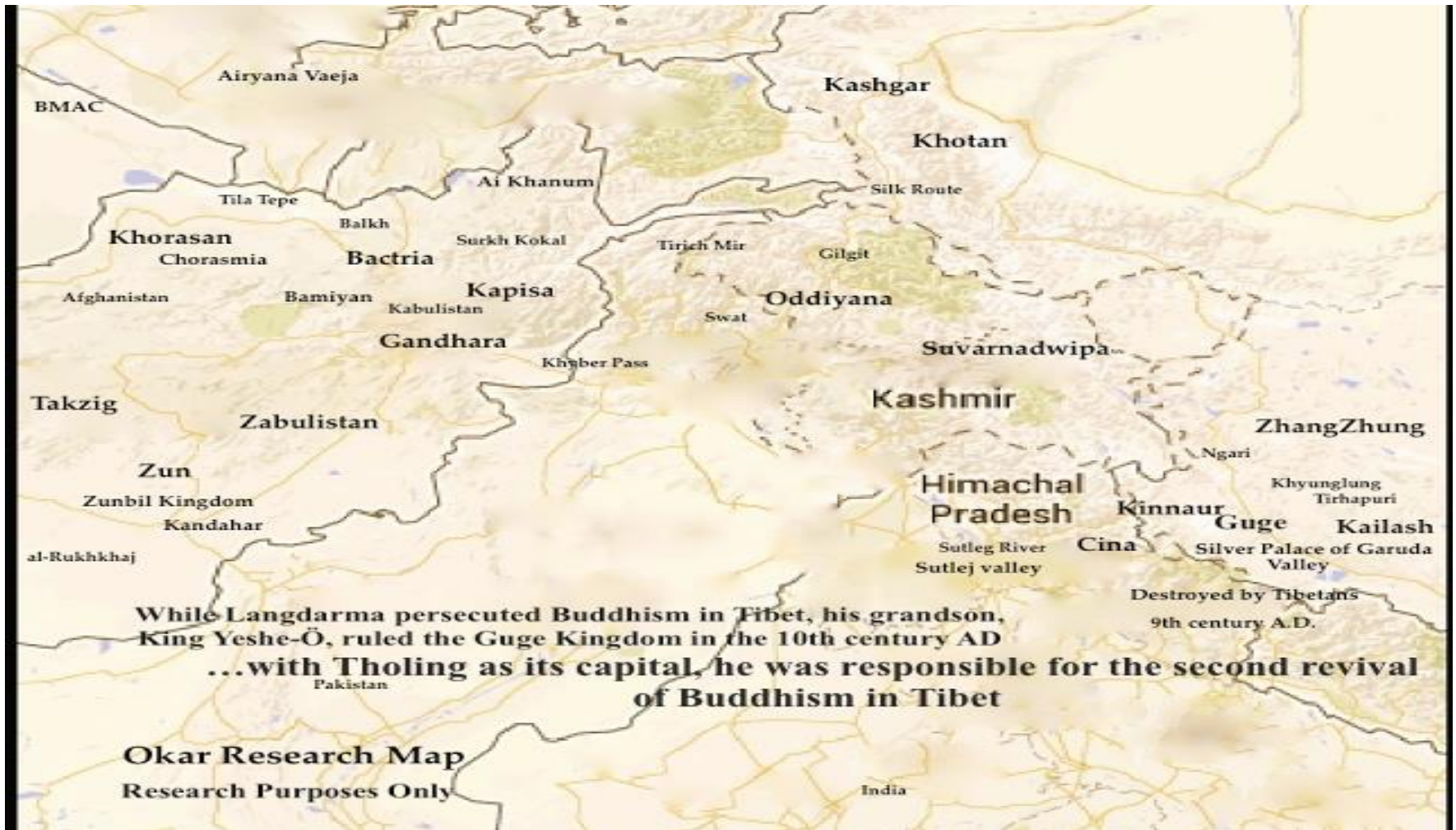


**Lama Byang –Chub-'od
(959-1040)**

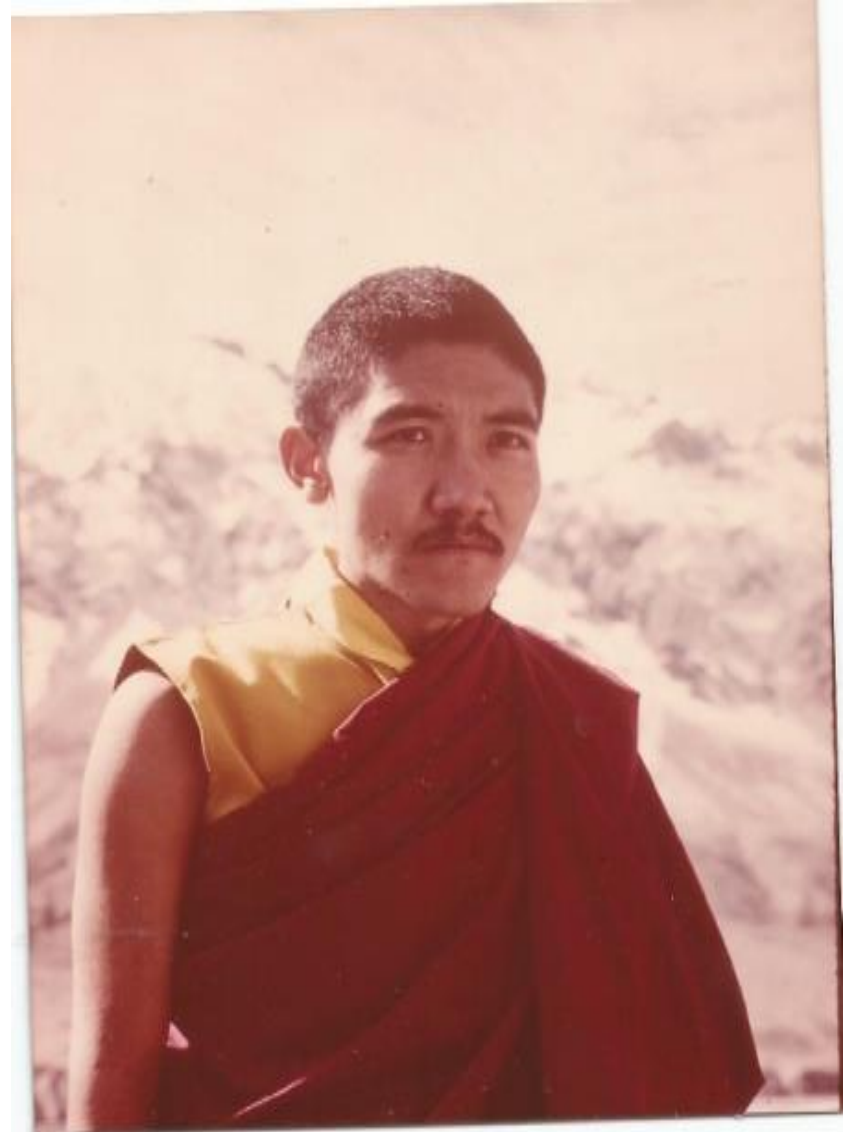
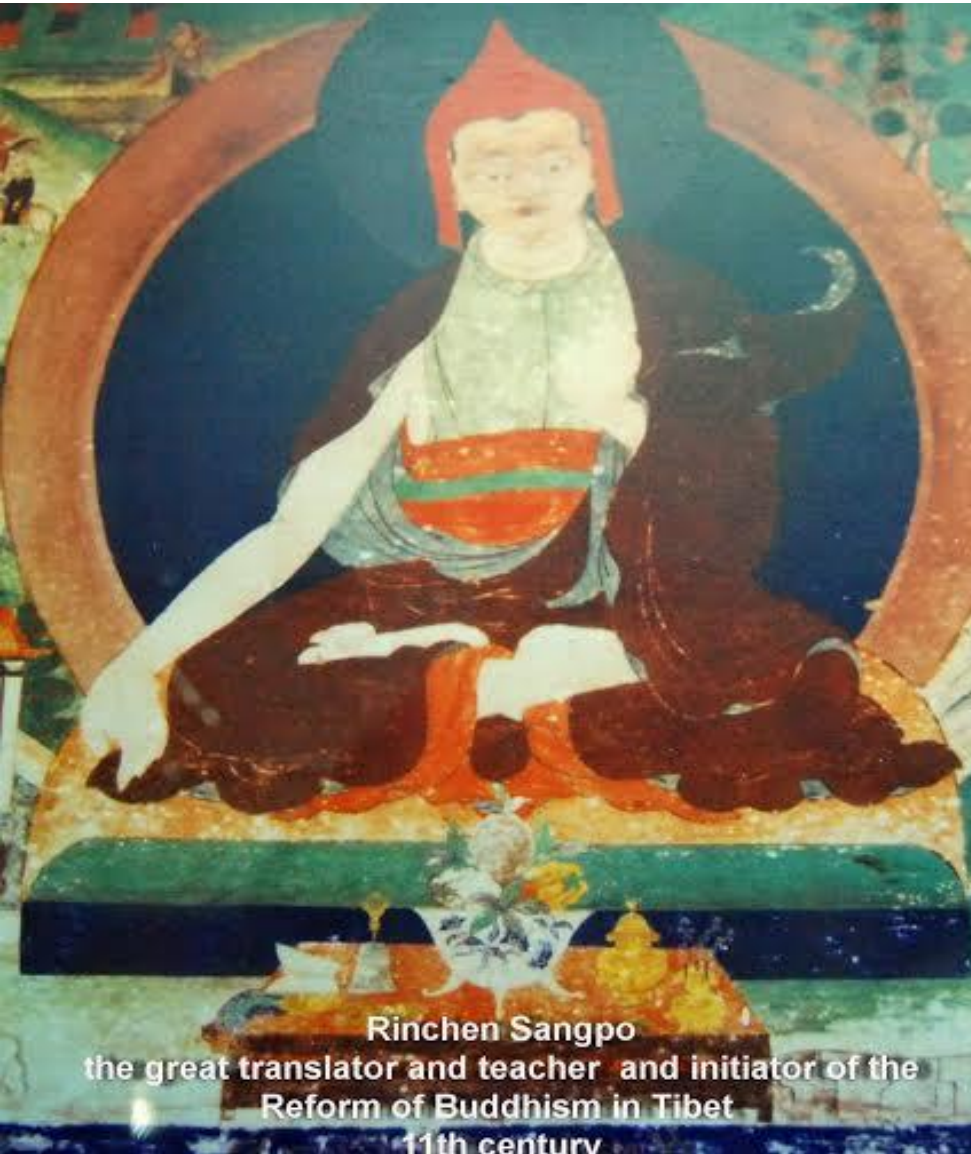
THE PATRONS

- Lama Ye-she-'od and Lama Byang –Chub-'od
- They were the patrons of Tabo monastery as well as key figures in the establishment of Tibetan culture in this western Himalayan region and transmission of Indian Mahayana Buddhism to Tibet.
- The kings of Purang-Guge always propagated Buddhism.

Guge Kingdom-10th Century



RIN-CHEN-BZANG-PO



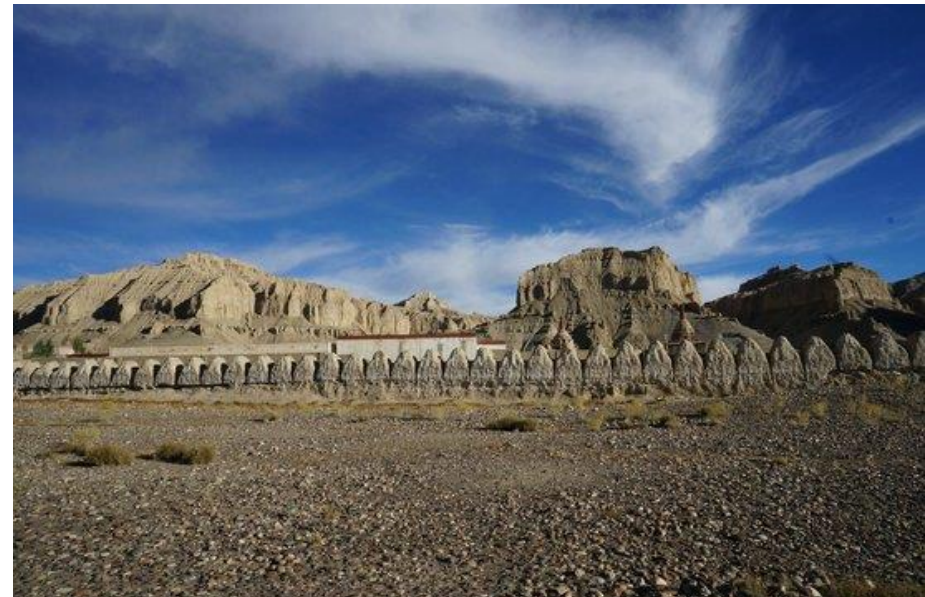
- “Lotsava R., Tibetan lama from western Tibet, is without a doubt one of the most important figures in the history of Tibetan Buddhism and a man distinctly representative of the period in which he lived.
- He earned the title of the Great Translator
- (lo-tsa-ba-chen-po) Rin-chen-bzang-po because of translations he made of Prajnaparamita and numerous ancient treatises from Sanskrit into Tibetan.

- It was through the translations, explanations and elaborations that great part of sacred literature reached Tibet.
- The teachings of Buddha were degenerated into tantric rituals which had become ends themselves.
- As it is known there was no dearth of translated treatises these were available from Chinese, from language of Gilgit, from Uigur but Lotsava created his own style and language which had general appeal.

Only in this way could they transplant it in Tibet and continue there that uninterrupted chain of masters and disciples.

The Lotsava is credited not only as a great translator but is associated with great building activity which took place in around 1000 AD. “In Ladakh, in Lahul, in Spiti, in Guge, in Purang, along the valley of Sutlej there is not a small ancient temple that tradition still does not connect with the great Lotsava.”

The new Tholingmath Monastery on left. The destroyed during cultural revolution old Tholingmath Monastery is on right.



LAMA YE-SHE- 'OD



- Ye-she-'od founded Tabo early in his missionary activity and before he had collaboration with Rinchen.
- Latter was at that time studying Buddhism in Kashmir.
- “However, the great translator Rin-chen may have been responsible for the stunning iconographic program which we see today in the assembly hall.”

PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURES

Tabo was built in two phases both in paintings and sculpture.

The 996 AD phase has regional and Central Asian inspired paintings which are quite different from phase two which are Kashmiri inspired of 11th century.

Paintings of Tabo Monastery



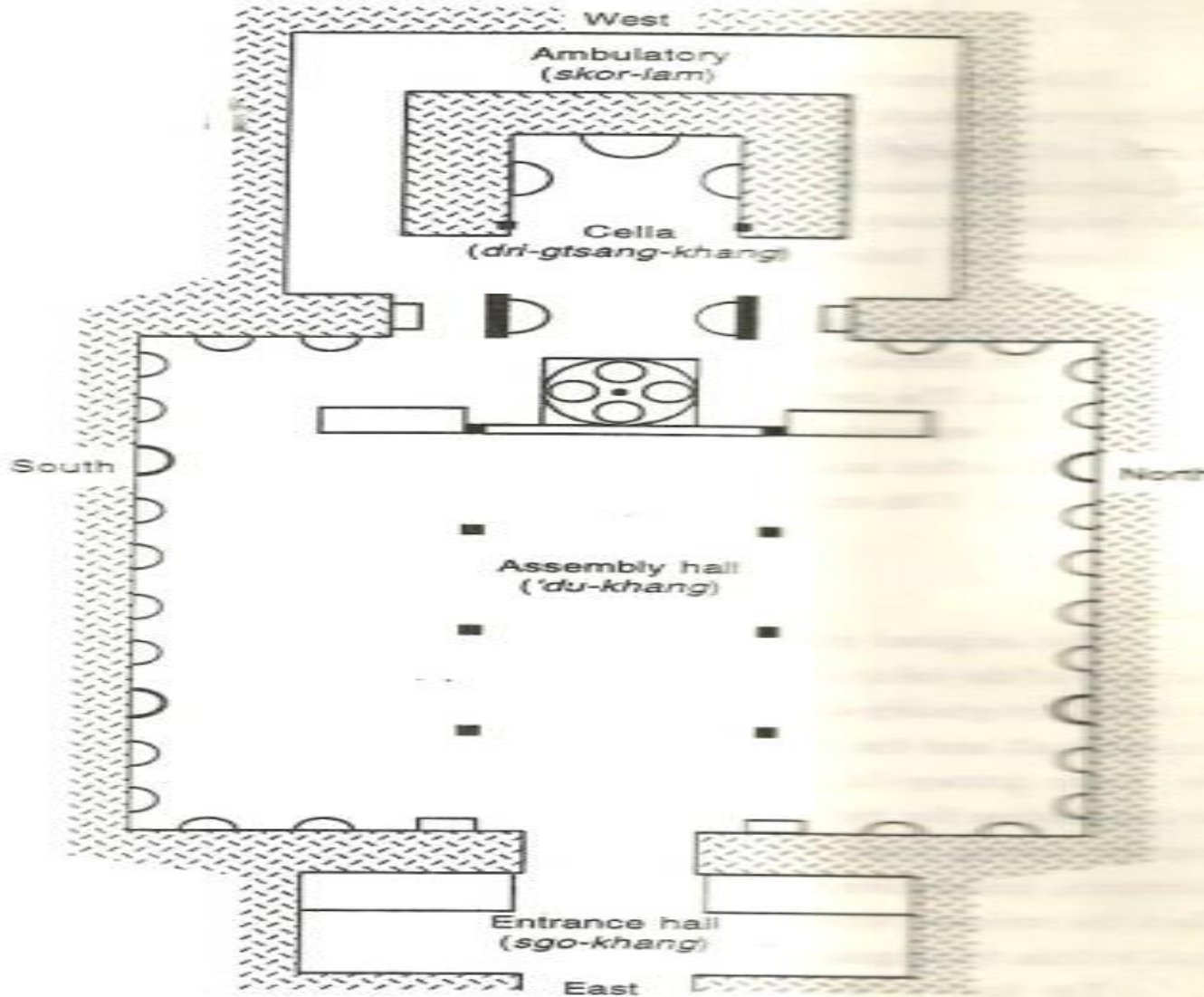
“Most important is the protectress of the temple, Wi-nyu-myin, a local deity, unknown in the Tibetan Buddhism. The style and iconography of the other deities dating to this time reflect influences from Central Asia, particularly Dunhuang.”



- A comparison of different iconographic themes in 996 AD and 11th century reflect social and political changes.
- Indian (Kashmir) style 11th century of the religious images show ideological change and support to Indian Mahayana culture. The cultural change, “reflect expansion of the provincial boundaries of this West Tibetan dynasty into the cosmopolitan world of Indian monastic Buddhism.”

DU-KHANG

The Tabo Main Temple (*gtsug-lag-khang*)



- Inside Du-Khang, all round the walls are thirty two life sized stucco divinities. They are both feminine and masculine. Some are of peaceful nature, others horrific, colored in red, deep blue, yellow , green or simply covered with white paper.
- The stuccos are common features in the monasteries built by Rinchen Bzang-Po.





The murals on the walls of the larger part of Du-Khang can be divided into three chapters:

- Upper register contains series of devotional paintings done in a elegant style.
- Middle register is seated thirty two stuccos interspersed with finely painted goddesses.
- Bottom register around the entire Du-Khang contain narratives mainly on life of Lord Buddha.

The Central Deity

A magnificent image of Vairochana is positioned at the head of columns.



The paintings depict twelve chief moments which have become traditional in iconography.

- It is clear that the paintings are inspired by Indian mythology and are far from the Chinese influence.
- There is direct Kashmiri and Eastern India influence. The number of deities is 36 which is significant, 'dhatu' or elementaries are thirty six in number.

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

- Tabo also strives to put the cherished values of universal compassion and altruism in practice by engaging in social welfare activities for the benefit of inhabitants of the surrounding tribal region.
- One such endeavour is the residential Serkong School, in the name of previous abbot, Serkong Tsenshab Rinpoche which provides all round good quality free education to local children specially from economic poor background.

The school was set up in 1999 by then Abbot of Tabo Monastery late Ven Geshe Dr Sonam Wangdai.



LATE VEN GESHE DR SONAM WANGDUI



SOLAR PANEL



A solar panel recently donated enables continuity in classes even in winters when area gets frozen.

Besides modern education it keeps the values of local culture alive in from fast dwindling state elsewhere.

- Tabo had the privilege of conducting *Kalachakra* initiation by His Holiness the Dalai Lama in 1984
- Again in 1996, when the monastery celebrated millennium years second Kalachakra initiation was conducted by His Holiness along with an international seminar on Buddhist culture.

CLIMATE CHANGES & CONSERVATION CHALLENGES

The Monastery, believed to be founded in 996 AD and renovated in 1042, is entirely made of earthen architecture topped with wooden ceilings. “It is interesting to notice that even to this day, the Tabo Monastery has preserved extraordinary frescoes (paintings) on its mud walls (over earth plaster work having canvass support) and wooden ceiling which make the monastery a representative place of most unique importance.”

“ In one recent study, by developing an annual (August-July) precipitation series back to 1330 CE for the first time, and using a tree ring data network of Himalayan cedar (*Cedrus deodara* (Roxb.) G. Don) obtained from the Lahaul – Spiti region (in the western Himalaya, India), it is revealed that the rainfall reconstruction showed a high magnitude multidecadal droughts during the 14th/15th centuries, and thenceforth a gradual increase in precipitation.

The increasingly wet conditions during the 20th century are found consistent with other long –term precipitation reconstructions, which reflect a large-scale intensification of the hydrological cycle, coincident with what is anticipated due to global warming. The study, which is more or less also supported by the empirical data, needs to be taken in all seriousness and prepare ourselves for future course of action.”

Report by ASI

CONCLUSION

Tabo Monastery had played a pivotal role in the advent of Buddhism in western Himalayas and western Tibet in 10th/11th th century when Indian and Tibetan monks had translated and interpreted together ancient literature from Sanskrit to Tibetan and vividly documented in the wall paintings, sculptures and stuccos. These tangible remains of that era have contributed to enhance the cultural values of distinct monastic complex which has set itself well in exceptional ecological settings so far for a thousand years.

Tabo Monastery contains the largest number and best preserved group of Buddhist monuments in Himachal Pradesh. The increasing wet conditions, of snow and rain, in Spiti, which was a dry desert even few years back, need coordinated and immediate actions by the state agencies, academic institutions and international organizations to save the precious treasure from the menace of climate change.

References

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2. August Hermann Francke , a German Tibetologist, (1870-1930) He was a Moravian Church missionary in Himalayas in Ladakh. He travelled in 1909 to Satluj valley, Spiti and Ladakh for four months mostly on foot and sometimes on yak when rarefied air compelled him to do so as roads were rare and not roadworthy in these remote hill tracks. Later, he became Professor at Berlin. His works include '1901 A Sketch of Ladakhi Grammar, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal*' and '*Antiquities of Indian Tibet- Vol 1 Personal Narrative of a Journey in 1910 from Simla to Srinagar.*'
3. Pritzker Thomas, *The Wall Paintings of Nyag Lhakhang Kharpo*, Orientations, Hong Kong, (published by Orientations Magazine Ltd.) March 2008, p 102. Author came upon the cave temple while in his quest to find out more about early Guge kingdom in west Tibet.
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Daboom Tulku, Glenn 11, Mulin, '*Compassion and Reincarnation in Tibetan Art,*' Tibet House, New Delhi, p2
5. Deborah, p 6.
6. Pritzker, p 102
7. Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo-Tibetica II*, Rin C'n Bzan Po, Roma Reale Accademia D'italia, 1933-x1, p 6 (translated under directions of Thomas J Pritzker, *Commentaries on Ta-Pho Monastery and the Works of Rinchen Zangpo*, 1988. (unpublished)
8. Do, p 9.
9. Do, p 10.
10. Deborah, p 7.
11. _Do, p 7.
12. _Do, p 8
13. _Do, p 8
14. _Do, p 10
15. _Do, p 11
16. _Celebrated Zorawar Singh (1786-1841) was the general of Dogra King Maharaja Gulab Singh of Jammu. The general invaded western Tibet in May 1841 and one of his column had passed through Kyi, Kaza, and Tabo.
17. _Ven. Zangpo La, a senior monk at Tabo in conversation with author in March 2016.
18. _Kalachakra Initiation is sacred teaching by a Vajra Master (senior monk normally by His Holiness the Dalai Lama) to his disciple (s) for reaching a pure inner world while still living in imperfect earthly world. During the 12 days' long process positive energy is released through a Mandala made by the monks and which purifies our mind, body and speech.
19. _Concept Paper for a one day symposium 'Climate Change vis-à-vis Tabo Buddhist Monastery-Importance, Threats, Status and Conservation Challenges beyond 2014.' Govt of India, Archaeological Survey of India Shimla, F No 9-13/ACADEMIC/2014 dated 5 Feb 2015. P1
20. _Do, p 2
21. _Do, p 2
22. Ven Zangpo La, a senior monk at Tabo in e mail reply dated 19 April 2016.

THANK YOU & TASHI DELE