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## Fluid Traditions: The Visual Evolution of Living Buddhist Spaces in Arunachal Pradesh

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### Abstract

This paper examines the living Buddhist visual culture of Arunachal Pradesh through a visual cultural analysis of four active religious sites. Despite the region's historical significance as a space where Buddhism persisted and evolved during periods of decline elsewhere in India, its art, architecture, and cultural history remain under-researched. Addressing this gap, the study analyzes how visual forms at these sites function as repositories of historical memory and contemporary practice in the absence of extensive written records.

Employing a comparative formalistic and iconographical methodology, the paper studies stupas, monasteries, Buddha images, and public religious sites alongside oral narratives, community beliefs, and socio-political contexts. The case studies- Gorsam Chorten (Zemithang), Golden Pagoda Monastery (Tengapani), regional Buddha imagery, and Buddha Park (Tawang), demonstrate how visual culture in Arunachal Pradesh emerges through layered interactions between Tibetan Mahayana and Burmese Theravada traditions. These traditions, introduced through distinct historical routes, continue to coexist and shape the region's cultural landscape. The analysis argues that Buddhist visual culture in Arunachal Pradesh is not static or regionally bounded but dynamically constituted through trans-geographical exchanges. Architectural replicas, stylistic adaptations, and the circulation of images from Nepal, Bhutan, Myanmar, Thailand, and mainland India reveal ongoing processes of borrowing, reinterpretation, and innovation. Contemporary factors such as state policy, pilgrimage networks, and digital media further intensify these exchanges.

By foregrounding living sites as critical archives, the paper reconceptualizes Arunachal Pradesh's Buddhist visual culture as an evolving, non-linear tradition shaped by mobility, connectivity, and local agency within broader transnational Buddhist networks.

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### Introduction

Arunachal Pradesh, a state in Northeast India, boasts a rich living Buddhist culture that has flourished even during periods when Buddhism faced decline in other parts of the country. Historically, this region played a critical role in the revival of Buddhism in India, its birthplace, particularly during the mid and late medieval period. Present-day Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by the evolution of two distinct Buddhist traditions: Tibetan and Burmese, which have developed concurrently. The landscape is adorned with numerous Buddhist monasteries, temples, stupas, and various sites that have been actively used for centuries, underscoring the enduring presence of Buddhism. This religious tradition has significantly influenced the art, architecture, societal norms, and overall cultural fabric of Arunachal Pradesh, manifesting its profound impact on the region's identity.

There is a notable scarcity of scholarships and documentation regarding the Buddhist history, art, and architecture of Arunachal Pradesh, which presents significant challenges in studying the Buddhist culture of this region. Early scholars of Indian studies primarily focused their research on peninsular India, leading to a general neglect of the Buddhist traditions and historical contexts of Arunachal Pradesh. Furthermore, the pre-modern era lacks sufficient reliable written records from the region, exacerbating the difficulties faced by researchers attempting to understand its rich Buddhist heritage. In the region of Arunachal Pradesh, the living sites act as rich repositories of historical and cultural information. These locations have witnessed long-term utilization, leading to the accumulation of a diverse range of artifacts and architectural styles, from ancient to contemporary. A visual

cultural analysis of these materials provides insights into the evolution of Buddhist culture within the region. Furthermore, the ongoing development of art and architecture at these sites, including those still in progress, offers valuable perspectives on the current state of Buddhist visual culture in Arunachal Pradesh.

This paper conducts a visual cultural analysis of four living Buddhist sites in Arunachal Pradesh, utilizing an eclectic methodological framework. It employs a comparative formalistic and iconographical approach to examine the artifacts and architecture found at these sites, contrasting them with similar Buddhist sites in various geographical locations. Additionally, the analysis contextualizes these findings through the lens of oral and written narratives, as well as prevalent community beliefs and the socio-political circumstances surrounding these sites. Given the scarcity of written research on the specific Buddhist sites under examination, the paper also incorporates information gathered from web-based platforms to enrich its analysis. Through analysis, the text argues that the Buddhist visual culture in Arunachal Pradesh, which has evolved over recent centuries, is influenced by external connections. The Buddhist communities in this region are not only receiving various Buddhist art forms from around the world but also experimenting with them. This dynamic process reflects how the living Buddhist visual culture in Arunachal Pradesh serves as a testament to transformation within trans-geographical and trans-national traditions.

#### **Living Buddhist Sites of Arunachal Pradesh: Trans-geographical Traditions in Transformation:**

The journey of Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by a non-linear progression, reflecting a unique historical context. This religion and philosophy, which originated in ancient India around the 6th century BCE, eventually evolved into a monastic institutional religion. At the height of its development, Indian Buddhist missions, alongside certain monarchs, facilitated the dissemination of Buddhism across South and Southeast Asia, eventually extending its reach to East Asia. Each of these regions initially embraced the Indian Buddhist traditions, showcasing a diverse adoption of the faith influenced by local customs and histories. In the exploration of Buddhist cultures, it is evident that over time, distinct traditions evolved, merging with Indian influences to create unique forms of Buddhism. This developmental trajectory, typically analyzed within a linear historical context, does not wholly apply to Arunachal Pradesh. The introduction of Buddhism to this region occurred via two main routes, notably in the 8th century CE when Padmasambhava brought Mahayana Buddhism from Tibet to western Arunachal Pradesh. The ethnic groups of the Monpas, Sherdukpens, Nahs, Membas, and Khambas primarily adhere to this Tibetan variant of Mahayana Buddhism and are predominantly located in the western and northwestern areas of Arunachal Pradesh (Dutta & Tripathy 2009). Between the 13th and 18th centuries, various Buddhist groups migrated from Southeast Asia, particularly from Burma (now Myanmar), and settled in different areas of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. As a result of these migrations, the Burmese form of Theravada Buddhism was established in the south-eastern region of Arunachal Pradesh.

The Singphos, Tai-Khamtis, and Tikhak Tangsas are communities in this region that adhere to Burmese Theravada Buddhism. Presently, both Tibetan Mahayana Buddhism and Burmese Theravada Buddhism continue to thrive as active practices in the area. In its evolution from the medieval to the modern period, the Buddhist culture of Arunachal Pradesh has demonstrated adaptability to various social and geopolitical transformations. The modern era, in particular, has seen significant shifts in political affiliations that have fostered new connections within the Buddhist community. Additionally, advancements in travel technologies and increased connectivity have effectively bridged the Buddhist community of Arunachal Pradesh with the broader global Buddhist landscape, enhancing interactions and exchanges. Studies on the Buddhist history, art, and culture of Northeast India, particularly Arunachal Pradesh, are still in the early stages of scholarly inquiry. The living Buddhist culture in the region has received limited academic attention, with only a few references noted in literature. Recent efforts to address this gap include the national seminar titled "Buddhism in North East India and its Socio-Economic Impact," held in December 2002 at Arunachal University, Itanagar. This seminar, organized by the Indian Council of Historical Research and the Department of History at Arunachal University, represents a significant academic engagement with Buddhism in this region, highlighting the socio-economic implications of the tradition. The seminar paper, compiled in the book "Buddhism in North East India" edited by Byomakesh Tripathy and Sristidhar Dutta, explores multiple facets of Buddhism in the Northeast Indian region. This inaugural compilation seeks to deliver a comprehensive overview of the Buddhist history and culture specific to Northeast India. It is structured into four sections, each offering insightful information on key themes including the historical evolution of Buddhism, its artistic expressions and architectural contributions, as well as the socio-economic repercussions of Buddhism within the local communities. This book serves as a significant resource for understanding the intricate interplay between Buddhism and the cultural landscape of Northeast India. Four out of seven essays in the art and architecture section focus exclusively on Buddhist sites linked to Tibetan traditions in Arunachal Pradesh, while two essays delve into the archaeological evidence of ancient Buddhism in Tripura. The remaining essay provides a general descriptive overview of the structures found in Tai Buddhist monasteries. Although the volume lacks an art historical analysis of the living Buddhist sites, it effectively chronicles the development of contemporary Buddhist traditions and the current status of Buddhism in the region. *Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh* (2009), by Sristidhar Dutta and Byomakesh Tripathy, emphasizes the prominence of Tibetan Buddhist traditions over Burmese traditions within the region's art and culture. This heightened academic interest can be attributed to Arunachal Pradesh's historical significance associated with the 6th and 14th Dalai Lamas, key figures in Tibetan Buddhism. Notably, Tsangyang Gyatso, the 6th Dalai Lama, was born in Arunachal Pradesh in 1683, marking a pivotal point in the region's Buddhist heritage. Additionally, the 14th Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso, notably passed through Arunachal Pradesh while seeking asylum in India in 1959, further linking the area to the broader

narratives of Tibetan Buddhism and its cultural legacy. Furthermore, the Tawang monastery, located in the Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh, dates back to the 17th century and is recognized as the largest center of the Gelupa school of Tibetan Buddhism. As a significant cultural and historical location, it has been the subject of several scholarly works focusing on the Tibetan Buddhist traditions of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly concerning the Tawang Monastery itself. Notable publications include *Buddhism among the Monpas and Sherdukpens* (1980) and *Tawang Monastery* (1981) by Niranjana Sarkar, along with *Tawang Monastery* by Tsewang Norbu. While these works primarily concentrate on the historical aspects of the site, Sarkar's two books also offer descriptive accounts of its art and architecture. However, it is important to note that they primarily focus on this single monastic site, limiting the broader contextual understanding of the region's diverse Buddhist heritage. The pioneering documentation of living Buddhist sites in Northeast India was undertaken by scholar C.V. Nageswara from Bangalore. His work, titled *A Survey of the Theravadi Buddhist Monasteries of Assam and Arunachal Pradesh*, is a comprehensive study that examines 61 monasteries in Assam and 41 in Arunachal Pradesh. The majority of these monasteries are linked to communities that practice the Theravada tradition of Burmese Buddhism. This significant scholarly contribution emerged after a rigorous fieldwork period spanning two years and offers essential insights into the history of these monasteries and the Buddhist communities associated with them.

### Case Study 1: Gorsam Chorten, Zemithang

The landscape of eastern and western Arunachal Pradesh is characterized by the presence of sacred Buddhist stupas, which are hemispherical domes integral to the region's religious-visual culture. These stupas vary in design and size, and their construction remains abundant today. In the western region, they are referred to as *chorten*, while in the south-eastern part, they are called *kongmu*, *pagoda*, or *cheti*. Historically, stupas are among the earliest Buddhist structures, initially built to contain the relics of Shakyamuni Buddha. Over time, stupas came to enshrine the remains of revered monks as well. More recently, the stupas are constructed not only to hold relics but also to symbolize the Buddha or commemorate the deceased, even when they do not contain physical relics. The ongoing presence and construction of stupas reflect the enduring significance of Buddhism within Arunachal Pradesh, showcasing the region's blend of traditional practices and contemporary religious expressions.

The Gorsam Chorten, located in Zemithang in western Arunachal Pradesh, is recognized as one of the oldest stupas in the region and continues to serve as a significant religious site for the local population. It attracts numerous visitors from Bhutan and Nepal during holy occasions and auspicious events, such as Buddha Purnima. The dating of the Gorsam Chorten is contentious due to the absence of written records. The Buddhist Cultural Preservation Society of Bomdila suggests that the stupa is approximately 700 years old, proposing a construction date in the 13th century; however, this claim lacks substantiation. Consequently, many scholars argue that the stupa was built after the Tawang monastery, indicating a later date of construction, specifically in the late 17th century (Dutta & Tripathy, 2006)<sup>[2]</sup>. It is believed that

Lama Pradhar from Kharman village situated near Zemithang built Gorsam Chorten.

However, it is a well-established fact that this popular stupa is modeled after the renowned Boudhanath Stupa of Nepal. Located on the historic trade route linking Tibet to the Kathmandu Valley, the Boudhanath Stupa stands at an impressive height of 118 feet. While the exact dating of this site remains a subject of debate, it is generally believed to have been constructed between the 4th and 6th centuries CE. A major pilgrimage site for Mahayanist Buddhists, Boudhanath is revered as the resting place of the relics of Kassapa Buddha, who predated Shakyamuni Buddha. It holds significance in both Nepalese and Tibetan Buddhism, having maintained its status as a focal point of devotion and pilgrimage for centuries. As a living Buddhist site, Boudhanath Stupa continues to attract both devotees and travelers alike, reflecting its enduring spiritual importance (Charleux, 2019)<sup>[3]</sup>. As per the oral history prevalent among the local community of Arunachal Pradesh, Lama Pradhar embarked on a journey to the Kathmandu valley, where he visited the renowned Boudhanath Stupa. Inspired by its grandeur, he crafted a miniature model of the stupa using a radish. Upon his return to Arunachal Pradesh, Lama Pradhar dedicated himself to constructing the Gorsam Chorten, a replica of the Boudhanath, which took him thirteen years to complete. Although the Gorsam Chorten is slightly smaller, standing at 100 feet, it is designed to closely resemble the original Boudhanath stupa, reflecting its architectural significance and cultural heritage within the community.

In Bhutan, there exists a replica of the renowned Boudhanath stupa known as Chorten Kora, located in the Trashiyangtse district. This significant structure, originating from the 18th century, was constructed under the direction of a local lama, Lama Ngawang Lodro, who undertook the project to subdue a malevolent demon believed to inhabit the area. The construction of Chorten Kora spanned twelve years, highlighting the dedication and effort involved in its creation. A fascinating aspect of the legend surrounding the stupa's construction is its resemblance to that of Gorsam Chorten. According to this narrative, Lama Lodro carved a radish to replicate the design of Boudhanath during his visit to the Kathmandu valley, emphasizing the symbolic and cultural connections between these sacred sites. Chorten Kora does not accurately resemble Boudhanath, leading to the belief that its curved radish model was shrunk during the travel of Lama Lodro, which hindered an accurate reproduction. Another intriguing aspect surrounding the construction of Chorten Kora is the tale of a princess from Arunachal Pradesh, who is said to have entombed herself within the stupa to meditate on behalf of all beings. According to various versions of the story, the princess was reputedly eight years old and was an offering from the Dakpa people of the Tawang region, although it is emphasized that her participation was voluntary (Dzongkhag Administration, 2024)<sup>[4]</sup>. Boudhanath, a significant site among the Buddhist communities in both Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh, exemplifies a distinct case of trans-geographical traditions in Buddhism. This interconnection highlights the shared cultural practices and the construction of replicas of Boudhanath, which serve as a bridge linking the Buddhist cultures of these regions. The ongoing popularity of Boudhanath within these communities illustrates the cultural and spiritual ties that transcend geographical boundaries.



**Fig 1:** Vasundhara, Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihar, Namsai (Photo: Ajanta Das)

### Case Study 2: Golden Pagoda Monastery, Tengapani

One of the newest additions to the Buddhist landscape in Arunachal Pradesh is the Golden Pagoda Monastery, located in Tengapani within the Namsai district. Since its inauguration to the public in 2010, it has become a significant pilgrimage site and tourist attraction. The architectural design of the monastery is notably influenced by traditional Burmese Buddhist architecture, reflecting the cultural and religious synthesis characteristic of the region. From a formalistic analysis, the central shrine of the Golden Pagoda is noted for its striking resemblance to the iconic Shwedagon Pagoda located in Yangon, Myanmar. The Shwedagon Pagoda is celebrated for its impressive architecture and is considered the most sacred site within the Burmese tradition of Theravada Buddhism. A significant aspect of its reverence comes from the belief that the main stupa houses eight strands of hair that are relics of Shakyamuni Buddha, which adds to the site's spiritual and cultural significance in the region (Pranke and Stadtner, 2015) [5]. The Shwedagon Pagoda is distinguished by its main bell-shaped structure, which stands at an impressive height of 367 feet (112 meters). This iconic landmark is surrounded by numerous smaller stupas and shrines that have been constructed over time. In contrast, the Golden Pagoda Monastery located in Arunachal Pradesh is significantly smaller, measuring 17.60 meters, yet it closely emulates the architectural features of the Shwedagon Pagoda, reflecting similar design elements. The Tengapani Golden Pagoda exhibits architectural similarities to the renowned Shwedagon Pagoda, particularly in its design features. The pagoda is topped with a main central dome that is bell-shaped (fig.:1), resembling that of the Shwedagon Pagoda, and it is surrounded by twelve smaller sub-domes that imitate the small stupas seen around Shwedagon. A deliberate effort has been made to enhance the resemblance of Tengapani Golden

Pagoda to its famous counterpart by applying a gold paint finish and designating it as the Golden Pagoda. Notably, the Shwedagon Pagoda, often referred to as the Great Golden Pagoda, is distinct for its exquisite covering of actual gold plates, which are affixed to a brick structure and have been generously donated by benefactors and the public throughout Burma's history. The Tengapani Golden Pagoda monastery draws significant inspiration from the Shwedagon Pagoda, reflecting similarities in both architectural design and spiritual ethos, evident in its name and overall visual presentation. However, there is a crucial distinction; while Shwedagon features a solid inner structure typical of traditional Buddhist stupas, the Tengapani Golden Pagoda incorporates a shrine beneath its stupa structure, indicating that it is an adaptation of the traditional model rather than a mere replication. The Golden Pagoda is notable for its trans-geographical traditions, particularly as it houses a Buddha sculpture from Thailand.

Shwedagon Pagoda holds a significant place in the cultural and religious psyche of the Buddhist community in southeastern Arunachal Pradesh, existing in the collective consciousness long before the erection of the Tengapani Golden Pagoda. The influence of Shwedagon Pagoda is evident through its multiple replicas found within the region, specifically constructed within various monastery complexes. Examples include the Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihar in Namsai and the Chongkham Buddha Vihar in Chongkham, both of which house replicas of the esteemed Shwedagon Pagoda. This phenomenon indicates that the design of Shwedagon Pagoda transcends mere architectural form; it has evolved into a profound religious symbol of high reverence within the Buddhist visual culture of southeastern Arunachal Pradesh.



Fig 2: Golden Pagoda Monastery, Tengapani, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh (Photo: Ajanta Das)

### Case Study 3: Images of the Buddha

Images of the Buddha hold a vital position in the Buddhist religious visual culture of Arunachal Pradesh, manifested through various forms such as paintings, prints, and sculptures. These representations are not merely decorative; they occupy significant spaces within the prayer halls of monasteries, often being placed prominently in the central areas designated for worship. The Buddhist communities in this region demonstrate a profound emotional connection with these central images of the Buddha. In the southeastern part of Arunachal Pradesh, particularly within the Theravada Buddhist community, the act of donating a Buddha image to a monastery is viewed as a significant rite that provides religious merit to the donor. This cultural practice contributes to the presence of multiple Buddha sculptures, such as those found in the Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihar in Namsai, displayed on altars within the prayer halls, further highlighting the importance of these images in the community's spiritual life (fig.2). Most of these are donated by individual devotees. It appears that the place where the image being made, or the prototype it follows is considered an important quality when choosing a sculpture for donation. The Theravada Buddhist community in Arunachal Pradesh has its origins in small groups that migrated from Burma between the 14th and 18th centuries CE, traversing the Patkai hills. Prior to their settlement in southeastern Arunachal Pradesh, these groups were dispersed across various regions, including the upper Brahmaputra Valley of Assam, eastern Arunachal Pradesh, and the bordering areas of Burma adjacent to the Patkai hills. Notably, the Theravada communities in Arunachal Pradesh are largely integrated into the broader Asian Tai community, which shares a historical lineage with the Thai population in Thailand. This shared heritage is notably reflected in their collective decision related to the iconography of Buddha imagery.

The representation of the Buddha's images manifests predominantly in three distinct styles: Thai, Burmese, and Indian, specifically from Mathura. The Burmese images are notably characterized by a broad band that adorns the forehead, and they often depict the Buddha seated in the *bhumisparsa mudra*, which is recognized as the earth-touching gesture. Additionally, these images are primarily

crafted from marble. Regarding attire, the figures typically wear a monastic robe that leaves the right shoulder bare, conforming to traditional representations of Buddhist iconography. Theravada Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh developed in close relationship with Burma during the early modern period prior to India's republic formation. In the 18th and 19th centuries, Buddhist monks frequently visited the Theravada monasteries in Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, facilitating the exchange of Burmese artifacts and the arrival of artisans to the region. As a result, acquiring Burmese Buddha images or creating replicas based on Burmese prototypes became a common practice among devotees. Consequently, a significant number of older Buddha images in this region reflect the Burmese artistic style.

In recent years, Thai metal images of the Buddha have seen a surge in popularity, characterized by distinctive features such as a flame atop the Buddha's head, finely curled hair, curved eyebrows, broad shoulders, and a narrow waist. Two primary factors contribute to this increased interest. Firstly, the deep-rooted historical connection between the Thai people and the rich Buddhist cultural heritage of Thailand fosters a sense of reverence towards these Buddha images. Secondly, following the establishment of the Indian republic, the royal government of Thailand has shown a concerted effort to engage with the Theravada Buddhist communities located in Northeast India, further enhancing the significance and appreciation of Thai Buddha images among these communities. This dual impact of historical reverence and contemporary governmental interest underscores the cultural importance of these metal images within the Buddhist context of Thailand and its neighboring regions. India's Look East Policy, declared in 1991, and Thailand's Look West Policy, introduced in 1996, significantly influenced cultural exchanges between the Theravada communities of Northeast India and Thailand's Buddhist culture. These policies facilitated increased interactions, as evidenced by the influx of Thai delegates and tourists visiting Northeast India's Theravada monasteries. Their visits often included the donation of Thai sculptures of Buddha and various artefacts, which further enriched the cultural landscape of the region. Many Thai devotees have assumed co-patronage of several recent Buddhist sites in the region, exemplified by the Golden

Pagoda Monastery of Tengapani, which boasts four co-patrons from Thailand. The enhanced air connectivity resulting from recent policies has facilitated travel for devotees from Arunachal Pradesh to Thailand on pilgrimage, during which they have collected Thai images to donate to their monasteries upon their return.

Images characterized by the Indian Mathura style, often depicting a round, smiling face in the *abhaya-mudra* (gesture of reassurance), originate largely from Indian Buddhist

pilgrimage locations, particularly Bodhgaya. These images were transported by devotees undertaking pilgrimages to these significant sites. In addition to showcasing the work of native artists from the region, there are instances of collaboration with invited artists from outside. The images are constructed using locally sourced materials such as wood, bamboo, and cement. These artworks serve as excellent examples of craftsmanship and often adhere to one of the three prototypes previously mentioned.



**Fig 3:** Pariyatti Sasana Buddha Vihar, Namsai, Arunachal Pradesh (Photo: Ajanta Das)

#### Case Study 4: The Buddha Park, Tawang

In recent years, Arunachal Pradesh has seen a proliferation of public Buddhist sites in addition to its community monasteries. These sites, while featuring religious characteristics, primarily aim to attract and educate both native and non-native tourists. A notable example is the Buddha Park in Tawang, referred to locally as Ngangpa Natme. The park's central attraction is a 30 ft tall statue, known as the Giant Buddha, which is positioned above a two-storied prayer hall and is visible from various points throughout Tawang city (fig.3). This site, consecrated by H.E Thegtse Rinpoche in 2016, serves as a convergence point for various trans-geographical Buddhist traditions. The architectural features and ornamental designs adorning its exterior are reminiscent of Tathagata Tsal, widely known as the Buddha Park of Ravangla, which is located in the South Sikkim district of Sikkim. Established between 2006 and 2013, this site has gained popularity and is notable for its impressive colossal Buddha statue, which stands at an imposing height of 130 ft. As one enters the prayer hall of the Buddha Park in Tawang, one can observe a rich tapestry of significant events from the life of the Buddha, which are artistically displayed across the three walls of the hall. These depictions are meticulously produced on prints and then affixed to the surfaces, showcasing a distinct influence from the Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhist tradition. This influence is particularly evident in the portrayals of the Mara Vijay episode, where detailed imagery captures pivotal moments from Buddha's narrative, inviting visitors to reflect on these profound teachings and stories (fig.4). This episode is significant within the context of Burmese and Southeast Asian Theravada Buddhism, wherein the earth is personified as Vasundhara. This particular representation is distinct to Burmese Buddhist traditions and is rarely found in Mahayana Buddhism or Tibetan practices. The artistic depiction of the

scene, in which the earth Goddesses come to the aid of the meditating Buddha, distinctly reflects Southeast Asian stylistic elements. Additionally, Vasundhara in this representation is embraced as a subsidiary deity among the Theravada communities in southeastern Arunachal Pradesh, further highlighting her cultural and religious importance in the region (fig.5). A monk present on the site informed that the prints were procured from a professional printing studio located in Bangalore (Interviewed in May 2025). These designs appear to be widely available online, indicating they are probably downloaded and subsequently printed from various websites. Notably, this accessibility highlights the role of contemporary media and connectivity in uniting trans-geographical traditions, as exemplified by their manifestation at the Buddha Park in Tawang.

In Arunachal Pradesh, the Buddhist visual culture has been significantly shaped by diverse influences over time, particularly from Tibetan and Burmese art traditions. Additionally, the regional cultures of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, and Bodhgaya have contributed to the rich tapestry of this visual expression. In recent years, the Buddhist tradition from Thailand has emerged as a profound influence, further enriching the Buddhist visual culture of Arunachal Pradesh. This paper explores the interactions and exchanges among Tibetan, Burmese, Nepalese, and Thai art traditions, highlighting the dynamic and interconnected nature of Buddhist artistic practices in the region. As we conclude this paper, we examine the Mandal Top, also known as the 108 Mani, which has recently become an integral part of the Buddhist visual landscape in Arunachal Pradesh. Located on a hilltop in the West Kameng district, this site was established in 2018 as a collaborative effort between the government and the local community, primarily aimed at enhancing tourism. The Mandal Top features 108 Manes adorned with the inscription "Om Mani Padme Hum," arranged in five

concentric circles, thereby emulating the sacredness of a mandala. This design is reminiscent of Bhutan's renowned pilgrimage site, the Druk Wangyal Chortens, which is situated at the Dochula Pass and was erected to honor the valiant Bhutanese soldiers who lost their lives in the 2003 battle. Additionally, it is noted that numerous other tourist-focused sites are currently undergoing construction throughout Arunachal Pradesh, with various stages of development in progress. For example, Yokmuzor Buddha Heritage Park, currently under construction near Jagoan in the Rupa circle of west Khameng district, is architecturally inspired by the Buddha Park of Tawang but is notably larger in scale. Additionally, in Lathao circle of Namsai, a 108-foot statue of Buddha is also being constructed, designed according to the prototype of a Thai Buddha image. The tradition of creating colossal Buddha images in Arunachal

Pradesh has a rich history, with the 25-foot gilt-copper statue located in the historic Tawang monastery being one of the oldest examples of this art form.

In recent years, the creation of massive images of the Buddha has gained considerable popularity, with a focus on their impressive scale as a defining characteristic. The Buddhist community in the region is largely supportive of these tourist-centric developments, recognizing the significant potential they hold for both economic growth and the enhancement of religious-cultural identity. Nevertheless, the community faces challenges due to inadequate road connectivity and telecommunications in the area. Addressing these infrastructural issues is essential, as it would facilitate rapid socio-economic advancement in Arunachal Pradesh and elevate the visibility of its Buddhist communities within the broader global Buddhist landscape.



**Fig 4:** Buddha Park/ Ngangpa Natme, Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh (Photo: Ajanta Das)



**Fig 5:** Mara Vijaya, prints, Buddha Park, Tawang (Photo: Ajanta Das)

## Conclusion

Arunachal Pradesh's Buddhist visual culture is deeply influenced by its historical connections to Tibet and Burma, deriving significant elements from their respective Buddhist traditions. The paper presents case studies that highlight how, throughout its long historical development, the living Buddhism in Arunachal Pradesh has formed various new affinities and influences from outside the region. These influences are notably reflected in the region's visual culture, demonstrating a dynamic and evolving relationship between local practices and external Buddhist traditions. Buddhist architectures and artifacts across various geographical regions are being replicated, adapted, and innovatively transformed within Arunachal Pradesh. This dynamic process enables us to characterize the living Buddhist visual culture of the area as a trans-geographical tradition undergoing continuous evolution.

## Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest. Verbal consent has been taken from all the participants to include their names and other information.

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Dr. Ajanta Das is the Researcher Associate on a collaborative research project of Institute of Social and Cultural Studies (ISCS), Kolkata and Indian Council for Social Science Research (ICSSR), New Delhi which is working on the Integral Socio-Cultural Practices of Buddhist Communities in Borderland Regions: A study in Sikkim and Selected Districts of Arunachal Pradesh and North Bengal (File No: ICSSR/RPR/2023-24/4) (2024-2026). She has completed her PhD in Visual Studies from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, on "Living Buddhist Visual Culture in North-East India", in March'24.

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