

Impact of Buddhism on the Monpa Community of Arunachal Pradesh, India



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Abstract

The Monpas are the habitant of Tawang and West kameng district of the easternmost state of India, Arunachal Pradesh bordering China and Bhutan. The term Monpa refers to people living in low land, but in context of the state of Arunachal Pradesh it refers to a particular ethnic group. The Monpas are Buddhist of the Mahayana school and their language belongs to Bodic speech family. The Tawang Monastery of the Monpas founded some 350 years ago, has been agreat seat of Buddhist leaning and enlightenment. It is also an institution of monastic education. Before the advent of Buddhism in the area the Monpas believed in the existence of numerous gods and demons all around them. Buddhism has brought many changes in the life of Monpa community. Therefore, the present paper aims to investigate the impact of Buddhism on the socio-cultural life and Economy of the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh.

Keywords: Buddhism, religion, tribal, Mahayana

Introduction

A society is consists of number of interdependent organisms of the same species. A culture is the learned behaviors that are shared by the members of a society, together with the material products of such behaviors. Socio-cultural environment consists of all elements, conditions and influences which shape the personality of an individual and potentially affect his attitude, disposition, behaviour, decisions and activities. Wetherly (2011) described the socio-cultural environment as consisting of everything that is not contained within the economy or political system. According to him, socio-cultural setting is made up of collection of activities, and the relationships people engage in their personal and private lives which include population features, age, ethnicity, religion, values, attitude, lifestyles and associates.

Study Area

Arunachal Pradesh is situated in the north-eastern part of India having long international border with Bhutan to the west, Peoples of Republic of China (PCR) to the north and north-east, Myanmar to the east and the state of Assam to the south-east. It is the homeland of 26 major tribal communities, further divided into about 101 recognized sub-tribes and majority of the native are of Tibeto-Burman origin. The study area Tawang district, the land of snow-capped mountains lies on the north-western extremity of Arunachal Pradesh, bordering Tibet in the north, Bhutan in the west and south and the district of west kameng in the East and the habitant of the district are the Monpas.. The Monpas are one of the major tribes of the state. The term Monpa refers to people living in low land, but in context of the state of Arunachal Pradesh it refers to a particular ethnic group. The Monpas are Buddhist of the Mahayana school and their language belongs to Bodic speech family. The TawangMonastery of the Monpas founded some 350 years ago, has been a great seat of Buddhist leaning and enlightenment. It is also an institution of monastic education.

Before the advent of Buddhism in the area, the Monpas believed in the existence of numerous gods and demons all around them. These were held to personify the powers andforces of theirwild highland landscape and were believed tobe responsible for all the calamities threatening their welfare. So they propitiated these supernatural beings by performing rites in which the sacrifice of animals formed an important part. Thus, the fundamental principles of that religion is same those of the indigenous Bon religion of Tibet. But when the Monpas accepted Buddhism, it stopped these rites and started worshipping according to the manner of the Buddhist rituals. The lamas (Monks) firmly believe that a master of Nalanda university of India Guru Padmasambhava known as Lupon Rinpoche who helped the Tibetans to establish the creed in Tibet

visited the area and planted the germ of Buddhism. After accepting Buddhism many changes took place in the socio-cultural life, political system and economy of the Monpa people. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to investigate the impact of Buddhism on the Monpa community of Tawang District of Arunachal Pradesh.

Objectives of the Study

1. To investigate the impact of Buddhism on socio-cultural life of Monpa community of Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh.
2. To investigate the impact of Buddhism on economy of the Monpa community of Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh

Methodology

For the present study the investigator employed survey method. A sample of 200 community members (100 male & 100 female) were selected randomly from Tawang district of Arunachal Pradesh. Further, to find out the impact of Buddhism on socio-cultural life and economic activities, two questionnaires were developed and used as data gathering tool. The administered questionnaires were analyzed by calculating simple percentage

Findings

In order to investigate the impact of Buddhism on socio-cultural life and economy of the Monpa community of Arunachal Pradesh, the questionnaires were administered on the selected sample and detail analyses are given below.

Impact of Buddhism on Socio-Cultural life of Monpa Community

Do you think Buddhism played significant role in integrating the smaller society like Monpas.

The first question is relating to integration among the Monpas and the responses revealed that majority (96%) of the male and (92%) female members agreed that Buddhism plays a vital role in integrating the smaller society like Monpa due to which lot of changes can be seen in the Monpa society.

Do You Think that the Change in the Customary Laws, Like Marriage System Among Monpas is Due to the Impact of Buddhism?

In case of the impact of Buddhism on marriage system (52%) male and (60%) female respondents responded that changes occurred in the marriage system among the Monpas is due to the impact of Buddhism

Is there any dowry system practiced in the traditional marriage of the Monpas?

The study revealed that (92%) male (42%) female responded that there exists dowry system in the traditional marriages of Monpas.

Was polygamy and divorce common among the Monpas?

Regarding divorce in Monpa society (62%) male and (60%) female responded that divorce was common among the Monpas. Regarding polygamy (92%) female and (89%) male responded that it is not commonly practiced in Monpa society.

Do you think that less practice of polygamy and reduce in divorce rate is because of influence of Buddhism, as polygamy is very common among the other tribes of the state?

(85%) male and (82%) female feels that, reduction in divorce rate and less practice of polygamy in Monpa society is because of Buddhist religion and its moral studies.

Polyandry was commonly practiced in traditional Monpa society. Do you think that reduce in polyandry, is because of the impact of Buddhism?

(90%) male and (87%) female respondents responded that reduce in polyandry is because of impact of Buddhism and also because of availability of more economic opportunities among the villagers.

Is there any tradition of alcoholism among Monpa people?

The study revealed that (86%) male and (78%) agreed that there had been a tradition of taking alcohol among the Monpa society and now it is because of the impact of Buddhism people are giving up consumption of alcohol.

Are there any changes in the food habits of the Monpa people because of impact of Buddhism? If yes, mention in brief.

Responses from the above question revealed that majority (88%) of male respondents feel that the food habits and the life style of the Monpa people had changed drastically due to the influence of Buddhism. Among female respondents it was found (78%) agreed that food habits and the life style of the Monpa people had changed drastically due to the influence of the Buddhist education. It was revealed that people are becoming more vegetarian, as Buddhist philosophy is against killing of any animals.

Monpa people as a whole respect all living beings. Do you think this is because of impact of Buddhism?

Majority of the male and female respondent (98%) feels that the Monpas respect all living beings as per Buddhist religion which teaches non-violence and Ahimsa Param Dharma.

Do you think Monpa society is woven by the fabrics of Buddhism?

Responses to the above question revealed that majority (70%) male and (84%) female respondents feel that Monpa people are very religious and does everything in the name of religion; it is obvious that Monpa society is woven by the fabrics of Buddhism.

It is observed that Monpas are well disciplined and cultured in comparison to other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. Do you think it is because of the impact of Buddhism?

(90%) male and (88%) female respondents responded that discipline among the Monpas is because of its religious factor. It is observed that Monpas are well disciplined and cultured in comparison to other tribes of Arunachal Pradesh.

Do you think that Buddhist Education played a vital role in spreading new concepts of Education, Culture, Art and Architecture in the Monpa areas?

Majority (92%) male (84%) female respondents agreed that Buddhist Education played a vital role in spreading new concepts of Education, culture, art and architecture in Monpa areas. The Tawang Monastery is the example of Buddhist institution, art and architecture, which is providing Buddhist as well as modern education to all the people of Monpa.

Do you think that due to the impact of Buddhism men and women are treated equally in Monpa society?

Regarding equal treatment among the men and women, it was found that majority (90%) male and (88%) female respondents think that it is because of the impact of Buddhism all are treated equally in Monpa society. In Monpa society women are given equal status at par with man in almost all the areas.

Do you think that less crime rate in district is because of impact of Buddhism?

Responses regarding the above question revealed that (74%) male and (96%) female feels that due to the impact of Buddhism, crime rate is less in the area as Buddhist religion teaches to follow peace and non-violence.

Impact of Buddhism on Economy of Monpa Community.

Was there any trade and barter system in traditional Monpa society?

The first question is relating to trade and barter system in traditional Monpa society. (88%) responded that there was barter system in traditional Monpa society. Rest (22%) respondents are not aware of it.

Do you agree that Monpa society is basically a materialistic society?

(34%) male respondents and (55%) female respondents agreed that Monpa society is a materialistic society and they believe that it is because of impact of Buddhism.

Do you find any changes in the occupational pattern of the people? If yes, what changes you notice? Mention... Do you think it is because of impact of Buddhism?

Regarding occupational pattern (66%) male and (46%) female agreed that there is a change in occupational pattern like people are more in business and other activities. They have also responded that religion is one of the factor.

Is there any restriction in doing some business like selling meat, fish etc in Monpa society as Buddhism does not permit any living beings to be killed.

(88%) male and (97%) female responded that there is restriction in doing such business as per Buddhism, but at the same they believe that this does not hamper economic development of the society.

Is Buddhism a 'Motivating Medium' in the development process of the Monpa society?

Responses to the above question revealed that (94%) male and female respondents agreed that Buddhism is a 'Motivating Medium' in the developmental process of Monpa society as Buddhism has changed the thinking and life style of the Monpa people.

Men and Women perform equal work in the fields and at home in Monpa society. Is it because of the impact of Buddhism?

(72%) and (64%) female agreed that men and women perform equal work in the field and at home in Monpa society but they also revealed, it is not related with their religion.

Do you think that because of impact of Buddhism women also have equal right to choose her vocation?

In Monpa society women have equal right to choose their vocation, (72%) male and (76%) female responded that this is because of impact of Buddhism.

According to traditional laws only sons have the right to inherit parental property, this system is changing now, do you think this is because of impact of Buddhism?

Regarding property right, (64%) male respondents and (77%) female respondents revealed that the change in the property right in Monpa society is because of the impact of Buddhism. In Monpa society men and women are treated equally in almost all spheres of life

Conclusion and Discussion

The present study investigated the impact of Buddhism on socio-cultural life and economy of the Monpa community of Tawang district. The findings of the study reveals that after accepting Buddhism many changes took place in socio-cultural life of the Monpa people like – marriage system, food habits, customary law etc. It has been a source of discipline in the lives of Monpa people. In terms of economy; Buddhism has served as winds of change in the mindsets of the Monpa people. It has brought forth the change in occupational pattern, vocation and notion of property right. More importantly, Buddhist monasteries in Tawang district were the only center of education for the Monpa people during British period, as there was no other organization imparting education to people of this area. The Tawang Monastery is imparting Buddhist education as well as modern education to the Monpa people of the region.

We can conclude by stating that the impact of Buddhism in the life cycle of the Monpa people has been as of birth to death. Hence, this calls the need to preserve Buddhist culture, art and architecture in the Monpa area.

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