

Buddhist Symbolism: Its Impact on Trans-Himalayan Art, Culture and Society

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Most of the cultural achievements of Trans-Himalayan Buddhist Society are related, in some way or another, to the Buddhist religion. Because of the predominance of Tantra with its rich tradition of symbolism in Tibetan Buddhism, it is no surprise that symbols and symbolic artifacts of all sorts are found in Trans-Himalayan societies. As Tibetan Buddhism spread through Trans-Himalayan region, it picked up the cultures of Trans-Himalaya or provided symbols, values and ethics to the culture of the region. In the Trans Himalayan Buddhist societies, Buddhist symbols are part of everyday living. This paper tries to explore various religious symbols prevalent in Himalayan region, meanings associated with these symbols and use and influence of these symbols on people's day to day lives.

Introduction

The highest mountain chain in the Himalayas is much more than the physical mass that it is known for. Stretching in a massive arc of 2500 kms in length, along the boundaries and covering parts of 5 Asian countries, the uneven terrain of the Himalaya range is broken occasionally by valleys and plateaus that have provided habitation to human beings. The sizeable population of 65.57 million belonging to different indigenous tribes, Of this, 36.32 million reside in India (25% in western Himalayas, 54% in central Himalayas and 21% in eastern Himalayas), 27.07 million in Nepal and 2.18 million in Bhutan (Banerji 2006). The isolation bred by the high mountain ranges has helped nurture a multiplicity of tribes with unique cultural features. Yet, many factors like the common geography and spiritual traditions helped shape cultures that were highly akin to one another. The spread of Buddhism across Himalaya helped societies across Himalaya form a unique 'Himalayan way of life'. Buddhist symbolism has played an influential role in making the geographical landscape and culture of the Himalayan people quite unique and distinctive.

Symbols

Symbols have been used for thousands of years, they help people communicate and interact with one another. Kramsch (1998) notes that the pivotal feature that differentiates human beings from animals is humans' ability to "create signs that mediate between them and their environment". Kramsch further contends that linguistic signs, namely denotative, connotative and iconic, relate to ways in which members of a specific discourse or speech community "encode their experience". Eco (1976) states that, "Semiotics is concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign. A sign is everything which can be taken as significantly substituting for something else. This something else does not necessarily have to exist or to actually be somewhere at the moment in which a sign stands in for it." Symbols, according to Hofstede's (2001) are words, discourse, nonverbal gestures, pictures and art forms that contain "often complex

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