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Commodification and Tibetan Buddhism: An Anthropological study

Raj Kumar Singh
Ph.D. Scholar,
Department of Anthropology,
University of Delhi

Abstract

This research paper explores the relationship between Tibetan Buddhism and commodification. It outlines the way Tibetan Buddhist are economically engage in a society and the way Buddhists tangible and intangible objects are being commodified by the refugee Buddhist community in Dharamshala, Himachal Pradesh. Buddhism is often projected by western thinkers and authors as a religion which is based on non- materialism. Lord Buddha rejected his luxurious life and later attained liberation. He gave teachings to his followers about the way a person should engagement with economic practices. Lord Buddha was a firm believer that a person with economic sustenance should become monk.

Introduction

Buddhism as a religion originated in India in the 5th century BCE and transmitted its teaching in the whole of the Asia. Buddhism gained its popularity among the majority of people in Tibet in 7th century and replaced Bon religion which was a folk religion in Tibet. Tibetan Buddhist accepted teaching from both *Mahāyāna* form of Buddhism (practice of Salvation) and *Vajrāyāna* form of Buddhism (Gellner, 2001). Different school of Buddhism were developed in Tibet and at present there are broadly four schools in Tibetan Buddhism which are Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelugpa. Nyingma is the earliest school came into existence in 7th century while Gelugpa is the newest and more focussed into monasticism. It came into existence in 14th century. Gelug-pa is also the most followed school of Tibetan Buddhism which is headed by His Holiness 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso.

With the occupation of Tibet by the Chinese government, many Tibetans fled to the neighbouring countries in search of religious freedom and to continue their fight for freedom of Tibet. His Holiness Dalai Lama arrived with his 10,000 followers by crossing the Himalayan range. The Tibetan refugees were provided separate land by Government of India to build their permanent colonies, hospitals, monasteries and markets in some parts of India. Tibet as a land was mystical to everyone and there

was very less known about Tibetan peoples and their culture. The arrival of Tibetan refugees in India opened way for the world to engage with them and they started receiving help from all over the world and with the presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama in Himachal Pradesh, it became a sacred land for every buddhist in the world.

The relation between Buddhism and Economy and Max weber's monumental work

Lord Buddha as founder of Buddhism, rejected all his luxury as he believed that attachment to wealth is a hinderance in attaining liberation. However, Lord Buddha held the view that only a person with good economic base should leave his family and adopt monkhood (Chakravarti, 1987). The engagement of monks and monasteries with economy played an important role in the society (Schopen, 2004). Lord Buddha taught economic ethics to the monks and lay people by providing the knowledge of engagement with economy. The concept of 'Right Livelihood' was explained by Lord Buddha in terms of engagement with economic practices which are honest and do not cause suffering to anyone trade in arms, animal slaughter for meat selling, sale of alcoholic drinks or doing trickery are termed as 'Wrong Livelihood' and lead towards negative karma and eventually towards a bad birth in next life (Harvey, 2000).

The first major sociological work in the field of Buddhism and economy was done by Max Weber. Weber in his books "The Religion of India: The Sociology of Hinduism and Buddhism" theorized that Buddhist monks have other worldly ascetic alignment which leads them towards non-materialism and non-attachment to the world and their entanglement with economy is forged. Max weber's work was based on the Buddhist texts and was idealistic in nature. According to his analyses Buddhist monks and lay Buddhists are dissimilar and use of money by the Buddhist monks will lead them towards destruction of original teachings of Buddhism (Weber, 1958). This textual based study of Buddhism leads him towards his conclusion that a rational economic ethic would not be able to develop in Buddhism (Weber, 1905). However, Weber was criticised many scholars like Gregory Schopen believed that Buddhist monks and monasteries were always involved in economic activities (Schopen, 2004). Scholars like Gustavo Benavides also argued that the spread of monetary economy shifted the society from agriculture to Industry. Urbanisation led to the construction of circumstances which lead towards development of Buddhism in India (Benavides, 2005).

Buddhism and Economy of Tibetans in Tibet

The presence of Buddhism in Tibet has influenced their whole world view which ranges from beliefs, ritual practices, customs and traditions. Science and education were also under the control of religious institutions. Monasteries were the centre of innovations which ranged from medicine to astronomy (Shakabpa, 1984). The linkages between religion and economic institution were present in the form of patron-client exchange between monasteries and household, the gift-giving or alms giving to the monks and the feudal agricultural system which was in control of monasteries and monks who were the centre of both religious and political power. The economic activities of Tibetans were agriculture and trade. The consumption was dependent on nature and natural products and majority of the Tibetans were concerned about the utilitarian mode of consumption. However, religious performances were performed on request with involvement of some kind of donations (Mills, 2006).

Tibetan Buddhist Literature about the process of Commodification

Buddhist texts forbid sale of certain religious objects by the people as these objects are property of the *saṅgha*. The ban of selling Buddhist objects dates back to time of Nāropa (956–1041), who was abbot of Nālandā and became a mahāsiddha and was one of the forefathers of the Kagyu school of Tibetan Buddhism. In a collection of *Drigung Kagyu* hagiographies by *Dorje dze ö* selling of Buddhist texts and religious objects is considered as sin as they are property of the *saṅgha* and are sacred in nature (Catanese, 2020). The hagiographies of Machik Labdron who was a great female Tibetan nun in the 12th century views selling of Buddhists statues as wrong livelihood which will lead towards negative karma and depletion of Tibetan Buddhism (Harding, 2013, Catanese, 2020). The *Maitreya-simhanada-sutra* mentions that the merit generated by building the images of Lord Buddha is far less than merit generated by accepting the dharma (DeCaroli, 2015). This sutra also criticises that the one should not create painting and idols of Lord Buddha for earning their livelihood (Catanese, 2020). In spite of all these prohibitions on the practice of selling the Tibetan *thangka* and *Mandala* painting, most of the skilled and popular painters used to sell their work for generating wealth (Jackson, 2006). Patrul Rinpoche who was a monk of Nyingma-pa lineage emphasize in his book “Words of my Perfect Teacher” that anyone who have respect for the three jewels should not utilise Buddha statues and scriptures related to the teachings of Buddha to generate material wealth. However, he believes that selling of ritual tools is legitimate but even those ritual tools like bell and Vajra should be respected as they have religious and symbolic meaning (Patrul, 2010). However, for Tibetan monks who are born outside Tibet and are living as a refugee in different countries, they had to deal with different environment and conditions.

Tibetan Buddhist scholar Yangsi Rinpoche who is a refugee himself mentions in his book “Practicing the Path” that selling statues or paintings of Buddha should not be purchased by anyone as it promotes wrong form of Livelihood and the person that buys it will accumulate negative karma but if a person buys it with positive motivation, then it will lead towards positive karma (Yangsi, 2005). Thubten Chodren in his book “Taming the Mind” explains that the profit generated through selling of Buddhist objects and scriptures should be utilised for creation of new Buddhist objects and for the purpose of Buddhism (Chodren, 2004). Her view is very much the same as of his holiness 14th Dalai Lama who mentions in his book “Illuminating the Path to Enlightenment” that selling of Buddhist objects and publication of Buddhist books is not wrong until the profit earned from it is utilised for the Dharma itself (Lama, 2013).

Methodology

The whole economy of Mcleodganj is dependent on tourism which includes both religious and spiritual tourism. I analysed this Commodification of Buddhism which involved the conversion of Buddhist symbols, Buddhists religious texts and other sacred objects into commodities which are produced, consumed and sold in a market present around the monasteries through the emic perspectives.

Economic entanglement of refugee Tibetans in Mcleodganj

The situation in India was different for Tibetans as they were refugee and have very limited livelihood options as compared to their native land which they left due to religious prosecution by the Chinese government. Although, the government of India provided them land for agriculture but most of these Tibetan refugees did not know about the Indian ways of doing agriculture. After receiving some kind of monetary support from different organisations some of them started practicing their original profession of painters and artisans which they used to perform in their native land.

The craftsmen and painters with the aid provided by different organisation started their work of paintings and making objects. The lamas and lay Tibetans both had to work for sustaining in a foreign land and for survival of their culture (Michael, 1985). The Tibetans monks who at that time were also the political centre of power started receiving donations(*dāna*) from all over the world especially from western countries and started building monasteries, schools and colonies.

Mcleodganj which was a small hill station developed by the Britishers and where majority of the people were pastoral and agriculturalists started receiving attention from the state and central government due to the arrival of Tibetan refugees. Mcleodganj came into lime-light When his

Holiness Dalai Lama was awarded with Nobel Peace Prize, and then significant developmental changes started in Mcleodganj. The influx of more and more foreign tourists increased the pace of development of new cafes, restaurant, cyber shops, travel agencies and hotels. The Tibetan refugees encashed this opportunity by commodifying a lot of religious objects like Thangkas and *Mandala* paintings, Idols of Lord Buddha, Tibetan incense sticks, prayer items like prayer beads and mini prayer wheels, healing stones, pendants with inscriptions printed in Tibetan script, Tibetan flag etc. for economic benefits.

On my visit to one of the handicraft centres of the Tibetan Handicraft society in Mcleodganj, I found that there were handicrafts worker who were knitting a *Tibetan rug (Carpets)* with the use of a machine. During my interview with the handicrafts worker, they told me that although there is involvement of machines but still, it requires a lot of skilled human labour which makes it very expensive as compared to the carpets produced by the Indian carpets industry. The manager told me that they also design *Tibetan rugs* as per the demand of the customer. The production process is dependent on the demand of the market and most of their customers are foreign tourists who buy these products for the purpose of decoration. Some of them gave me the narrative that in modern times the knowledge of production of Buddhist art and objects is not something which is only acknowledged by them but today it is produced and consumed in other parts of the world like China and Nepal. The demand and supply of these religious items will continue even if they stop producing them so they believe that it is better to produce these commodity and gain wealth. According to the Tibetan refugees, the artisans, handicraft workers living in Tibet are also utilising their skills for gaining wealth but due to the influence of Chinese government they are not able to produce authentic products as they are under constant surveillance by the Chinese authority while Tibetan refugees who are living in India are free from any kind of pressure from the Government of India and are able to produce authentic products as compared to Tibetans living in Tibet.

During my conversation with the shop owners that were selling very expensive idols of Lord Buddha they told me that they are not manufacturing these statues and idols and these are imported from factories in Nepal and Dehradun where they are manufactured by Tibetan refugee and local people especially Newari peoples of Nepal who are involved in this industry. The labour cost was too high in Mcleodganj and also the raw material used to come from Nepal so they shifted their factory to Nepal and now, they only sell these idols and statues and gain profit.

According to one of interlocutors who was a *thangka* painter told me that in pre-capitalist Tibet Buddhist objects were made on auspicious occasions and only for a very few selected monasteries

and for monks but today, these religious objects are produced for consumption by the lay peoples and the tourists. The mode of production is getting shifted from being religious to becoming more secular and market oriented. The sacredness that was related to the religious items is getting depleted and the products are becoming mundane. Some of the interlocutors also stated that their refugee identity has helped them in commodifying almost all of their cultural products which includes their food, religious objects and religious texts.

The presence of His Holiness Dalai Lama in Mcleodganj also acts as a brand for Mcleodganj, Dharamshala, as he is a spiritual leader and a noble prize winner whose presence in Mcleodganj attracts a lot of tourists and religious visitors. The presence of tourists and religious visitors in Mcleodganj increases the sale of religious commodities and people are able to make a lot of profit. The profit they earn is utilised for their personal benefits. They were of firm believe that they are refugee and they need to utilise their resource for sustaining their livelihood and for preservation of their cultural heritage.

The narrative that was expressed by the Tibetan refugee didn't provide me a very clear image on the religious legitimacy of commodification of religious objects and utilisation of the profit earned from this commodification for the personal benefit as the views of the lay Buddhist shopkeepers were many a times diametrically opposite to each other. During my conversation with one of my interlocutors who was person in his late sixties naming Tenzin¹ and owner of a small shop selling prayer wheels told me that selling Buddhist objects was one of the gentle ways of attaining both livelihood and good karma as the seller becomes a medium for transmitting the teachings of Lord Buddha to his followers while another Tibetan refugee named Tsering told me that though selling of religious products was forbidden by the religious leaders in the past but in present time it is a part of their economic life and won't lead towards any negative karma. On the issue of generation of negative Karma, they all held a common belief that by providing donations to the monks and through ritual practice they will be able to relinquish all of their bad karma and will be able to generate good karma.

In order to receive a much broader representation of the process of commodification I interviewed a Kunga Lama a monk from Namgyal monastery who was also holding the position of principal in Namgyal school. He viewed commodification process as a way for sustaining their life and balancing their Dharma. He told me that in Tibet monks and monasteries were communal responsibility of the Tibetan people. There was a lay-patron relationship among them and were seen as complementary to

¹ The names of the interlocutors have been changed because of the ethical concern and on the demand of the interlocutors

each other. Monks were the representative of the state and were involved in administrative work also. His Holiness Dalai Lama was the head of the state of Tibet and holder of all the decision-making powers of the state but in India the circumstances are different as India is not a Buddhist nation but a secular nation. The Tibetan refugees were not in a condition to take responsibility of the monks as they themselves were in a stage of shock and financial crisis. So, the monks and monasteries were left with no other option than to engage themselves in economic life. The monasteries also provide their space to shops selling both sacred and secular products and also their room to the tourists for monetary gains. The income generated through all these commercial activities is utilised by the monasteries for providing basic needs to the monks. However, when I enquired him about his view on commodification process going on of the communal properties of *saṅgha*, he told me that they don't have any authority over the lay Tibetans and in certain manner because of the commodification process the Tibetan refugee are still very much connected to their religion and Culture. He also stated that the commodification of objects which are property of *saṅgha* is incorrect but even if it is performed with right conviction and religious spirit and for the sake of benefit of the society it will lead towards generation of good karma.

Conclusion

In contemporary times Buddhism is getting intermingled with the global economy and has become a major brand for the local economy of Mcleodganj. Buddhist commodities are an important factor in linking this local economy with global economy. The excessive demand of Buddhist objects in the market confirms the way Tibetan Buddhism is getting penetrated in the life of non-Buddhists from all over the world through Buddhist objects. Tibetan Buddhists perceive these objects are devotional tools for accumulating merit and are representation of teachings of Lord Buddha and various Tibetan Buddhist Masters. On the contrary, Buddhist objects which are purchased by non-Buddhists are utilised for decorating their houses rather than for accumulating merit which changes the nature of Buddhists objects from sacred to mundane. However, as Trine Brox mentions in his article on 'The Aura of Buddhist Material Objects in the Age of Mass-Production' that faith labour is more important in creating that 'Aura' necessary for making a commodity as sacred (Brox, 2019).

The development of Tibetan refugees as one of the most successful refugees in the world can be seen as a positive impact of commoditisation (Michael, 1985). The growing popularity of Buddhist products in the world is also leading towards creation of a diffusion of market with monks and monasteries. The Buddhist *saṅgha* and Buddhist leaders find this commodification as improper way of attaining someone's livelihood but they also agree with the view that commoditisation has helped

them in transmitting Buddhist teachings all over the world. The Buddhist *saṅgha* also believes that the monastics should be financially independent and shouldn't become burden to the society. Tibetan diasporic communities across the world donate to monasteries and help them surviving as a strong ethnic community helping them retain their own culture and traditions.

The production of religious objects for economic gains are also seen as practices which are transforming the nature of Tibetan Buddhists. The Vinaya Piṭaka which forbids the sale of Statue of Lord Buddha, Buddhist texts and other religious products as they are the property of *saṅgha* but most of the Tibetan Buddhist who are involve in production and selling of religious objects were also ethically concerned about the commoditisation going on of their religious heritage as it is diluting the teaching of Buddhism. Religious objects which were property of *saṅgha* are getting sold in the market while some of them believed that there is nothing wrong in commoditisation of Buddhist products as it is their cultural heritage and it is important for them to sustain their cultural and religious heritage through the process of commoditisation.

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