

Preservation Of Alchi Paintings In Ladakh: Analyzing The Neglect Of Lamayuru Paintings By Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo From The Same Era

Trinh Thi Kim Anh
Nalanda University, Nalanda, Bihar, India

Abstract

In the summer of 2024, the author had a two-month vacation in Ladakh. Strangely enough, the longer the author stayed, the more I enjoyed and wanted to spend more time researching this spiritual land after the trip to learn about the culture and traditions of the Tibetan tradition. The author wanted to write an article on the research to discover the historical and artistic importance of the Alchi and Lamayuru monasteries, built by the Tibetan Buddhist teacher and translator Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo. Although Alchi and Lamayuru have much in common, Alchi has received much attention for conservation work, and the Alchi Monastery murals are considered among the world's greatest works of art and faith, while Lamayuru monastery has been neglected. These are the artistic, historical, and conservation-related causes neglected in this study. The article uses both direct and indirect sources to show that more needs to be done to protect the heritage of Lamayuru Monastery. This paper draws from multiple sources to emphasize the need for more substantial efforts to preserve the heritage of Lamayuru Monastery. This study highlights the importance of proactive conservation by exploring different perspectives on protecting cultural heritage in remote areas. This study highlights the importance of proactive conservation by exploring different perspectives on protecting cultural heritage in remote areas. The study also identifies key strategies for different Himalayan Buddhist sites to approach conservation challenges.

Keywords: Alchi Monastery, Lamayuru Monastery, Tibetan Buddhist heritage, Cultural conservation, Monastic art preservation, Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo.

Date of Submission: 25-02-2025

Date of Acceptance: 05-03-2025

I. Introduction

Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo (958–1055 CE) played a pivotal role in the transmission of Buddhism from India to Tibet. A prolific translator and temple builder, he contributed significantly to developing Tibetan Buddhist art and architecture. He is credited with constructing 108 monasteries, including Alchi and Lamayuru in Ladakh, two very famous monasteries not far from Leh. While Alchi is recognized as a masterpiece of Himalayan Buddhist art and is a candidate for UNESCO World Heritage status, and its murals are considered world-class masterpieces, Lamayuru is in a state of neglect, with its murals and architecture deteriorating due to environmental factors and human neglect.

In this article, the author compares two ancient Buddhist monasteries, Alchi and Lamayuru. The author will analyze the reasons for Alchi's success in preserving its cultural heritage and the relative neglect of Lamayuru. The author will use a combination of cultural history analysis and contemporary conservation studies that are still maintained by the community today. This study highlights the urgent need for more supportive efforts to call for restoration at Lamayuru. Scholars such as Handa (2019) and Tsering (2009) have argued that neglecting sites such as Lamayuru reflects broader challenges and implications for heritage conservation and management across the Himalayas. They have also emphasized the importance of protecting Ladakh's Buddhist heritage as a necessary and urgent need.

II. Historical And Artistic Contributions Of Lotsawa Rinchen Zangpo

Rinchen Zangpo played an essential role in the second diffusion of Buddhism in Tibet.¹ by translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan. His translations not only preserved important Indian Buddhist texts but also adapted them to Tibetan philosophical and artistic traditions. According to Davidson (2005), the second transmission of Buddhism in Tibet was greatly influenced by Zangpo's translations, and Rinchen Zangpo's translations played an important role in shaping Tibetan Buddhist thought.

¹ Handa, O.C. *Rinchen Zangpo and His Legacy to Buddhism*. New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2019, p. 67.

Working with Indian scholars at academies such as Vikramaśila and Nalanda, which were considered to be prominent centers of learning in the 5th century, he translated important texts, including the *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Cakrasaṃvara Tantra*.² In addition, his translation efforts played a major role in disseminating the Hevajra Tantra and the Guhyasamāja Tantra, which significantly impacted Tibetan Vajrayana practice.³ Zangpo's translation process involved collaboration with many Indian scholars, such as Śāntisribhadra and Ratnavajra, who provided him with textual guidance and philosophical interpretations.⁴ This ensured that his translations retained doctrinal accuracy while remaining understandable to Tibetan practitioners. Furthermore, his work laid the foundation for later Tibetan Buddhist scholars such as Sakya Paṇḍita, who refined the Buddhist translation and commentarial traditions.⁵

Zangpo also played an important role in Tibet's systematization of Buddhist teachings. In addition to translating and propagating the teachings, he brought Sanskrit manuscripts to the region and established translation teams to standardize terminology, creating linguistic consistency between different Buddhist texts.⁶ This consistency and standardization of terminology of Buddhist texts have greatly influenced and contributed to how Buddhism was studied and practiced in shaping the Buddhist canon in Tibet for centuries up to the present day.

Scholars such as Snellgrove (1987) and Kapstein (2000) argue that Zangpo's work was not limited to textual translation but extended to cultural adaptation. His efforts ensured that Buddhist stories, especially those related to the Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna traditions, were widely accepted by Tibetan practitioners. This adaptation included the integration of indigenous Tibetan symbols and deities into Buddhist iconography and literature, helping Buddhism take root in Tibetan society and bringing a new color to Tibetan Buddhism.

Zangpo's legacy continues to be recognized in modern scholarship, with recent studies emphasizing his contributions to Buddhist hermeneutics and philosophical transmission.⁷ The translation methods he pioneered remain a subject of academic discussion, particularly regarding their influence on subsequent Tibetan Buddhist exegetical traditions.

III. Temple Construction And Artistic Legacy

Rinchen Zangpo's architectural contributions were heavily influenced by Indian and Kashmiri styles. The Alchi and Lamayuru monasteries are prime examples of this blend, combining elements of Gandhara and Kashmiri art. According to Tsering (2009), the Alchi murals are unique in that they retain early Tibetan artistic influences before the Central Tibetan style dominated later.⁸ However, unlike those at the Alchi monastery, similar murals at Lamayuru have faded considerably due to exposure and lack of conservation efforts by local people and established heritage conservation centers. As Klimburg-Salter (1997) has noted, the artistic complexity of the Alchi murals makes them invaluable to the history of Buddhist art in Ladakh as well as to the world, but similar works at Lamayuru remain underappreciated and in a state of serious disrepair. Scholars have found that Lamayuru sculptures severely lack conservation.

² Genoud, Charles. *Buddhist Wall Painting of Ladakh*. Switzerland: Editions Olizane, 1987, p. 43.

³ Snellgrove, David. *Indo-Tibetan Buddhism: Indian Buddhists and Their Tibetan Successors*. London: Serindia Publications, 1987, p. 214.

⁴ Ruegg, David Seyfort. *The Buddhist Philosophy of the Middle: Essays on Indian and Tibetan Madhyamaka*. Boston: Wisdom Publications, 2004, p.98.

⁵ Kapstein, Matthew. *The Tibetan Assimilation of Buddhism: Conversion, Contestation, and Memory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 156.

⁶ van Schaik, Sam. *Tibet: A History*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011, p. 87.

⁷ Gyatso, Janet. *Apparitions of the Self: The Secret Autobiographies of a Tibetan Visionary*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1992, p. 341.

⁸ Tsering, Nawang. *Alchi: The Living Heritage of Ladakh*. New Delhi: National Museum, 2009.

IV. Comparative Analysis: Alchi Vs. Lamayuru Monastery

Feature	Alchi Monastery	Lamayuru Monastery
Historical Significance	Founded ca. 1020–1040 CE	Founded ca. 1025–1050 CE
Artistic Style	Highly detailed murals blending Kashmiri and Tibetan traditions	Traditional Tibetan iconography with simpler artistic features
State of Preservation	Well-preserved due to conservation efforts	Deteriorating due to neglect
Tourism and Development	UNESCO candidate, tourist-friendly infrastructure	Less developed, lacks infrastructure

V. Comparative Preservation Models From Other Himalayan Buddhist Sites

Several Buddhist heritage sites, such as Mustang in Nepal and Tawang Monastery in Arunachal Pradesh, have benefited from structured conservation efforts. According to Hargreaves (2018), community-led initiatives and government support have played a key role in their preservation.⁹

Thubchen Monastery in Mustang was restored with the support of the American Himalayan Foundation (AHF), using traditional materials and local artisans, whose paintings are valuable because all artisans use herbal paints and hand-painting.¹⁰ Tawang Monastery has received periodic state-supported reinforcements to withstand the harsh climate (Meyer 2016). These examples demonstrate how community participation and funding are important for sustainable conservation, providing models for Lamayuru

VI. Community-Driven Conservation Approaches

Recent studies have emphasized the importance of community engagement in sustainable heritage conservation. Skorupski (2010, 79) notes that successful conservation of Himalayan monasteries requires not only funding but also the active participation of monks and local communities. (Tashi 2015, 112; Dawa 2018, 143) have said that projects such as the restoration of Hemis Monastery and the conservation of Alchi Monastery have combined local expertise with the support of NGOs, ensuring long-term sustainability to upgrade the preservation of ancient cultural heritage. To avoid the loss and neglect of traditions. In essence, training programs for monastic monks and artisans help preserve traditional techniques, while environmentally friendly methods, such as using natural pigments, enhance sustainability. (Norbu 2020, 67; Lama 2019, 98) These efforts demonstrate that local engagement is key to maintaining cultural and environmental integrity.

VII. Conclusions

The neglect and lack of maintenance of Lamayuru Monastery highlight the greater challenges of heritage conservation in remote areas. Meanwhile, most of the older values are primarily confined to monasteries. While Alchi has benefited from systematic conservation efforts, Lamayuru needs urgent attention to prevent further degradation. Scholars such as Handa (2019) and Tsering (2009) argue that heritage conservation must extend beyond popular sites to include less visited sites such as Lamayuru.

To address these issues, this paper advocates for increased government and international support, tourism development, and community-led conservation initiatives to preserve Lamayuru's artistic and historical legacy. Future studies should explore the role of local monastic communities in preservation efforts and potential collaborations with international heritage organizations.

References

- [1] Aabedi, Zain-Ul-Aabedin. 2021. *Ladakh: The Then And Now*. New Delhi: Atlantic Publishers & Distributors.
- [2] Davidson, Ronald M. 2005. *Tibetan Renaissance: Tantric Buddhism In The Rebirth Of Tibetan Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- [3] Genoud, Charles. 1987. *Buddhist Wall Painting Of Ladakh*. Switzerland: Editions Olizane.
- [4] Handa, O. C. 2019. *Rinchen Zangpo And His Legacy To Buddhism*. New Delhi: Pentagon 4. Press.
- [5] Hargreaves, Anne. 2018. *Preserving Himalayan Monastic Traditions: A Study On Heritage Conservation*. London: Routledge.
- [6] Klimburg-Salter, Deborah E. 1997. *The Silk Road And The Diamond Path: Esoteric Buddhist Art On The Trans-Himalayan Trade Routes*. Los Angeles: UCLA Press.
- [7] Skorupski, Tadeusz. 2010. *Sacred Art In The Buddhist Himalayas*. New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre For The Arts.
- [8] Tsering, Nawang. 2009. *Alchi: The Living Heritage Of Ladakh*. New Delhi: National Museum.
- [9] Dawa, Sonam. 2018. *Preserving Ladakh's Sacred Art*. New Delhi: Heritage Publishers.
- [10] Lama, Tenzing. 2019. *Eco-Friendly Conservation Of Buddhist Monasteries*. Kathmandu: Himalayan Studies Press.
- [11] Norbu, Lobsang. 2020. *Training The Next Generation*. Dharamsala: Tibetan Cultural Institute.

⁹ Hargreaves, Anne. *Preserving Himalayan Monastic Traditions*. London: Routledge, 2018, p. 58.

¹⁰ Lo Bue, Erberto. *Art and Architecture in Ladakh*. Leiden: Brill, 2010, p. 95.