



Lahaul & Spiti - The Land of Wondrous Gompas

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Ashok Thakur belongs to the ruling family of Lahaul. He is presently the Principal Secretary (Culture and Tourism) to the Government of Himachal Pradesh. As such he is responsible for the preservation of some to the oldest monasteries of this remote Himalayan region.

The Himalayan district of Lahaul–Spiti in the Indian state of Himachal Pradesh is one of the last refuges for Tibetan Buddhism in India. As one crosses over the Rohtang Pass from verdant Manali through the fluttering prayer flags and piled up manes stones one truly enters into a different world – a world of gompas, chortens and above all smiling faces with chinky eyes and warm hearts which is in stark contrast to the overall ruggedness of the landscape. Centuries of landlocked and hard existence have led these people to devise their own social institutions for their survival - polyandry, law of primogeniture and above all the monastic system of life all designed to keep population in check and at the same time to avoid fragmentation of land holdings. Even today the district is land locked for 5 months in a year as all the passes leading into the valley are blocked due to heavy snowfall from December to May each year, the only connection with the outside world then being a once a week helicopter service for medical emergencies.

Amongst all the three institutions it is only the gompas which are still going strong thanks largely to the Dalai Lama who has been frequently visiting these areas and holding Kalachakra discourses for the people of this Himalayan district.

I shall take you for a tour of the stunning gompas of Lahaul and Spiti. Let us first go to Lahaul. Around Kyelong, Lahaul's headquarter, one can find some of the most exquisite gompas of the area.

Located 8 kms from Keylong, Guru Ghantal is overlooking a precipice above Tandi village, where the Chandra and Bhaga rivers join to form the Chandrabhaga. The gumpa is surrounded by a large number of rock caves. Locals claim that Guru Padmasambhava had meditated before here leaving for Tibet. Guru Ghantal is a double-storeyed structure made of wood, with pyramidal roofs and a big assembly hall, characteristic of monasteries in the Lahaul valley.

The monastery has a black stone image of the Hindu goddess Kali, locally known as Vajreshwari Devi, the deity has been assimilated into the Buddhist pantheon.

A few kilometres away is Shashur gumpa. Founded in the 16th century by a Tibetan Lama, the place is named after the juniper trees growing in its vicinity. The original temple has been rebuilt several times; the last being about a hundred years ago after it was destroyed by an avalanche. This monastery has gigantic *tangkhas*, some over 4.5 m tall and numerous wall paintings, including that of the 84 Buddhists *siddhas*.

Once the capital of Lahaul, the village of Kardang possesses a 900 year old monastery built on the banks of the river Bhaga. It was renovated by a Tibetan master, Lama Norbu in 1912. The multi-storeyed structure has four temples.

Kardang's library has a collection of musical instruments, beautiful *tangkhas* and ancient weapons. Unfortunately the old gompa has been demolished and in its place a more spacious and a modern one built has been constructed.

In Satingiri village, Tayul gompa (or 'chosen place' in Tibetan) is famous for its 4 meter tall statue of Guru Padmasambhava. The prayer wheel at this gompa is reputed to have the divine power of 'self turning'. According to resident monks, this last happened in 1986.

Lahaul has the particularity to have two temples holy to both Buddhists and Hindus. The Mrikula Devi temple in Udaipur village is dedicated to the goddess Kali. This wooden temple was built in the 11th century. The local priests claim that it was built much earlier. Overnight, the Pandava brothers would have constructed it from a single block of wood.

A fascinating panel depicts the Assault of Mara, in which Buddha engages in battle with Mara the Tempter, flanked by Rama warring with the demon Ravana.

The other temple is the 8th century Trilokinath temple across the Chandrabhaga river. It has a six-armed deity that is said to have been installed by Padmasambhava himself. It is worshipped as Shiva by Hindus and Avalokiteshwara by Buddhists.

Officiating priests claim that those who pass through the narrow passage between the temple's wall and the two pillars that stand at the entrance to the main shrine, wash off all the sins of all their previous births.

The other valley of the district is the Spiti valley. Here you can find the most awe-inspiring gompas. Spiti's early monasteries were built during the 11th and 12th century during an era of peace and renaissance. The great translator Rinchen Zangpo has been instrumental for the revival

of Buddhism in the area. With the Mongol invasion in the 17th century, this peace was shattered and warfare affected the architecture of most of the gompas. During this period, the gompas were constructed on elevated ground, usually on hill peaks. Thus they gained the appellation 'fort monasteries'. One of the most well-known examples of such construction is Kye, which was shifted from lower ground at Rangrik to a higher one.

The uppermost rooms in the gompa are assigned to the *khenpo* (the abbot); this position indicates his superior status. The most sacred spaces in a gompa are the *lha-khang* (sacred shrine) and the *du-khang* (assembly hall). The *gon-khang* (chamber of protective deities) and *zalma* (chamber of picture treasures) are also of great significance. Lower down in monasteries are the monks' cells. The verandas of the *du-khang* are usually most extensively decorated. A monastery's courtyard, the site of all monastic festivals, is an integral part of the building. Every courtyard has a *lungta* (prayer flag) around which monks perform the annual *cham* (ritual dance).

In most monasteries, the inside walls, windows and doors are painted in vivid colours like black and red, in contrast to the white exterior. These sharp, alternating colours are a feature of Tibetan architecture, and derive their philosophical basis from Tantra, which emphasises the union of opposites.

Kye gompa is situated 7 kms from Kaza, Spiti's headquarters. It is the first fortified monastery in Spiti. The entire complex is located on the slope of a hill. Kye's garrisoned architecture still bears stark testimony of the Mongols' attacks in the region. As late as the 19th century, Kye was subjected to more assaults during the Kullu-Ladakh, the Dogra and Sikh wars.

Kye is also a vibrant centre of Buddhist cultural tradition. Its elaborate *du-khang* was rebuilt after the original was destroyed in the earthquake of 1975.

Not far away at Komic is Tangyud gompa at an elevation of 4,587 m. It is one of the highest in the world. This monastery is over 500 years old and has about 45 monks in residence.

According to a legend its construction was foretold in Tibet, as a monastery built between two mountains, one shaped like a snow lion and the other like a decapitated eagle. The space between the mountains would resemble the eye of a snow cock, and, the name Komic in fact derives from this – *ko* means snow cock and *mic*, eye.

India's oldest functioning monastery is Tabo gompa, some 47 kms from Kaza. This monastery is an architectural illustration of the concept of the mandala. The monastery celebrated its 1,000th anniversary in 1996 when the Dalai Lama performed the Kalachakra initiation in Tabo.

The gompa is known as the 'Ajanta of the Himalayas', holds treasures in its dimly-lit interiors. Its walls and ceilings are a canvas for astounding mural paintings. Sharp lines, earthy colours and distinctly Indian features are characteristic of the paintings from this early period. The *du-khang* is the most elaborately decorated, with its walls divided into 3 tiers. The life of Buddha is depicted on the lowermost tier, followed with 32 stucco images on pedestals in the middle tier, and 3 rows of Boddhisattvas on the uppermost tier.

From a considerable distance, Dhankar gompa stands out because of the solidity of its construction, which led the 19th century traveller, Trebeck, to refer to it as a 'cold fort'. Dhankar was originally called Dhakkar or 'Palace on a Cliff'. Dhankar was once the capital of Spiti.

This gompa has been enlisted as one of the World Endangered Monument.

A two-hour drive from Dhankar is Lha-lun gompa (literally the 'Land of Gods'). It is one of Spiti's oldest monasteries which is believed to have been constructed overnight by the gods after Lotsava Rinchen Zangpo planted a willow tree here, stating that if it lived through the year, a temple had be built next to it. The tree still stands outside the gompa.

As a result of the sectarian strife in Spiti most monasteries belongs to the Gelukpa sect. Only in Pin valley, particularly at Kungri and Mud, one does find monasteries of the Nyingmapa tradition. This is probably because this region was very isolated, the only entrance being through the Pin river. The Kungri gompa has a large retinue of monks in residence. The dilapidated, mud-walled old building is flanked by a recently built hall decorated with paintings and woodwork.

The monastic history of the region makes it clear how links with Tibetan culture were (and are) maintained and balanced with the local ethos. This is an indication of the 'sacred geography' that extends across countries. In Ladakh, for example, the Stakna monastery maintains a link with Guru Ghantal and with their mother monastery at Pangtang Dechinling in faraway Bhutan. If a monk desires higher education, for which facilities are not available in Lahaul, he goes there.

My earliest association with gompas of Lahaul-Spiti was as a child in Gemur gompa in Lahaul where I learnt the Tibetan alphabet under the guidance of my grand father Thakur Mangal Chand, the Rais (or Wazir) of Lahaul. He was the one responsible for inculcating in me interest in Lahauli history and culture. He himself was a multifaceted personality: being an accomplished administrator, a renowned *amchi* [Tibetan traditional doctor], a master of Thangka painting and an explorer who

led expeditions successfully into Tibet with British officers. For this reason, he was appointed as the British Trade Agent at Gartok.

My later association with the region and its gompas was in my official capacity as the Deputy Commissioner Lahoul Spiti which means that as head of the District, I was also responsible for the gompas and their restoration and upkeep. I continue doing so today as the head of the Department of Culture in the State of Himachal Pradesh.

And do not forget, Himachal is the land of hospitality; we will be delighted to take you around our wonderful gompas.

Glossary

Mani Stones carved with the sacred chant *Om Mani Padme Hum* are stacked one on top of the other to form walls. Often, the *mani* wall ends at the entrance to a village or on the top of a pass.

Gompa or monastery is supposed to be located in solitary place, far away from social settlements.

Chorten, Tibetan for *stupa*, is a Buddhist reliquary structure that commemorates an auspicious occasion or ceremony, or is a repository of the relics of important monks and saints.