



Original Article

An Introduction to The Buddhist Cultural Values and Social Life of Himachali People in India

Beligalle Dhammajoti

Abstract

Himachal Pradesh is a Northern State of India and bears particular types of geographical, cultural and social characteristics. Nowhere in the world that we find this type of cultural and strange social milieu. Geographically, it is a mountainous area with thousands of dangerous precipices with scenic splendour with many of the Himalaya snow-capped mountains. From mountain to mountain, from province-to-province narrow roads are present and they are extremely unsafe. Environmentally it is the most suitable place for man to lead a happy and healthy life. People are fortunate enough to breathe fresh air and use pure water. Their religious and cultural values are of a unique character and the social life can also be considered to be peaceful and exemplary in nature. Buddhist monasteries in the Himalayan region have been having a profound impact on the cultural and social life of the people for centuries. Some of the aspects of Buddhist cultural values remain unnoticed. This paper tries to prove that there is exceptionality in Himachal culture and its social life. The objective of this research is to show the peculiarity of the Himachal life style to the rest of the world. The research method used in this research work is a qualitative research method based on observed empirical information, and secondary documents are also used.

Keywords: Culture, Himachal Pradesh, Life style, Religious harmony, Social life

Department of Pali &
Buddhist Studies
Faculty of Humanities
and Social Sciences
University of Ruhuna

profbeligalle@pbs.ruh.ac.lk

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3432-3142>



This article is published under the Creative Commons CC-BY-ND License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nd/4.0/>). This license permits to use, distribute, and reproduce the contents of the publication for commercial and non-commercial purposes, provided that the original work is properly cited and is not changed anyway.



Original Article

INTRODUCTION

Himachal Pradesh in India is a snow-laden province which bears peculiar characteristics in every aspect. Geographical variations, a sound environment, religious and cultural diversity, peaceful social life and an ideal simple life style may be named as a few. Geographically, it is a mountainous area with thousands of dangerous precipices, deep canyons and gulches, great ponds, gruffly forested valleys and a scenic impressiveness with many of the Himalaya snow-capped mountains. The Dhauladar, Great Himalayan, Pir Panjal, Shiwalik, and Zanskar ranges are well-known mountain ranges. Beas, Chenab, Giri, Pabbar, Spiti, Sutlej and Yamuna are the lovely rivers of Himachal Pradesh. The famous lakes are Brigu, Chandra Tal, the Dal Lake, Dashuar, Kamru Nag, Kareri, Manimahesh, Nako, Pong, Renuka, and Suraj Tal, and they further beautify the entire Himalayan region. The Himalayas' gushing torrents, terraced grounds and harvest fields give an inexplainable picture. Nature lavishly bestows everything that the human beings of Himachal Pradesh need; the purest air they breathe, the hygienic water they drink, the cool breeze they have to enjoy, the natural food they consume, and the herbal medicines they take. Almost all the people in Himachal Pradesh depend on agriculture, horticulture, forestry, and pastoralism. Moreover, the culture and social life of the Himachali people

present peculiar characteristics which can be considered to be exemplary ideals to global society.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Hundreds of books have been written on the Himalayan Geography, Himalayan Geology, Demography, explorations, expeditions, mountaineering, and Himalayan socio-economic conditions. *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1975) provides a comprehensive article on the physical setting, statehood, economy and people. Kaushal (1965) in his *Himachal Pradesh* gives a historical study and statehood. Saraswat (1970) speaks of Himachal people, economy, state and social customs. Handa (1987) describes Buddhist monastic life and centers, educational, social and economic aspects, architectural developments and monastic art of Buddhist monasteries. Shiromany (1995) in his edited work, *The Spirit of Tibet: Universal Heritage* provides a collection of speeches and dialogues of HH Dalai Lama which elucidates the significance of cultural values and environmental protection. Austin Waddle (1996) gives the detailed accounts of Lamaism, Lama Sects, and cultic practices which paved the way for shaping the religious sentiments of the Trans-Himalayan people. It seems that the research works on Himalayan religion and Buddhist culture is somewhat uncommon. This research work tries to provide an introductory explanation of the peculiarity of the cultural and social



Original Article

values of the Himalayan people based on the information gathered by field research work and literary sources.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

The purpose of this research paper is to closely examine the cultural and social life of the people of Himachal Pradesh in India and to study the peculiarity of their cultural values. Observing the questions of 'how the Himalayans lead a harmonious social life?', and 'what are the religious values of the Himachali people?' are timely for they provide exceptional moral and social lessons in today's troubled global society. The major objective of this research is to show the timely significance of Himalayan cultural and social values in the modern world.

RESEARCH METHOD

In this research work, the qualitative research method is applied. At first, the relevant information was gathered from various literary sources, and the empirical information was gathered by visiting some parts of Himachal Pradesh. In 2015, I visited a few villages and the major temples of Himachal Pradesh and had a chance to study the environment and the socio-cultural values. I had discussions, group discussions, and interviews with government officers, religious dignitaries, and village people in some parts of the Himalayan region. Two persons also joined me on this

challenging expedition. Although their objective solely was for visiting purposes, I had two objectives; visiting purposes and conducting research on examining the socio-cultural aspects of the Himachali people. It is to be mentioned here, that their contribution was immensely helpful in my study.

RESULT AND FINDINGS

The Himachal Pradesh and People

Himachal means "Snowy Mountain" (*hima*, "snow"; *acal*, "mountain"), the State (*pradesh*) taking its name from the Himalayas. The history of the area dates back to the Vedic period, the earliest known tribal group being the *Dāsas*, who had a reputation in the arts of warfare (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). 'Generally speaking, the Great Himalayas and the Tethys Himalayas are inhabited by Tibetan and other Mongoloid people; the Lesser Himalayas are the home of the tall, fair Indo-Aryans (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). Today, there are various social groups, secluded social classes and distinct linguistics groups in the Himachal Pradesh. The prominent social communities are Gaddi, Kinnauri, Pangwali and Lahuli. In the Lahuli, Kinnaur and Spiti districts, a majority of the people are traditional Buddhists and in some other parts Hindu people peacefully co-exist with Buddhists.

The Himachali people speak various social dialects. The Western Pahari



Original Article

language is the principal language. Pahari is derived from Sanskrit and Prakrit (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). In the Kinnaur, Lahuli, and Spiti districts where the majority are Buddhists the widely spoken vernaculars belong to the Sino-Tibetan family. An explicit Chinese and Tibetan cultural influence on the Himalayan people in their languages, religious thinking and culture can be seen. From mountain to mountain, their spoken language is different. However, the common people are intelligent enough to share and understand their ideas.

Since there are no alphabets in many village-level spoken languages, students are taught in the Hindi and English languages. A dialect at times may be used by just the people of one particular village. From mountain to mountain, the spoken language is generally different. They are however familiar with the spoken languages of their neighbouring hill people.

The Least-urbanized State

In accordance with the geographical research of Bhardwaj, Himachal Pradesh is one of the least-urbanized States in India. In the early 21st century, its urban population accounted for less than 10 per cent of the total (Bhardwaj: 1983). Urbanized areas are very infrequent to be seen although we go for few hundreds of miles via dangerous routes. Today, it is a recognized fact that, urbanization results in many environmental

problems. Since the Himachal Pradesh is not urbanized yet, nature lavishly offers everything fresh that the Himachali people need.

According to Bhardwaj, most people in Himachal Pradesh depend for their livelihood on agriculture, pastoralism, transhumance (seasonal herding), horticulture, and forestry (Bhardwaj: 1983). It seems that their agriculture may be termed as the "Acquitted Agricultural System" for they never use chemicals. In accordance with the opinions of some villagers, it may be coined as "innocent agriculture". They are accustomed to live with nature in a friendly manner. The huge Himalayan Mountain ranges give birth to various great rivers and they immensely help the Nation's power supply. Bhardwaj comments 'Himachal Pradesh produces a significant portion of India's hydroelectric power' (Bhardwaj: 1983). Some inhabitants are of the opinion that the whole Nation depends on the blessings of the Himalayan Mountains.

In Himachal Pradesh we find a village-based administrative system and it is a fitting system for their nature-bound-simple life style. The state is divided into ten districts – the Chamba, Mandi, Bilaspur, Mahasu, Sirmur, Kinnaur, Simla, Kangra, Kulu, and Lahaul and Spiti (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). Whatever political system at the higher level or the parliamentary level under which that they have to live, it seems that a village-based simple agricultural life provides them life-satisfaction.



Original Article

'Their economy is entirely based on the various products of the land. The chief crops are wheat, maize (corn), barley, rice, and potatoes. Excellent varieties of plums, peaches, apricots, pomegranates, and other fruits are produced' (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). Therefore, the Himachali village people, from time immemorial, have been working with strenuous effort. Machinery is considerably ignored and human labour is given high priority.

Social and Cultural life

The social life of the Himachali people is basically designed by perennially snow-fed rivers of the State. They lead their life mostly with ordinary knowledge related to nature. Although the modern generation is given a proper education by degree-granting Colleges, the elders are endowed with traditional knowledge coming from generation to generation. For example, their traditional and ancient knowledge of medicine is par excellence. Most of the people always use the ancient Tibetan, Indian or Chinese herbal medicines related to nature. The diseases like diabetes high blood pressure, cholesterol and heart attacks are not known to many of them. There are thousands of octogenarians and nonagenarians who bear a first-rate health condition. The healthy food, the clean air, and the pure water seem to be conducive to their physical and mental happiness.

'The fairs and festivals of the hill people are occasions of joyful song and dance.

Besides folk dances, there are folk songs with romantic themes and folktales woven around mythological figures' (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). The men and women join together jubilantly for these dancing and singing festivals. The folktales are related to their ancient Himalayan culture and history. The people belonging to Shamanism also practice various kinds of cultural rituals that are not known to the rest of the world.

Bhardwaj adds, that the Kullu valley, known as the valley of the gods, provides the setting for the *Dussehra* festival held each autumn to celebrate the defeat of the daemon king, Ravana, by the prince Rama (Bhardwaj: 1983). The story of Rama and Ravana found in the ancient Indian Hindu epic 'the Ramayana'. 'During the festival, the various temple-gods are carried in a procession in covered palanquins, accompanied by bands of singers and dancers', Bhardwaj highlights. Normally, the Himachali people are decked in colourful attire when they are enjoying religious and social functions.

Dharmshala in Himachal Pradesh can be considered to be the unofficial kingdom of the Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the whole Buddhist world today. It emerged as a sacred religious zone where the Tibetan people practice Buddhism, and we find many Tibetan Buddhist festivals here. These cultural festivals are not limited only to the Tibetans, and they always invite the others to join; to enjoy, and in



Original Article

a way, this paves the way for cultural, social and religious harmony. This is a notable and particular characteristic of Dharmshala in the Himachal Pradesh.

Himachal Pradesh is very famous for their arts, crafts, and paintings. ‘...Himachals can boast of beautiful and useful crafts, such as the exquisitely designed shawls of Kinnaur and the embroidered handkerchiefs of Chamba’ (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1975). Mostly, they are Tibetan people and traditional Buddhists.

Social Values It must be emphasized that the Himalayan people generally live in concord and harmony. They honestly respect traditional social values. Ministering their parents and grandparents, respect for womenfolk, showing mercy to cattle and other animals, helping their next-door neighbours, respecting elders and trouble-free relationships are to name a few. Their enthusiastic religious life, especially their devout dedication to Buddhist principles and rituals plays a major role in their pleasant surroundings of family life and village life. A few examples of the information collected from the field research work can be highlighted for a proper understanding of this context.

The Security Situation

It seems that Himachali cultural and religious ideas provide them the necessary protection and from social troubles and dangers. We spent one night in a Government Guest House at

Kinnaur (Kinori), and early morning at 5.00 a.m. on the 27th of May, 2017, we were ready to see the delightful sunrise there, at a narrow roadside. At 5.15 a.m. a school girl was coming down from the upper part of the mountain on the road that we were waiting on. She was alone and the following is a part of our discussion:

Girl student: Namaskar, Bhante ji, Good Morning.

Author: Good morning daughter. Are you going to school?

Girl student: Yes, Bhante, I am going to my school.

Author: In which class are you studying?

Girl student: 10th grade Bhante.

Author: Daughter, you are not scare of going alone at this early hour?

Girl student: No Bhante, not at all. Every day I walk at this time.

Later I questioned the Officer-in-Charge of the Government Guest House to get more information regarding her explanation. He categorically confirmed ‘Bhante, you believe me, in Himachal Pradesh girls/women are highly respected. They can walk at any time on the roads. No harm. And a girl is given the full freedom to select a youth for her future life. The girl’s word is the last word. Parents are not entitled to pressurize, because young men in Himachal Pradesh never cheat their girl-friends. But marriages by parents’ proposals also are there. The Dowry is not permitted. But in other states of India, dowry is an essential custom. If the



Original Article

relatives of bride do not give enough dowry, the husband sometimes going to kill his wife. But in Himachal Pradesh the situation is quite different. We never hear of rape cases. The divorce cases also are very rare. We never heard of such things. These are really our traditional wealth given by Buddhist doctrine, Bhante". This shows the nature of sacred attitude to womenfolk in Himachal Pradesh which pave the way for peaceful social environment in turn.

The marriage rituals are performed by Tibetan Lamas of Tibetan Buddhist temples with a religious background. Therefore, marriage ceremonies are so simple in nature. In certain marriage rituals, we find a few days of continuous singing and dancing. Normally, continuous singing and dancing festivals are arranged for a few days for their merry-making. It is a peculiar characteristic of the Kinnaur District (Kinnori) dancing.

Kalpa village in the Kinnaur district is the place where we can visualize the Kailas Kuta of the Himalaya Mountain. In Kalpa village, there is an ancient Buddhist temple called 'Kalpa Mandir' and it is more than 1000 years old. On returning from Kalpa Mandir, in order to get more information, we entered into a small police station where we met just one Police Constable at that time. The part of the dialogue of the author with police officer is as follows:

Author: Good afternoon, Sir.

Police officer: Namaskar. From where are you?

Author: We are from Sri Lanka. Can we talk with you regarding some aspects of social situation of this village?

Police officer: Yes, of course. We can talk. No problem there.

Author: Are there struggles, street fightings, family problems and crimes? What is the nature of crimes that are prevailing here?

Police officer: No crimes, No troubles, No family problems. No struggles in this village. During the past five years, we had no even single complain.

Author: It is wonderful? Then, why there is a police station here?

Police officer: It is because of the government policy. If something happens? Many tourists come here, and at times, they need a proper guidance and our help.

This is astonishing information for us and this gives a somewhat clear picture of social co-existence, social values and a peaceful environment of the Kinnaur-Kalpa village people. The Kinnaur-Kalpa people bear such inherent Buddhist characteristics in their life style that which come from generation to generation.

Harmonious House-life

With the help of Lama-ji (Indian-Tibetan Buddhist monk), I had a chance of visiting a few houses of Buddhist devotees. One of the houses that we visited was a two-storied wooden house. Their garden was such a mind-pleasing place with vegetables, grain



Original Article

cultivation like barley, fruit trees like apples, peaches, and pears. It was a fact of astonishment for us to hear and observe their harmonious life style. The ground floor was solely for keeping grains, seeds and other kinds of dry food. One bed and a few chairs were there in that part, and the mother of three children lived there. The children lived in the upper part of the house. One family was in one corner of the upper story and the other two children with their family members lived in the other two corners of the house. There were no separate rooms and it was just like a dormitory-type residence. When there is a newly-born baby for one family, all the persons come forward to care and provide protection and necessities for the baby. So, in that house, there were always six persons caring for a newborn baby. After having a discussion with the mother, we came to know that they all lead a very peaceful life, and they all regularly give the necessary protection for their mother. This life pattern, clearly, is setting an ideal example for global family relationships. In Himachal Pradesh, marriage is considered a “sacred union” and it is not only the relation of two persons but is the union of two souls in accordance with their opinion.

Healthy Physical-life

The peculiar characteristic of the Himalayan people is that they are leading a physically healthy life. When we questioned many octogenarians and nonagenarians, they knew nothing

of high-blood pressure, diabetes, cholesterol or any other well-known diseases. This might be because of the continuous climbing of mountainous tracks, drinking pure water, breathing pure air, working hard continuously and the impact of cultural events and a happy life. Whenever they get a sickness, normally, they use indigenous Indian, Tibetan or Chinese medication. Some Tibetan Buddhist monks, in addition to their religious duty, provide medical services for people as indigenous doctors.

In Himachal Pradesh, Hinduism and Buddhism are practiced simultaneously. It seems that Tibetan Buddhist monks play a major role than Indian Buddhist monks. Tibetan Buddhist monks use various types of medicines, spells (*mantras*), short spells (*tantras*) to cure many sicknesses of their devotees. They strongly deem that helping devotees in their physical and mental sufferings is a part of their own spiritual life. Many Lama Buddhist monks in Himachal Pradesh have a wide knowledge of indigenous medicines. They perform their service even to the Hindu people in their hour of need.

Temples and Culture

Some of the tribal people are so poor in an economist’s view, but it seems they lead a happy life with what they have. Many of them know nothing of religions or philosophy. In their words, they find no time to engage in religious activities, and they have to struggle



Original Article

with nature and seasonal changes to earn their living. But many other villages people practice traditional religions like Buddhism, Shamanism, and Hinduism. They have their ancient traditional Buddhist temples too.

The Tabo monastery complex in the Sagnam village which is surrounded by snowy-capped mountains by the side of the Spiti valley in Himachal Pradesh is one famous Buddhist temple which was established in 996. It is considered the “Ajanta of Himalaya” where, we find nine temples, pagodas, caves and cliff-like structures, murals, and stucco sculptures carved on the walls. It is, in a way, a meeting point of Tibetan and Indian cultures. This village is a very ancient Buddhist village of the World and the villagers supply every service and the needs of the temple. So, it can be considered “a temple-village”. At night, the environment of the Tabo monastery complex is the most silent place although there are more than 300 monks including novice student monks currently. Even in the day time, it has a soundless environment. All the villagers of Tabo, live harmoniously and lead a simple and happy life because of the impact of the Tabo monastery and the Tibetan Lama monks.

The Key Gompa Buddhist monastery is also a famous cave temple for Lama Monks which is located on the top of a hill in a small village at an altitude of 13,668 feet above sea level in the Spiti valley of Himachal Pradesh. According to the chief Lamaji’s explanations, from

time to time, it was attacked by Mongols and again it was sacked in the Ladak-Kulu war, and again severely damaged by the Dogra army. In 1975, yet again it was damaged by a violent earthquake. But the Key Gompa temple was repaired by the Archaeological Survey of India. Later, in this monastery complex, monastery architecture, monuments, murals and paintings have been restored and developed with the help of the faithful Chinese devotees. Many ancient Buddhist manuscripts and books are carefully protected there. It is a major religious educational site for more than 250 Tibetan Lama Monks today. It is also a center of social service by providing accommodation for the elderly and the handicapped. Besides all these services, the Key Gompa temple can be considered a Buddhist sanctuary for all the visitors from all over the world. We find a temple-village (*āramika gāma*) there which serves as a service village for this ancient monastery. The people of this village lead a simple, peaceful and religious life style.

The Gyuto Monastery is located in a high mountainous area with a natural picturesque beauty. The Tibetan Buddhist monks’ study *Dhamma* (Buddhist Doctrine) and *Vinaya* (Discipline), the Chinese, Tibetan and English languages, and Sino -Tibetan medicine. Although there are more than 500 student Monks currently, it is a quiet place, and also a fine place for a harmonious ecclesiastical life. It seems



Original Article

that the service-village for this monastery nowadays is being developed little by little. The daily routine of these Tibetan Monks provides a proper atmosphere for peaceful co-existence of all the people belonging to various Buddhist traditions and other faiths.

Himalayan Buddhist Nunneries

A great religious and social service is rendered by the Himalayan Tibetan Buddhist nunneries. In the people's voice, that is certainly a blessing for Himalayan womenfolk of all the tribes and religions. **Dolma Ling Nunnery** is a non-sectarian nunnery located in the Kangra valley near Dharamsala. This education campus is home to 250 nuns and it is dedicated to higher Buddhist education for Tibetan nuns from various traditions. The **Ani Gumpa Nunnery** is located in Gangotok city surrounded by pristine greenery, waterfalls, and an attractive countryside. As a Buddhist meditation center, it invites ladies of all the religions and of all the ages, and at any age in their life, they may join the nunnery for meditation. The **Tilokpur nunnery** is located at Tilokpur in Himachal Pradesh and it is the oldest Tibetan nunnery outside of Tibet. This nunnery belongs to the famous Indian Yogi Tilopa's lineage. It provides education and meditation facilities for more than 110 nuns. It is an oasis for Buddhist nuns of Tibet, Nepal, Kinnaur, Ladakh, Sikkim, and Arunachal Pradesh. Although they belong to various nationalities and

tribal communities and speak various languages, they lead a pleasant and harmonious life in this nunnery. They are all bound by the bond of *Dhamma* (Doctrine) and *Vinaya* (Discipline).

CONCLUSION

The village areas of Himachal Pradesh can be considered as the most suitable places in the World for leading a healthy and harmonious life. Generally, the people are peaceful, kind-hearted, innocent, and honest. Money-centered people are very rare. The life style of almost all the people is bound by their culture and religion. The Tibetan Buddhist temples and nunneries provide an unparalleled religious, social and spiritual service to all the Himalayan people. The Buddhists and Hindus never experience any religious uprising or any conflict. They live so peacefully and both sides share and enjoy the various cultural events relating to these two religious' traditions. They extremely respect their mother nature. They live with nature and live for nature, and they consider the Himalayan natural resources as their wealth. Even though the people of India give a high priority to the life-threatening caste system, the Himalayan people neglect it. Therefore, they provide a good example for leading a peaceful family life and a conciliatory social life.



Original Article

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my gratitude to the following persons for their willing assistance in various ways to conduct this research work successfully: Dr. (Ven.) Medagama Nandawansa, (Former Professor, University of Ruhuna) Sri Lanka, Chief Lamas of Key Gompa Monastery, Lahaul and Spiti district; Gyuto Monastery, Simla; Guru Padma-Sambhava temple, Pin Valley; Lama Teachers and Lama student-monks of Tabo Monastery, Sagnam village, Lahaul and Spiti district of Trans-Himalayan region; Chief Nun, Ani Gumpa Nunnery, Gangtok; Dr. (Ven.) K. Siri Sumedha, Chief Incumbent, Jambudipa-Sri Lanka temple, Saranath; Officer-in-charge, Government Guest House, Reckong Peo; Lamaji Nanavajra, (for his guide to various places in Himalaya); Mr. Kumar De Silva, Ex-Secretary-SLBPR, (managed by SLHC-New Delhi); Mrs. Nancy Lim Ho Neo (Lalita), Founder member of Jambudipa-Sri Lanka Buddhist temple, Saranath, India.

References

- Austine Waddle, L. (1996). *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*. New Delhi: Aryan Books International.
- Bhardwaj, S.M. (1983). *Hindu Places of Pilgrimage in India (A Study in Cultural Geography)*. California: California University Press.
- Encyclopaedia Britannica Vol. 8. (1975). U.S.A.: University of Chicago.
- Handa, O.C. (1987). *Buddhist Monasteries in Himachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
- Kaushal, R. K. (1965). *Himachal Pradesh. A survey of the history of the land and its people*. Bombay: Minivera Book Shop.
- Saraswat, H.C. (1970). *Himachal Pradesh*. New Delhi: Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Govt. of India.
- Shiromany, A.A. (1995). *The Spirit of Tibet: Universal Heritage*. New Delhi: Allied Publishers Limited.