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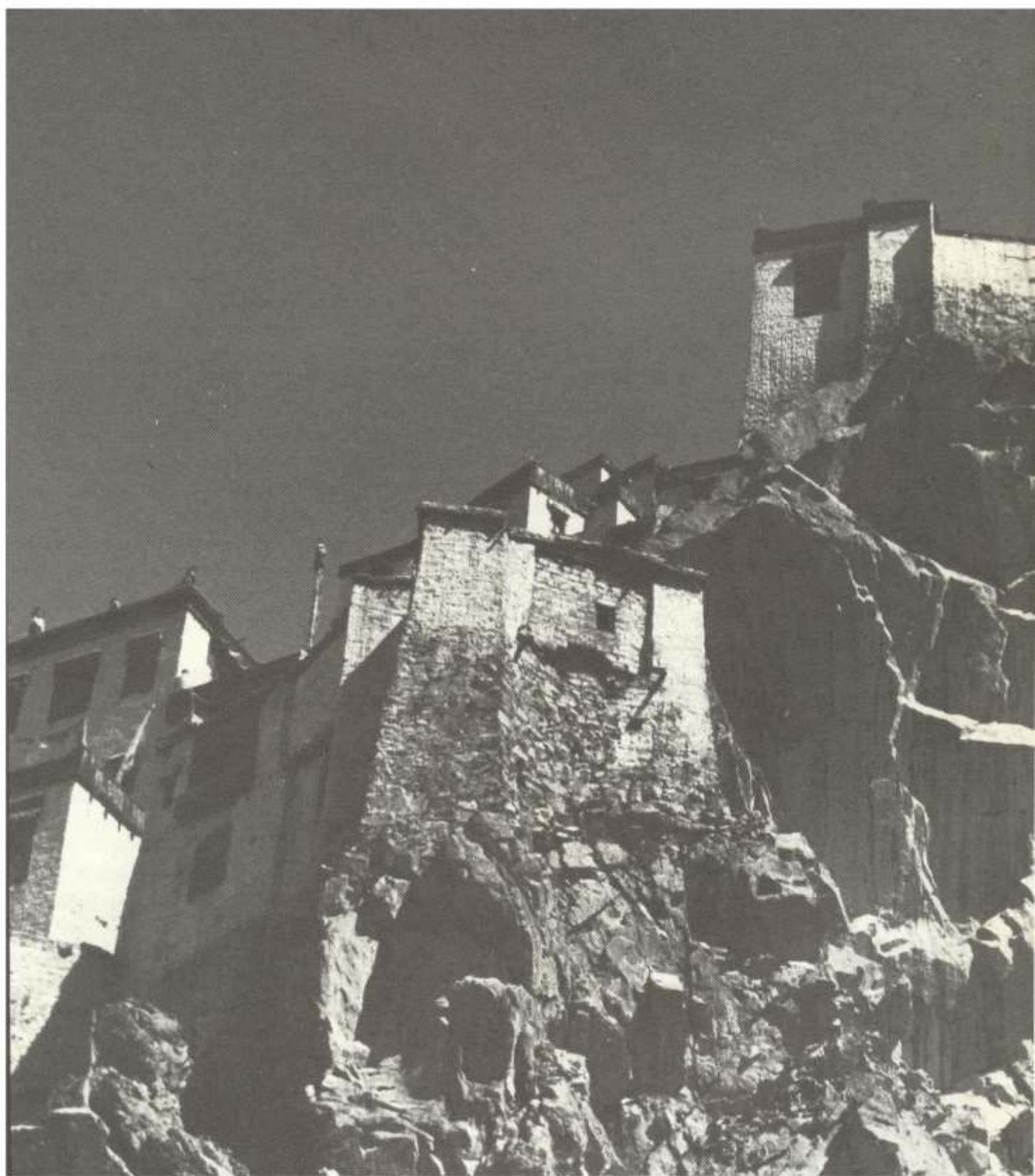
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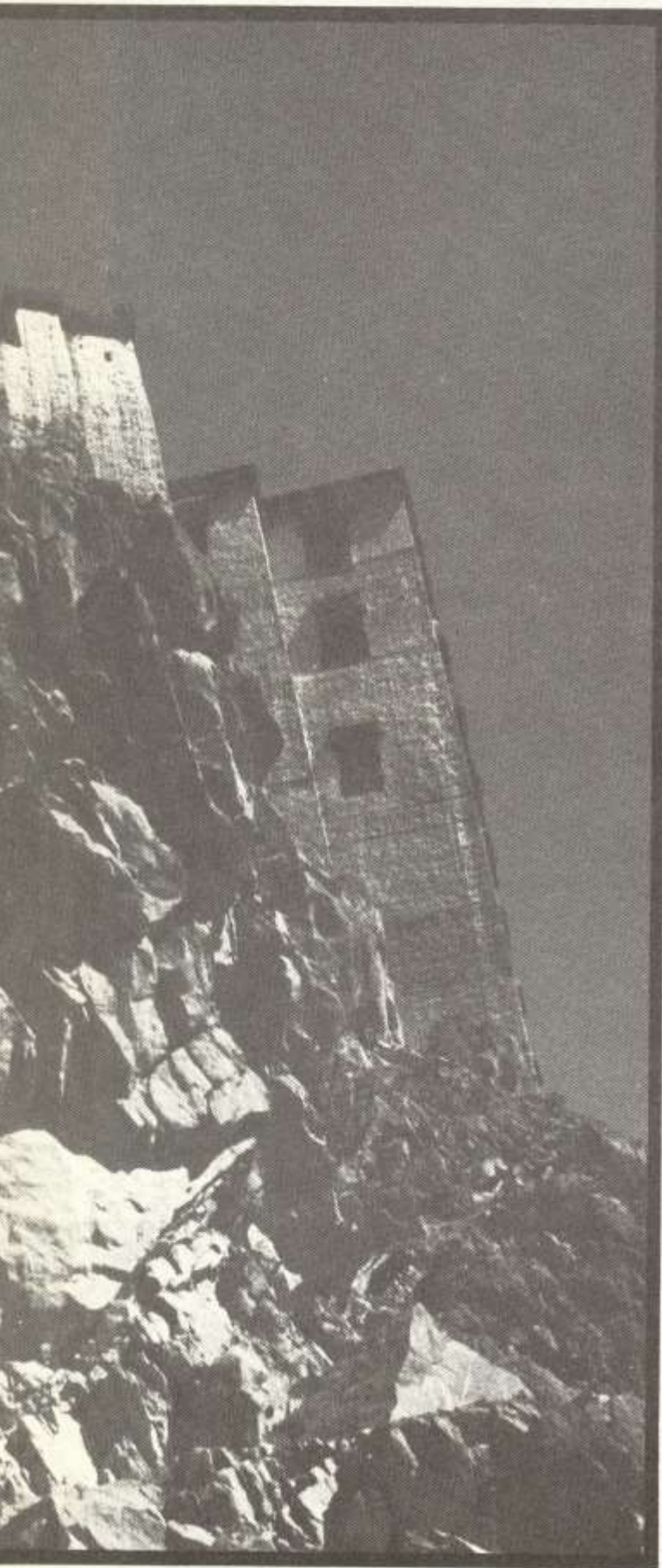
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# The Context of ARCHITECTURE IN TIBETAN



# BUDDHISM



## Romi Khosla

The Tibetan culture, like any other, is a part of history and hence involved in the process of change. The middle of this century however brought such a sudden accelerated change to it that, at long last, its deep roots were finally wrenched out. Since its evolution into a mature Buddhist society during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the aristocratic and religious elite had formed a pattern of social organisation which was aimed at slowing down the effects of change by establishing institutions that had regulated and monitored progress. The stratification of the society into a rigid structure was aimed at levelling off potential antagonism to a minimum. Before 1950 (the date of the arrival of the Chinese Peoples Liberation Army into Tibet) Tibetan society was composed of a ruling elite of religious and lay heads who owned enormous private estates at one end of the scale and the peasants and nomad herdsmen who toiled to produce the surplus wealth on which the elite lived at the other end. Within this polarised pattern however, there were a great many subtleties in social relationships, both within and between each class, which are interesting to examine as they were indirectly symbolised in the architecture.

Tibet continues to be one of the most inaccessible places in the world. Historically, the reasons for this have been a mixture of geographical and political factors. The general level of the valleys in the western and central parts varies between 11,000 to 16,000 feet above sea level (3,500 – 5,000 metres). The distances are enormous and the modes of transport were, until 1959, very primitive. Ten years ago the journey from Lhasa to Peking took eight months of hard travel. The country is surrounded by massive mountain ranges several valleys deep to the North, South and West. The north-eastern part of Tibet is relatively flat, desolate and uninhabited. In the north-west the Kun-Lun ranges naturally separate Sinkiang from Tibet and thus over three-sevenths of the country is a freezing desert where only occasional herds of wild animals are to be seen. The centres of Tibetan life lie in the south where the intricate river networks of the upper Yangtse

(flowing to China), Salween (flowing to Burma), Mekong (flowing to Cambodia) and the Tsangpo (flowing to Bangla Desh) which irrigated the land and allowed most of the 2½ million Tibetans to subsist at a basic level as farmers and herdsman.

The nomadic life which is still characteristic of some of the Ladakhi tribesmen in the west is a remnant of their origins which go back several centuries to the Ch'iang tribes which roamed the pastures of Central Asia. Fragments of these tribes broke off from the main body at some stage and drifted south eventually to settle into agricultural communities, while others of them continued in their nomadic way moving across the country from pasture to pasture with the changing weather. Thus very early in the history of Tibet, long long before Buddhism came in the seventh century, two basic ways of life had been established which relied on each other for their survival. The farmers traded their agricultural produce in exchange for the dairy products of the nomads. This fundamental division in their occupations came about for climatic and physical reasons. Most of the year round the severe climate of the country restricted movements of the cattle and people. In the late spring and summer the whole country burst into a spasm of activity which meant that the land had to be tilled, the cattle grazed on fresh grass, and the sheep sheared before the winter set in again. The pastures for the cattle are generally located on the slopes of the passes above the tree line whereas the agricultural land lies along the valley floor irrigated by the waters of the melting snow. So while the peasants dug and ploughed the earth, the nomadic herdsman packed their tents and moved their yaks and goats up the mountain slopes and passes which were green with the first grass of spring.

The early history of the Tibetans has come down to us through mythical tales and one can only hazard a guess from observing their way of life today as to their origins and early development. Naturally the myths and songs give a clue but the picture is hopelessly inadequate. Literary records can be relied upon only up to a certain extent since the Tibetan script was introduced in the reign of King *Srong-brtsan-sgam-po*<sup>1</sup> (Song tsen gam po) who died in 650 AD and was the king responsible for the introduction of Buddhism. The literary records of the earlier history were written much later by Buddhists who interpreted the early beginnings through a series of legends and myths which formed a part of their pattern of beliefs. For instance the first Tibetan king is known in the Tibetan scriptures as "Divine Mighty One" or *Lha-btsan-po* which is a completely Buddhist term applied to the founder of the Yarlung dynasty whose thirty-second king was *Srong-brtsan-sgam-po* the first Tibetan Buddhist.

From a cultural point of view the development of Tibet is clearly divisible into three periods:

1. From prehistoric times up to the introduction of Buddhism in the seventh century.

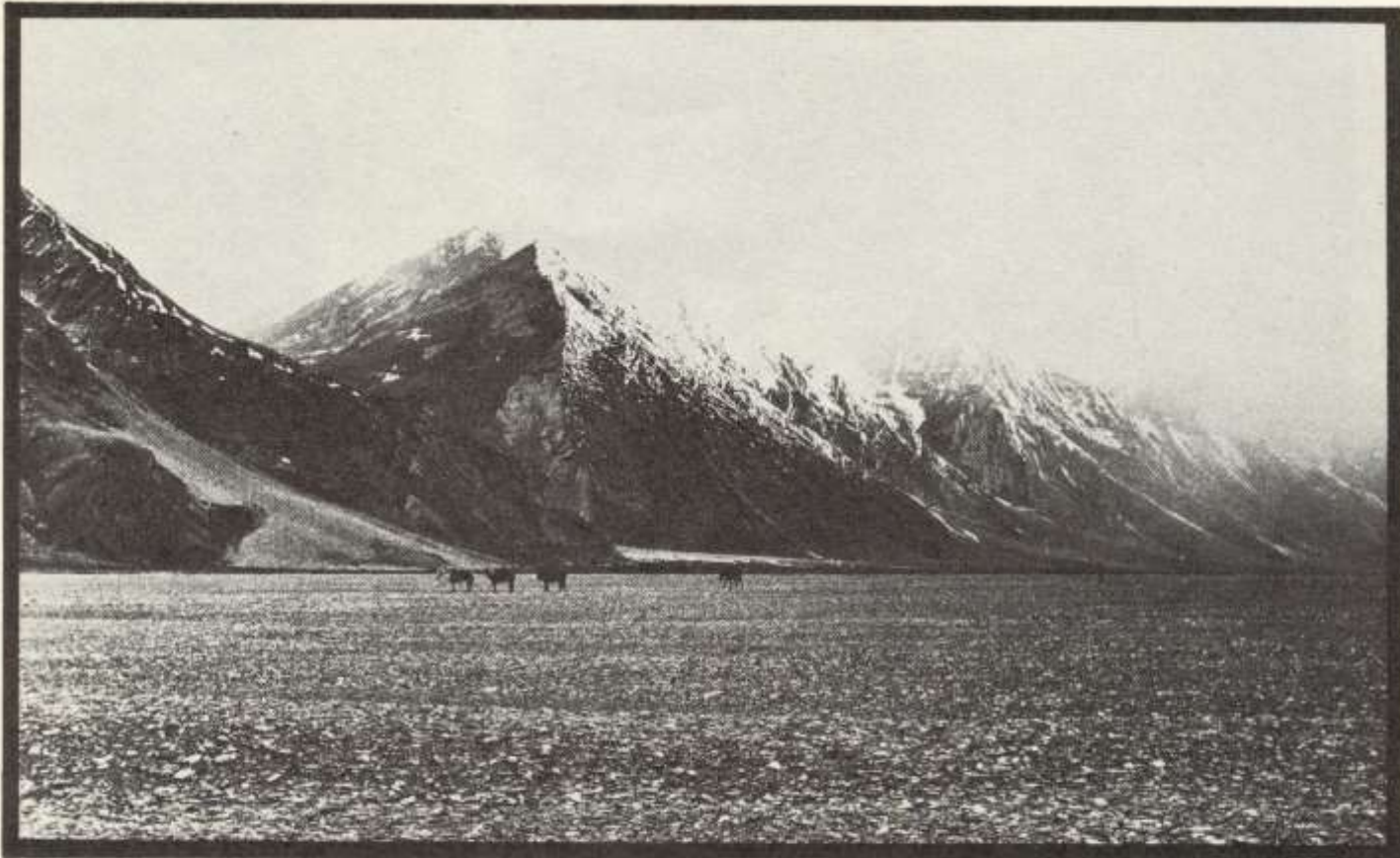
2. The development, maturity and decline of the Buddhist culture from the seventh to the middle of the twentieth century.

3. The introduction of Communism with the complete end of Buddhism from 1959 onwards.

The middle period of this history is the most interesting in relation to the present situation, for it is here that one may observe in Lhasa the rise of a power elite, its deliberate policy of isolation and controlled change and finally its complete inability to resist the sudden leap into the twentieth century which China brought to it.

Buddhism was introduced into Lhasa in about 640 AD when king *Srong-brtsan-sgam-po* married the Princesses *Wen-ch'eng* daughter of the Chinese Emperor *T'ai-tsung* of the T'ang dynasty, and Princess *Bhrikuti* daughter of King Amcuvarman of Nepal. Both the Princesses came from Buddhist families and their arrival at the Tibetan court was followed by the building of the first Buddhist temple in Tibet to house the Chinese and Nepalese images of deities which the girls had brought. This temple came to be called the *Jo-khang* — the most sacred temple in Tibet. Under subsequent royal patronages the new religion flourished and spread its message by building chapels and temples across central Tibet. The first monastery of *bSam-ya* (Sam-ya) was built by King *Khri-srong-lde-brtsan* in about 779 AD on the principle of a sacred *mandala*. A *mandala* in any form is an extremely complex tantric symbol of a palace or dwelling place of a deity. It is generally evoked through a highly intricate process of meditation which seeks to merge and identify the meditator with the particular deity portrayed in the centre of the diagram. This merger bestows upon the initiated specific tantric powers for which he has already been carefully prepared through a series of rituals.

Like all religions, Buddhism too propagated—right from its introduction into Tibet—the elitist nature of its message. Having started off as a court religion, it continued to maintain throughout the history of its development this exclusivity which made it impossible for the uninitiated to participate directly. The origins of the complex hierarchy of lamas or monks that ran the administration of government lie in these early beginnings, when it became imperative to create an elite which was initiated, disciplined and organised enough to spread "the message" throughout the land. The monastery developed as the headquarters of this campaign and gradually a social system emerged whereby potential monks were recruited in childhood. They were plucked away from their villages by force of social custom and introduced to a completely secluded life which concentrated on religion. The rest of the family meanwhile produced the surplus to support them in the



With a density of under two persons per square mile, one can spend days travelling through the stone deserts of Ladakh before arriving at a village. It is imperative to be totally self sufficient in food and shelter. The countryside offers nothing.

Society is clearly divided between the ruling elite of religious and lay heads whose power is manifest in the monastery . . . and the peasants and herdsmen who live a precarious life in the village below.





The spiritual head of the religious community is often an incarnate who is recruited in childhood as a sacred born. He is brought into the seclusion of the monastery and carefully nurtured to spiritual maturity.

Primogeniture governs village society. The eldest son inherits all the land including the family house. His younger brothers go to the monastery and become monks. His parents leave to build themselves a small house outside the village.



pursuit of knowledge. Patronage of these monasteries came from the rich landlords and aristocratic families in Tibet who, by letting out their lands to tenants, were able to amass fortunes which they in turn shared with the "church" in the form of patronage. Some of the larger monasteries had accumulated vast quantities of this wealth which was hoarded in gold, silver and other jewelled objects of divinity. This close liaison between the lay and religious leaders of the land was important in establishing the effective government of Buddhist Tibet.

The size of the monasteries varied enormously and some of the biggest ones like *Tashilumpo* had over 5,000 lamas. There was of course only a minority of these lamas who actually practised and meditated upon the gaining of higher truths. Others were concerned with the production of texts which involved printing, translating and copying. Still others were specialists in painting and carving while some cooked, kept stores and played music. About half the lamas were scholars and were familiar with the five branches of non-tantric literature which were:

Logic

Doctrine of Universal Truth

Doctrine of the Middle Way

Treasury of philosophical notions

Monastic discipline.

The few lamas who solely pursued the path to *Nirvana* then went on to study tantric disciplines and these took them beyond the fifteen years of study required to become a lama. These lamas who were able to confine themselves within the spiritual aspects of their existence were able to elaborate further and deeper into the teachings of Buddha. Gradually enormous volumes of texts dealing with the interpretations and experiences of these lamas were built up and the size of libraries in each monastery grew. With the proliferation of these experiences came the development of the various schools or sects in Tibet. Each monastery and thus each lama and each family belonged to one of these sects. Of these sects four are the most prominent and they are distinguished in essence by their varying emphasis on the different lines of teachers who gave relative importance to different deities. It becomes immediately obvious to the trained observer on entering a monastery or temple as to which sect it belongs not only because the lamas of each sect dress differently but also by the selected deities represented in the frescos and also by the layout of the altar. The schools are as follows:

1. *rNying-ma-pa* – the tantric school of the Ancient ones founded in the 9th century AD.
2. *bKa-rgyud-pa* (*Kargyutpa*) – the school of "Whispered Transmission" founded in the 11th century AD. This school is further divided into eight sub-schools, four of which

are counted as great while the others are considered as lesser ones.

3. *Sa-skya-pa* (*Sakya-pa*) founded in the 11th century AD.
4. *dGe-lugs-pa* (*Gelug-pa*) – the school of "Virtuous Ones" founded in the 14th century AD. Both the Dalai lama<sup>2</sup> and Panchen Lama belong to this sect which is popularly called the Yellow Hat sect. The present Dalai lama Tenzin Gyatsho is the 14th re-incarnated spiritual leader of this sect.

The system of reincarnation started off as method for the succession of abbots in a certain monastery of the *bka-rgud-pa* sect in Central Tibet. It consisted of seeking out the infant in whom it was believed that the spirit of the deceased head lama had passed. Many monasteries came around to using this useful system of succession which prevented the seclusion of the rights of succession to any one powerful family. For political reasons this system of succession was established early on in the *dGe-lugs-pa* sect and the Dalai lama became the supreme head of that sect. There is of course deep respect given by the common man to the mystical status of a reincarnate. But one realises the political nature of this office when one looks at the mysterious infant deaths of the 9th, 10th, 11th and 12th Dalai lamas when a particularly powerful Regent was ruling Tibet. The uniqueness of the office of the Dalai lama lay in his capacity as the spiritual leader of the most powerful religious sect as well as his position as the political ruler. This acquisition of political status was brought about by a careful juggling of incarnates in the sixteenth century. The fourth Dalai lama was "discovered" to be the great-grandson of the Mongol Ruler Altan Khan. This political link with Mongolia by a religious sect in Tibet eventually led to the triumph of the Yellow Hats in both the religious and political spheres in Tibet. The fifth Dalai lama was the first undisputed ruler of Tibet combining both spiritual and temporal powers.

With the undisputed supremacy of the *dGe-lugs-pa* sect came the period of isolation, fear of foreign agents and a general suspicion of neighbouring countries. This period also helped to consolidate *dGe-lugs-pa* power through a network of powerful monasteries built throughout Tibet. Very often these were built in prominent and high situations as symbols of the Yellow Hat power. In the hierarchy of *dGe-lugs-pa* lamas, there emerged classes of monks who performed the lay functions of the civil service. They were assisted by the patronage and positions held by the nobility who 'advised' the Dalai lama. In fact the Dalai lama was only the symbolic head of the country and the real power was wielded by the Regents, the senior and incarnate lamas of the larger monasteries and the nobility who were descendants of the old Yarlung dynasty. This was, generally speaking, the situa-



Within the precincts of the monastery the monks spend their days in meditation, prayers and the performance of daily chores which keep the whole place going.

tion in Tibet when the Chinese arrived with the new order of Communism.

The only regions where Tibetan Buddhism survives today are:

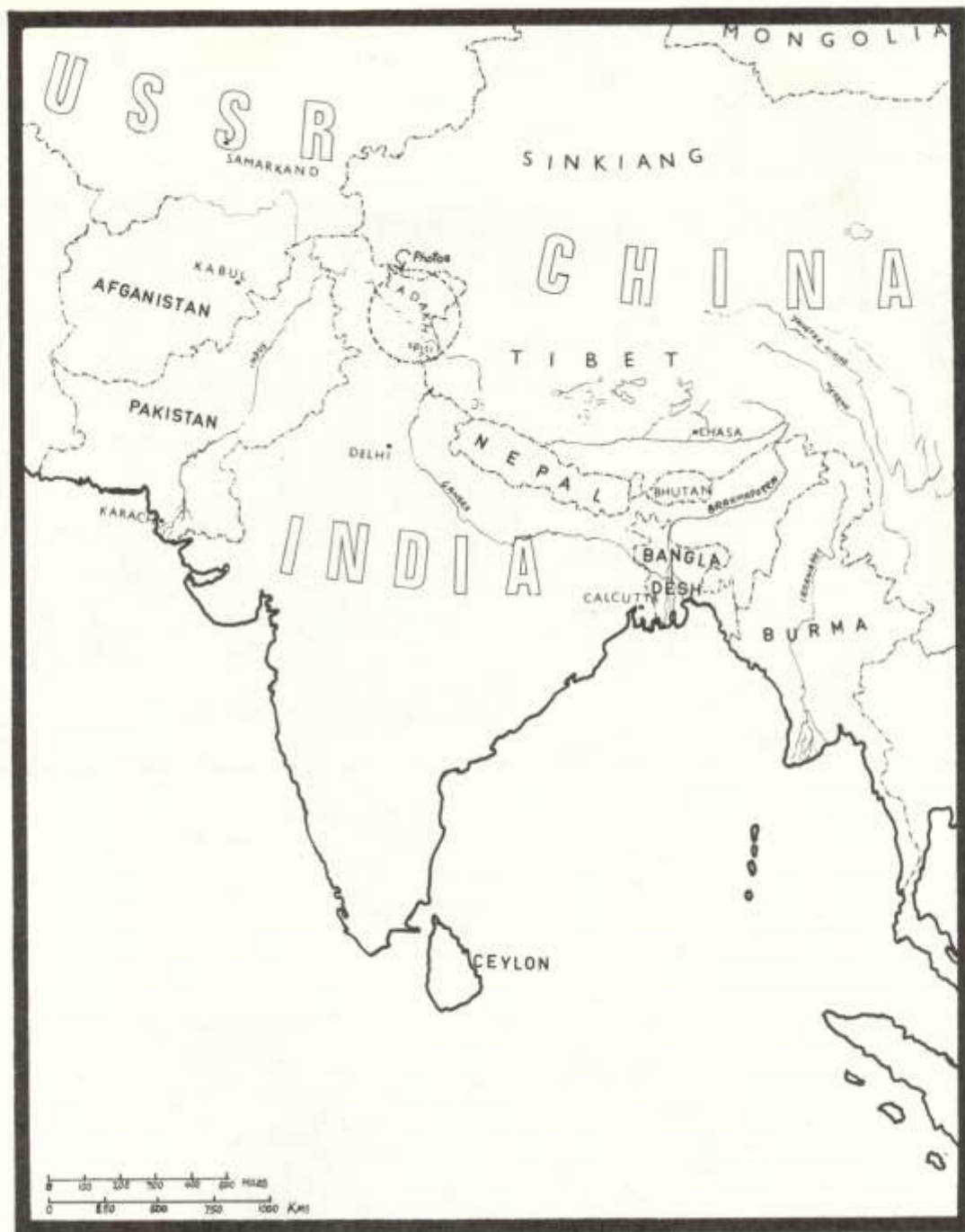
1. Ladakh, Spiti and Lahoul now in India, but once part of the western Tibetan kingdom of Guge .
2. Nepal which has both Hindu and Buddhist regions.
3. Bhutan which has a Buddhist king.
4. Sikkim which too has a Buddhist king.
5. Parts of the North East Frontier Agency of India.

Ladakh and Spiti are the only regions which had in the past established close links with Lhasa to such an extent that the architecture and way of life here, even now, comes the closest to that of central Tibet. Taking this area as a microregion of

Tibetan culture, it is possible to examine it in some detail to understand how Tibetan society had worked under a Buddhist regime.

Ladakh is a vast area and judged by size it is the largest "district"<sup>2(a)</sup> in India (119,820 square kilometres, 47,200 square miles) even though it has diminished in political size as a result of the two wars with Pakistan and China. In contrast to its size, Ladakh has the lowest population density in India with under two persons per square mile. Extending between the latitudes of 32°15' to 36° (Cairo is 31°) and the longitudes 75°15', to 80°15', it occupies a crucial strategic position which has kept it sealed off from visitors and travellers. Bounded on the north by Chinese Sinkiang, to the east by Tibet and to the west by a Pakistan administered area, Ladakh's primary





importance to India is of a strategic nature. The population of 88,651 persons counted at the last census (1961) is unevenly distributed about the many valleys which run diagonally across from the north-west to the south-east. The Indus river, which is among the twenty longest in the world, divides Ladakh down the middle separating Nubra in the north from Zaskar in the south.

Although its physical isolation from the mainland of India has protected it from persistent occupation in the past, Ladakh has nevertheless a history full of local wars. There are very few historical sources relating directly to the early history, but in the second century AD it was a part of the Kushana Empire.<sup>3</sup> Reliance on the documented history of Baltistan gives some indication about the history before the 10th century AD when Chinese, Tibetan and Kashmiri troops were

active in the area. The Tibetans conquered Ladakh in the seventh century AD. By the time the independent western Tibetan kingdom of Guge' had been established by king *Skuid-ide-ni-mamgon* three centuries later, Ladakh had begun to import Tibetan culture. The first monasteries such as Alchi were constructed during this period. In 1842 an army from Kashmir led by General Wazir Ratra defeated the Tibetan army at Leh and annexed it to the state of Kashmir. It was this historical war that eventually determined the devolution of Ladakh to India in 1947.

Once Buddhism had been introduced, it took a firm hold on the people. The various kings of Guge' instigated the construction of the numerous monasteries that are to be found there today. They were the grand patrons and so financed these expensive operations from the coffers of their



When the repairs have to be carried out on the temples, each villager is required by custom to contribute his free labour to the monastery. The monks supervise the work.

Built high as symbols of power, the Buddhist monasteries in Ladakh such as Thikse had at one time over five hundred monks. Now the culture is changing and we found only sixty of them struggling to keep the place together.





Trees are extremely valuable and are carefully grown. Timber is precious and is very precisely used in the construction.

state. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism, the local inhabitants were bound up in a totemic religion called Bon. Buddhism succeeded very rapidly because it transformed the Bon totemic classification into a Buddhist one. Thus one complete system of classification was substituted by another with the aid of clever links which took elements in the Bon myths and introduced them into the Buddhist pantheon. Buddhist deities doubled up as Bon ones and in their Buddhist roles they established links with animals and other personified natural forces which had Bon origins. The people were therefore able to regard Buddhism as a natural extension of their awareness in the context of Bon. Contrary to the opinions of most western Tibetologists, the introduction of Buddhism did not bring a new era of social history to Tibet. The *base* or system of economic founda-

tion remained unchanged, it was the *superstructure* that changed and a new pattern of institutions (the creation of a "church"), organization and hierarchies of authority (the new class of lamas) was established. This distinction between changes in the base and superstructure is important to understand because the nature of the two is entirely different. The introduction of communism into Tibet has involved a change at the basic level.

The most powerful tool in changing this superstructure was the monastery. It was the physical manifestation of the symbolic link between Man and his origins, his reason for existence, his inevitable destiny. Buddhism taught that life on this planet is a perpetual cycle of suffering of enormous scale and power which results in a circle of



Alchi monastery has been built as a three dimensional *mandala* and its inner walls are totally covered with miniature paintings of *mandalas* that today are only of historic value.

birth – death and rebirth.<sup>4</sup> Death is the termination of the tangible elements which compose man and it disintegrates the link between the visible and invisible elements just as rebirth establishes this link. It is this cycle of disintegration and reassembly which must be broken to create a total harmony which finally prevents the cycle from reforming. The monk (arhat) must follow the way of Buddha and guide himself to harmony through the teachings. The faithful following of this procedure leads to *Nirvana* which literally means “blowing out” or “exploding”. The walls of the monastery<sup>5</sup> are covered in frescos which symbolically illustrate the complex process of realising *Nirvana* through both the Sutra and Tantra schools.

Let us look at the monastery or rather its central and most important part – the inner temple or *Lha-khang*. Alchi monastery,<sup>7</sup> which I mentioned earlier, is on the banks of the Indus river in central Ladakh. As it stands there today it is a complete mystery. But its key lies inside and it only needs the dedicated effort of a scholar to unravel its secrets. The task is enormous because like many temples built by the Tibetan *Rin-chen-bzang-po*, Alchi stands as a three dimensional *mandala*. It consists of the five separate temples of *ajam-dByargs-khang*, *Lo-tsa-bai-khang*, *rNam-par-srang-mdzad*, *gSum-thsang* and *Zha-khang-soma*. They all contain frescos and sculptures which are unique in the whole of India. The three colossal

standing statues of *Matreya* (*rGyal-va-chams-pa*)<sup>6</sup> in the *gSum-thsang* temple are extraordinary examples of the skill of the Indian craftsmen who were imported to create these replicas of prototypes in India. What makes the Alchi temples totally unique are the frescos which cover the entire flat surface of the interior of each temple. Thousands of miniature paintings show the incredible patience and skill with which these temples were created. There are numerous *mandalas* which are reputed to be replicas of ones painted in some of the ancient Buddhist centres in India. The role of symbolism in these paintings is crucial. The pictorial representation of the *mandala* is therefore seen as a diagrammatic aid to the text which is the vehicle for learning. Alchi is built as a *mandala* which contains within it other *mandalas* to the various deities in the northern Buddhist pantheon.

Apart from these diagrams, the frescos contain a wealth of information about local dress and customs of the tenth century. There are hundreds of different festivals, palaces, kings and queens, processions and animals which represent a totally different world. Each separate temple has its own collection of deities and contemporary scenes and each of these forms a unit of the complete assembly comprising the monastery as a whole. The temples, each a separate *mandala* and hence a separate realm were used only by the initiated. A

suitable myth was woven around the presence of the temples (Alchi was created in one day by the action of superhuman powers) which ensured their sanctity and preservation. The effect of creating such glorious places of worship in the heart of a dust ridden community labouring hard to survive was of course incredible. The corps of lamas and disciples, the elite, housed and meditating in the monastery seemed to offer all the "answers". The manifestation of the palace of the deity on earth was the physical evidence of their direct contact with the superhuman realm.

Current thinking about the meaning and structure of Tibetan society has been utterly confused by the romantic accounts<sup>8</sup> of some of the scholars and travellers from the west who were intrigued by the mystical practices of Buddhism which seemed to promise a utopian existence. The accounts of some of the earlier travellers described a beautiful picture of spiritual harmony in Tibet. Even the peasants seemed to be laughing and happy all the time. The inaccessibility of the region lent it an additional mythical quality as a forbidden paradise on earth. Today Tibet forms an autonomous region within the Chinese Peoples Republic. The Chinese maintain that it has always been a part of China. The Tibetan leaders in India deny this vehemently. The rest of the world keeps silent because these matters seem to be decided on actual rather than legal considerations. Those philanthropists who have been actively condemning alleged atrocities in Tibet have of course completely forgotten the record of the Younghusband Expedition in 1903-4 which the Imperial British Government sent to invade Tibet. Having slaughtered the ill-equipped Tibetan army with modern arms, Younghusband arrived in Lhasa to deliver the Tibetans from the Russian threat! Although there was no evidence of this threat, the invading force left Lhasa after compelling the Tibetan government to sign trade agreements giving sole concessions to the British.

The Tibetan culture has not disappeared. The Buddhist phase of its development which had outlived its usefulness long ago (that of uniting a territory and giving it regional identity) has come to a sudden end and the next phase as a communist culture has begun. The importance of this new phase is that the base of Tibetan society has shifted. With this shift in its economic foundations has come a new age of social relationships wholly opposed to the hierarchical system which had characterised the Buddhist phase. Perhaps Buddha's contention about the equality of man has at last been realised.

## NOTES.

1. Tibetan spelling is composed of silent and radical letters the latter of which are pronounced. Very often one of the eight prefixes precedes the first radical letter but it is not pronounced. There are however complex rules which govern the way in which the pronunciation is altered by the prefix. The phonetic pronunciation is placed in brackets as is conventional for the writing of the Tibetan script in English. There are 36 letters in the alphabet.
2. Dalai Lama is written by the Tibetans as *Ta-le* and it means 'Ocean'. This title was bestowed on the third Grand Lama who became the third *Ta-le-la-ma* - a title bestowed by the Mongol Altan Khan in the sixteenth century. The Dalai Lama is considered as the incarnation of the deity *Avalokitesvara* - the lion's roar symbolic of the fearlessness in proclaiming the Truth.
- 2(a) India is a union of states each of which is divided into 'districts' - the principal administrative unit. Ladakh is a district in the state of Jammu and Kashmir.
3. The Kushana empire (50 BC - 210 AD) was established in the Hindu Kush region by the Yueh-Chih tribes who had been driven out by an off-shoot of the Huns (Hsiung-nu) from Kansu.
4. The correct name for rebirth is *Punarbhava* which literally means 'again becoming'. The literal translation is more accurate in this instance as it emphasises the dynamic and changing aspect. Even the English word 'birth' is misleading as it assumes 'that which is to be born' whereas the process correctly stated is an assembly of forces leading to 'again becoming'.
5. The Tibetan name for a monastery is *mGon-pa* or *vihara* in Sanskrit meaning secluded residence.
6. *rGyal-va-chams-pa*, is the Buddha to come. At present He is a *Bodhisattva* in the *Tusita* celestial realm. He will come as the fifth and last Buddha in a gigantic cycle of 25,000 years in which a Buddha comes every 5,000 years. Gautama was the fourth Buddha and Kasyapa, Kanakamuni and Krakucanda were Buddhas before him.
7. Alchi is one of the 30 Tibetan monasteries of which I recorded during two successive expeditions into the Inner Himalayas in 1968 and 1970.
8. A. David-Neil, *With Mystics and Magicians in Tibet*, London 1931  
H. Harrer, *Seven years in Tibet*, London 1952  
F. Maraini, *Secret Tibet*, London 1952  
A. Migot, *Tibetan Marches*, London 1955  
M. Pallis, *Peaks and Lamas*, London 1939  
L. A. Waddell, *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*