

## TRACING THE MONASTIC CULTURE OF LEARNING IN TIBETAN BUDDHISM- A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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**Abstract:** The essence of India lies in the foundations of reason, free thought and benevolence thus making it the melting pot for development, diversity and democracy. Several studies from the perspectives of Hinduism, Islam and Christianity have traced the uniqueness of relationship that exists between religion and the construction of knowledge. There remains a Sociological vacuum in the Epistemology of learning in Buddhist tradition, especially the continuity of the quintessentially Indian culture of learning among the Tibetan monks in exile. The question that is addressed in this paper is how religion can define the culture of learning with reference to a particular ethnic community.

The paper charts the metamorphosis of the *Monk* and *Monastery* or *Maha-Vihara* across ages. With in-depth interviews and non-participant observation this ethnography tries to compare learning practices in the Sera Je Monastery and the Jangchub Choeling Nunnery in Karnataka focussing mainly on the use of Paulo Freire's *Dialogue*, *Debate* or *Dhamcha* as an innovative instructional methodology in Monastic Curriculum. This study depicts an intriguing relationship between the contemporary theories and the traditional ways of interpreting education highlighting the diversity in unique and ancient Asian cultures emphasising on how Tibetan Buddhist monasteries preserve the original Indian culture in its purest form.

**Key Words:**

Pedagogy, curriculum, culture of learning, debate, monasticism

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### Introduction:

Culture and Learning have had multidisciplinary work done on them. My attempt is to deal with them together from a sociological perspective for understanding the evolution of Cultures of Learning in India from the ancient to the modern times with special reference to a community belonging to a particular sect trying to identify some of the basic characteristics of Indian learning tradition that remains preserved in the learning practices of a community. My ultimate focus is on Tibetan Buddhist learning in the Monasteries; their curriculum, teacher student relation, and the tools of learning. Using in-depth interviews on the basis of life histories, and non-participant observation this is going to be an ethnography performing a case study of Gelupa sect in Tibetan Buddhism in Sera Je Monastery in Bylakuppe comparing it with the learning practices among the nuns in a Nunnery in Mundgod, Karnataka. Using Paulo Freire's concept of Dialogue, it will be an attempt to understand how critical thinking emerges through debate and the relation between teacher and student shapes up inside the framework of monastic education. The Tibetans as an ethnic group have been residing in India since 1959 and have made significant attempts to hold onto their Monastic tradition claiming at the same time to be Indian in its essence. The key question to be answered in this research is how is this traditional education that is essentially Indian in essence surviving till now. Methodologically, this work is an attempt to contribute to the new Sociology of Education a new perspective, to understand the Tibetan Buddhist culture of learning in India in an attempt to contribute to the Indian Literature on Sociology of Education.

### Buddhist Monasticism in India: Origin and Decay

The Buddhist culture is closely associated with the history of the *Sangha or Priesthood*. The monasteries from where this institution functioned have a long history of growth by stages. The primitive monk settlement is represented by the *avasa* or the *arama*. A typical monastery called at first a *lena* came into existence when the primitive Sangha split up into a number of monk fraternities (Sangha). Wherever Buddhism spread and the monks came and settled, monasteries were built for them and both in the flourishing and in the declining periods of Buddhism, the building of monasteries was an industry, motivated by piety that never ceased. (Dutt, 2008). The widespread fame of the once flourishing Sangha in and outside India dwindled during the end-period of Buddhist decline. Nevertheless in the monasteries of Nalanda, Odantapura and

Vikramasila the ancient tradition of scholarship associated with monastic life continued. While the Sangha started out with the “*sake of faith*” philosophy, over the years it transformed itself to the “*sake of knowledge*” philosophy with influence of liberal thinkers and monks. (ibid.) However, over the centuries from BC to AD the concept of scholarship transitioned from verbal *scholar of the spoken word* to written *scholar of the written word* (Dutt, 2008). The canon of Buddhism was no longer considered to be the be-all and end-all of a monk’s study. (Bapat, 2009). Manuscripts thus became a treasure and were preserved with care. Thus monasteries viz. Nalanda, Vikramashila, Odanatapura etc. became store-houses of manuscripts, a culture Tibetans have preserved. The Tibetan legend is that the great libraries were reduced to ashes by the deliberate act of an infuriated incendiary, a Turk. (Bapat, 2009). According to Bapat, a competent person joining a monastery could live in Nissaya (dependent on a teacher) for 5 years or for the whole life. But the views associated with living inside and leaving the monastic life is a matter of debate. Towards the end, this evolution was characterised by the Monastic Universities of Tibetan and Chinese fame. It became more liberal and incorporated secular subjects in addition to sacred ones and admission was kept open for whoever sought knowledge irrespective of sect, religious denomination and nationality. On this account, a contemporary and fellow student of Huen Tsang at Nalanda was a Tibetan scholar named *Thanmi Sambhota* who in his own country had been the minister to the Tibetan king. He was deputed to India to study the religion at its source. When he went back he converted the king and Buddhism for the first time was declared the state religion of Tibet. (Dutt, 2008)

Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, permanent Tibetan minority came into existence in India. The Government of India developed a laissez faire policy towards this population who were absorbed as parts of territorial units with ongoing social and cultural systems. These immigrants were initially organized into transit camps by the Government of India. The first rehabilitation settlement was located in the erstwhile state of Mysore and was a first of its kind in India called Bylakuppe in 1961. (Goldstein, 1974: 14).

According to a survey conducted (for the first time) by Planning Council, Central Tibetan Administration, the table titled ‘Monastic Population by Age and Sex’, (Tibetan Demographic Survey 1998: 216) the maximum monastic population among the Tibetans in exile was in the age group 20-24 for the males (2030) and in 25-29 age group for females (107). The total male

Monastic Population from age group (0-4) to 60+ was 7715 and that of the same age groups for the females was 319. Total Monastic Population according to this first survey conducted was 8034.

According to a table titled 'Educational Level by Sex' (TDS, 1998:12) across several categories of educational level from below primary education, across primary, Matriculation, Higher secondary, to Graduate degree, Post graduate, engineering, medicine, teaching or TTC, Business and Finance, to Monastic Education, the maximum population was recorded in the last category. Monks were 9838 and Nuns were 797. The second highest figures recorded in this category was among the Below Primary education category, Male -8003 and Female 6603.

According to the survey conducted for the 2009-2013 Planning Council TDS, titled, 'Educational Level attained by literate Tibetans' the highest number was recorded in the Monastic Education Category (5848) out of a total population of 109015; for the males it was 5376 and for the females 472 (TDS 2009:42). The highest population was in the illiterate category (22627); males- 8756, females- 13871. The prominently high figures recorded in the Monastic Education categories in 1998 and again in 2009 indicated how sending children to become monks and nuns is a part of their culture and remained so over the years.

### **Tibetan Monasticism:**

Buddhist monasticism is a social institution oriented towards the soteriological goals of the tradition which provide its members with a framework that sustains and reinforces the discipline needed to achieve their goal and could be followed by one who wanted a life of religio-ethical ideals<sup>1</sup>. Monks and nuns' adoption of a priestly function has had important consequences for Buddhist monasticism. Monasteries are broadly of two types; local monasteries which are small and central monasteries which are training centres and may have more than ten thousand monks.

The latter are training centres for monks from other monasteries keeping alive the tradition of learning. Each school of Tibetan Buddhism (Nyingma, Sakya, Kagyu and Gelug) has its own central monasteries which uphold its traditions scholastically, politically, socially, and economically. Each central monastery is at the centre of an extended network of affiliated local

<sup>1</sup> Weber, M. 1963. *Sociology of Religion*, trans E. Fischhoff. Beacon, Boston. 162

monasteries. This network brings the central monastery considerable resources greatly extending pool of supporters and sponsors and ensuring that it has significant power and authority. (ibid.)

Sera Jey Monastery belonging to the Gelug Sect<sup>2</sup> was one of the severely affected from the spiritual and cultural genocide. Few hundred of Sera Jey members comprising of lamas, *geshes*, and monks were able to escape to India with His Holiness The Dalai Lama (the temporal and spiritual head) with an aim to preserve the traditional Buddhist Monastic Culture and practice.

The Indian Government had sponsored 38 rooms for 300 monks of the two Monasteries, Sera Jey and Sera Mey. According to the official records maintained by the Examination Board Office of the Sera Jey Monastic College, 2152 and 2400 students were enrolled in the Monastic University in the 2013-14 and 2012-13 academic year March to December respectively. The Jangchub Choeling Nunery located in the Hubli district of Karnataka was established in 1986 and has 204 nuns registered.

The following section discusses the lived experiences of the monks, their routine with emphasis on Debate which is the nucleus of their Monastic Study. The practices of the nuns are compared with that of the monks with an attempt to point out the reasons for such differences or discriminations whichever they may be. The findings as part of the Ethnography are at times in line with the secondary literature but the contradictions in theory and practice need to be addressed.

### Monastic Learning

Harold Garfinkel (1917-2011) in a foreword to 'Dialectical Practice in Tibetan Philosophical Culture; an Ethnomethodological Inquiry into Formal Reasoning' by Kenneth Liberman (born 1948) clarified the sociological importance of the study of Tibetan debates. According to Liberman, *Philosophy has its heritage in dialogue*. Dialectical reason had its origin in the West

<sup>2</sup>The Gelug tradition evolved into a fully independent school of Tibetan Buddhism towards the end of 14<sup>th</sup> century A.D. the founder, philosopher saint of Tibet, Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) popularly known as Je Rinpoche. (Coleman, 1995). In Gelug tradition there are five central monasteries. In Central Tibet, Gaden founded by Tsongkhapa (1409), Drepung (1416) and Sera (1419) founded by his two disciples JamyangChojay and JamchenChojay. In 1959, Drepung had more than 13,000 monks, Sera had 10,000 In exile Sera maintained 4000. The main monasteries or subdivisions or colleges under Drepung are Loseling and Gomang, Sera has Jey and Mey and Gaden has Shartse and Jangtse. In exile these organizations have reappeared in smaller scale. After arriving in India Dalai Lama Government was supported by the Indian Government to recreate a scholarly culture and the three seats were resettled in Karnataka in South India by 1970s (Dreyfus, 2002)

with the Socratic 'dialogue', in which the pursuit of truth was a process of discussion that depended upon the understandings of two or more persons to carry the inquiry to deeper and unanticipated levels. The classical form of South Asian philosophical debate which was carried to Tibet in the 12<sup>th</sup> century persists today as the contemporary philosophical praxis of Tibetan scholar monks living and training at the few Buddhist monastic universities that have survived within the Tibetans in exile. (Lieberman, 2004:52)

The monks and the nuns need to memorize the five basic texts and many other smaller works and prayers. An essential prerequisite to the Monastic training in Tibetan tradition is to learn Tibetan language, reading and then writing. In both Sera Jey and the Jangchub Choeling Nunnery, it was observed that they have morning debate (*dam-bca'*) from 8:00 to 9:30, beginning with a set of prayers (*tsokchen*) where they receive tea (hence the name of this prayer, *mangja* or "common tea"). Rich sponsors might provide food and money. All the classes of the college debate on the same grounds. They break into groups of two or three, with everyone shouting at the top of their voices. The rest of the day, each class has lessons with its teachers and the students memorize and study. If there was a sponsor, an assembly would be held in the evening. Otherwise, monks had to provide for their own evening tea and food, if they ate. Buddhist monks are not supposed to eat in the evening, but most Tibetan monks ignore this rule. Nuns have prayers every evening and the disciplinarian had said that the prayer on their weekly holiday Monday ensures all the nuns are back by 6pm from wherever they have gone. In the evenings, from 6 to 8, the monks have debate ground prayers (*chos-grva*). During the first hour, they recite over and again *Praises to the Twenty-One Taras* (*sGrol-ma nyi-shurtsa-gcig*), to eliminate interference for their study. During the second hour, they recite various other prayers. They then debate the rest of the evening, until at least 10:30pm. Many stay up until the early hours of the morning. (Dreyfus, 2002) When asked, what your timings of self-study? - A nun had answered while doing the research, 'We study all the time!'

The nuns do not have fixed schedule of classes but the 200 nuns are divided into classes and attend spiritual classes with monk teachers from the nearby Gaden and Drepung Monasteries. Arrangements for English and Science classes are also there but the infrastructure for that is inadequate. There were two classes for Science and three for English. But the attendance was irregular. After the 10 year 'Science meets Dharma' project got over in 2011, the Office of Dalai

Lama had instructed the Monasteries and the Nunneries to conduct science classes on their own. So for the past one and half years there was a local Tibetan lady, trained as a nurse, taking Biology class for the nuns. She complained that it was difficult of her to teach them as most of them did not follow the English terms and they had absolutely no idea about the human body. So presently the nuns do not have any science teacher. Large number of books on Neurobiology published by the Emory University, Georgia, USA and the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA) in collaboration have been found to be of too high standard for the nuns. So the teacher followed her own method and books to teach them. But what it was learnt from the senior nuns and a westerner teacher was that situation of education for nuns had improved from earlier conditions.

In Bylakuppe near Mysore ever since the tradition of having proper administrators was established in 1974, 18 terms have served as administrative office bearers. At present there are four administrators to assist the Khen Rinpoche as the head of the organisation of the Abott, one superintendent accountant, two accountants, three office secretaries, one translator- cum- secretary comprise the central administrative office of the Monastery. To evaluate and initiate methods to bring excellence in the academic work and Monastic scholarship, to establish new committees and centres abroad and to maintain communication with these and for the purpose of raising funds and to continue relationship with the existing ones, an Apex General Body meets comprising of the above mentioned Abott or the head priest, the Chief Chant Master, and Chief Disciplinarian, the four administrators plus two members from each Khangstens (or hostels). This is the highest office which owns the entire treasury keys of the Dratsang or Monastery.

After 1971, under the Government of India's Rehabilitation Housing Plan, the monks were allotted 22 houses, each having four rooms. For three years monks did not get any opportunity to study at all. Then a system came into being whereby those who were gifted scholars, sponsors used to pay for hiring substitutes for them to work in their place and thus began the revival of Monastic academic work. Those who were slow to learn went to work and the ones who were intelligent began to devote time in studying scriptures. Since 1980s, Tibetans escaping into India increased manifold. At present there are a total of 3714 monks in 13 Khangstens or Hostels. They come from Indian Himalayan regions of Ladakh, Arunachal Pradesh, and Sikkim. Among the principal seats of learning Tibetan Buddhist tradition, the Sera Jey Monastery has the largest

number of monks. In order to master the 5 Philosophical subjects one has to start with Duschung, or the preliminary debate class till passing the highest GesheLharam or Doctorate class, a student has to study nearly 24-25 years at a stretch. When the academic and puja sessions are going on, the students attend debate classes, philosophy classes, scripture readings all together and during session breaks the monks devote times in memorizing root texts of the 5 philosophical subjects. Under the supervision of the Monastic Academic Council, Annual examinations are conducted where the students sit for annual scripture memorisation, oral examination, written examination plus supplementary subjects like Tibetan grammar and Buddhist history. The sangha or the Monastery members include Tibetans from all regions of Tibet without discrimination, monks from western countries, China, Mongolia, Himalayan regions, Nepal, Ladakh, Mon Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan and Sikkim.

Kinship relations play a strong role in the coming of new monks and nuns to the Monastery and Nunnery. For some it is a source of education for free with food and shelter and at the same time a feeling of satisfaction that they are gaining merit for themselves and the family by being one of the children in family who is a monk. The Nunnery seemed to be in need of financial support from sponsors which was not so evident in case of the Sera Jey Monastery. There is diversities in the enrolments in terms of economic backgrounds with monks with higher education degrees from renowned Universities, with monks claiming to be quite rich unlike others, with majority of them having no place to go having fled from their homeland, with some monks and nuns who were originally Christians and Hindu.

In terms of the data collected it possible to differentiate the curriculum into two forms broadly-formal monastic curriculum and the no-formal curriculum imparting English, and Science education. The syllabus and the entire courses of studies being followed by this Monastery dates back to the 6th century ancient India and in particular to the Nalanda University which was built in 5th or 6th century and destroyed by the end of 12th century, according travel accounts of Huan Tsang. The Buddhsim as a whole flourished in China and Tibet originating from the Nalanda Buddhist University. The spectrum of commentarial works authored by Indian Buddhist professors and masters and further commentaries written on these works by Je Yabse, Je Rinpoche and his two closest disciples, Gytsab Je and Khedrup Je, and the commentaries by JetsunChoekyiGyaltsen and Je Rinpoche's five disciples each specialised in a particular field of

Buddhist study. In the Nunnery no such document to delineated their syllabus but I was told they follow the set syllabus for the Gelug sect which same for all three Monasteries and the 4 Nunneries. These include:

1. Buddhist Epistemology and several commentaries on it or Pramana Vartika
2. Wisdom of Perfection and its several commentaries or the Prajnaparamita
3. Middle Way and several commentaries on it or the Madhyamaka
4. Self Discipline of the Buddhist Order and its several commentaries VinayaPitaka
5. Higher Knowledge and its several Commentaries or Abhidharma

The means of learning involved are based mainly three pillars i.e. memory, commentary and dialectical debate (Dreyfus, 2003). The monks and nuns attend classes with the teacher where they receive the oral commentary, many of them record the lecture in their personal audio recorders, then they come back to their quarters, memorise the texts simultaneously listening to the audio recordings of the teachers. They memorise loudly which they think helps them to remember every line for a long time. Then they finally go to debate with their classmates where they get to challenge each other and try to understand the underlying meaning, questioning and cross questioning each other, sometimes with own class mate or sometimes with a senior.

Debate as method of learning Tibetan debates involve two parties: a defender (damchawa), who answers, and a questioner or challenger (riklamp). The roles of defender and questioner imply very different commitments, as Daniel Perdue explains that the defender puts forth assertions for which he is held accountable. The challenger raises doubts to the defender's assertions and is not subject to punishment for the questions he raises. The responsibility of the defender is to put forth a true thesis and to defend it. The questioner, on the contrary, is responsible only for the questions he puts forth. His questions must be well-articulated, must logically follow from the points already made, and must be relevant to defeating the defender. The ethno-methods of Tibetan dialecticians firstly involve the selection and ratification of the topic. Logic and reason are the devices which assist the philosophers in their task of organising a philosophical inquiry i.e. the logical is the social. As Dukheim had once observed, the first logical categories are social categories .

In both the places the routine is almost the same. In the morning they wake up at 5 am for Puja. Some of the monks and nuns clean their respective houses or the monastery premises turn by turn, have breakfast served from the monastery kitchen, then from 7.30 to 8.30 am is their self study time, when they memorise their texts in very high pitch. So most of the time I used to wake up at their loud memorising sounds. The voices of monks or nuns all memorising in close vicinity did not seem to affect their effort in memorising. The monks have much more space, with huge house premises divided into 14 Kangstens (or hostels), so if they wished they could go to different places to memorise unlike the nuns who were confined to one compound with 5 blocks of houses. At 9am they all go for debate till 11am. From 11 am to 2pm is their time to take rest. This was the time during which the science and English classes took place in the nunnery and the monastery.

At 11.30 the Tibetan version for Science and the English version for science and the English translation classes were scheduled to take place in Sera Jey. But there was no fixed schedule of classes set by the monastery and with the exams approaching, the classes in the morning were not taking place. It could be concluded that since it was into the resting time of the Tibetan monks and the nuns, in both the places, they were reluctant to attend the classes. In the Sera Jey Monastery the science classes were taken by a teacher from the Sera Jey Secondary school (for the Tibetans) who was salaried. And for those who wanted it in English there was an American monk who taught for free. They did not have any fixed lesson plan till now but I was informed that by 2018 Science would become a part of the Monastic curriculum. May be for that reason the number of students attending them and the regularity of classes was not impressive.

After dinner at 5pm, the monks and nuns headed for the debate courtyard (for nuns the debate hall) at 6pm. In the monastery I did not go to the debate courtyard as instructed by the disciplinarian master. But at the nunnery I went and recorded the debates. At 9.30 pm the monks and nuns would come back to their rooms/houses. They sometimes had some chai. In the nunnery I would see one or two nuns reading the next days' portion, memorising loudly.

In the monastery they had exams coming up so, they would have discussions in their respective houses, where they would get together in groups of their own classes and discuss questions out of the list of around 200 questions that had been given to them at the beginning of the year. This discussion would go on from 10pm- 12.30 am on the usual days and on Tuesdays which was

holiday for the monks the discussion classes would be from 8.30pm to 10pm. One of the senior monks had told me since the local market at Kushalanagara sits on Tuesdays, it had been decided long ago that the Monastery would have Tuesday as holiday.

Most of the monks and nuns come from poor nomadic families based in Tibet or Himalayan states of India. On being asked one of the young nuns had told me that when she pointed out her wish to be a nun she was surprised to hear her friends asking her, why do you want to become a nun, you are so pretty. She added that many people think that only handicapped people should be monks and nuns. In addition the interviews revealed that choosing to become a monk or nun among the Tibetans is still closely associated with their culture.

In terms of respondents there was a mixture of student monks (mostly first generation learners) who are either focussed in their monastic studies, or more interested in science studies, or students who are leading ordinary monks' life but not much interested in studying, teachers who are extremely popular and have many students and teachers with less students who are giving more attention to a few students' queries. In case of the nuns they had Monk teacher fixed by the Nunnery and the whole class went to the same set of Geshe for classes.

Comparative importance given to the questions during the interviews varied. While some monks preferred to give a prolonged account of their hardships involved in their journey as a refugee, some could elaborate on the importance debate has in their curriculum, a few of them could cite examples by explaining them well in English, while some others struggled to explain with examples. The senior students were capable of elaborating on some administrative details like how are the monks assigned to different Khangstens (hostels) of the University.

The nuns were not allowed to receive full 19 year course leading to receiving the Geshema degree. It was only from the last year that they sat for the first year of the six year exam for Geshema degree in May. According Dana, who has been closely observing their cause, said that this had been a matter of struggle for the last 30-40 years that they were not recognised as fully ordained, nor were there teachers in the Nunnery who were nuns.

On some of the days they would have special prayers, like the 8th, 10th, 15th and 25th day of the month following the lunar calendar. On those days the nuns did not have any classes. But the English or the Biology teachers would not be informed from before and they would be irritated

because of such reluctance in attitude. The teachers also seemed dissatisfied by the fact that the nuns would greet and respect the monk teachers even those who were not Geshes and would always be on time for classes, but in case of their classes they were reluctant to even inform them earlier that they had puja that day and would not be coming to class. The English teacher, Dana spoke from her earlier experiences that efforts are being made for introducing Science into the curriculum for the Geshema exam but not for the nuns who are at the lower level. Moreover, when the Science meets Dharma project ended the practical classes which used to be held for the nuns also closed down. She expressed her amusement saying that the way science is taught here is very different from the way it is done in their country and she does not understand how Physics could be taught without practical instruments. The level of attendance in the science classes among the monks was better than the nuns.

The philosophy classes had different dynamics between the teacher and the students. They would all greet the teacher bowing three times. In the classes which had larger group there would be a mike in front of the teacher. It was there in the nunnery. Some of the teachers according to the interpretations I got from the students like to teach the text through questions and answer and thus train them in the act of debating. While some other Gens like to only explain from the book while teaching the same text, thus not giving rise to too many doubts which according to the monks help them in critical thinking. Moreover, another version that I received from both some of the monks and nuns is that, “how can we ask him questions, he is the teacher!”

In the English Classes the number of attendance varied over the 9 days that there were classes. But since the attendance dwindled and kept changing the foreigner lady could not much proceed with her plan and started feeling irritated at the end of her stay. During the Biology class the Tibetan lady said that she followed her own plan of what to teach them and was quite friendly with the nuns. Since the medium of instruction was Tibetan the nuns felt little more confident and free to ask questions. On the other hand, during the Buddhist Philosophy classes, the nuns would all sit on the floor on their cushions would be all present before the teacher entered, greet him, would have a cup of hot tea ready on his table, have their books with them and would quietly follow what the teacher said. There would only be a question answer session if the teacher initiated one.

In the evening regular prayers started at 6pm which would sometimes go on till 8.45pm or sometimes end early if they had exam or as it was when the field work was conducted they were preparing for winter debate in Dharmasala. If there were special prayers each monk or nun would get food and money as given by the sponsor of the prayer. Just as in the monastery the nuns also had particular prayer everyday at the end of which the Gekola (disciplinarian nun) would make announcements regarding class timings, if there is a special teaching at any of the Gaden or Drepung Monasteries, donations made by individual and sometimes would scold nuns to be serious about studies and to attend the classes particularly the science and English classes. Sometime when it became difficult to converse with a nun for language barrier, a few nuns would join together, and it would turn into a group discussion.

In the Monastery also auspicious days of 8th, 10th, 15th, and 25th were observed and on those days special prayers would take precedence over petty (classes with teachers). Just as these days are followed similarly innovative method of learning is also present which incidentally have long history associated with them. A monk narrated, 'In ancient Tibet on one or two days in a month monks used to go out for begging for logs of wood. While coming back they used to make food and discuss texts throughout the night. That was called SinhoDhamcha. Now we do not go for begging logs of wood!' Now they get prepared food and sponsors give them everything and they debate till at the most midnight, not the whole night. So it was due this SinhoDhamcha that they did not have debates in the morning in the courtyard on three days and had Dhamcha in the evening in their own Khangstens. It means the clusters of monks' residential quarters. Khams means remote area of land and Tsen means group or cluster. Since monks travelled to Central Tibet from distant remote places, the clusters of monks' quarters were named after different remote areas from which the monks hailed. So these Khangstens received students from China, Mongolia, India until 1959 when the Jey Dratsang or Monastery had 5629 monks who came in the pursuit of pure teachings of Buddha, texts authored by the Nalanda Pandits, root texts of five major Buddhist philosophical subjects particularly those composed by JetsunChoekyiGyaltsen as the courses of studies. So a Khangsten is like a family to most of the monks.

There are monks who have no school background to Non- Tibetan monks who had education in Harvard and IIT. There were variations in socioeconomic background when monks said 'I do not have to think about money' to monk who felt responsible for the education of his sister who was

in college. Just as there was a monk who had come to be a monk having finished his study of CA thinking this was the cause of his life, similarly there were monks who felt knowing only about Buddhist Philosophy was not fulfilling enough. The monks and nuns were divided in their opinion towards the relevance of science. While some said the pressure of their Monastic curriculum was too much to study science, while others felt it necessary to know about the Universe and said he reads regularly from the internet in his phone on String Theory, while some tried to argue how Buddha's words are quite similar to what is said in Physics. In term of quality of monks/nuns - not all were very well aware of how to explain what they were studying.

- some may be bright but may not explain much,
- some may be bright and good at explaining,
- some may not be studying much but can explain well (for one who had good grip over English could explain various things to me) and
- some may be just not interested to read or to explain

There was a monk interested to see learned monks in terms of their ability to write poems. For instance another monk from Tibet who had written a book of poetry along with small articles about his experiences from the hardships of travel from Tibet to India, to his bout of Typhoid which had separated him from his best friend in Sera Je Secondary School and the importance of education in today's world for monks. The influence of His Holiness' words was evident in his writings about the importance of education. Just as there were monks enrolling in Open University to have a degree, there were some who had left the monastery altogether and had carved out a new life.

The focus upon debating commences with the very first years of a monk's studies. According to the Secretary at the Examination Board at Sera Jey, young monks are introduced to debates 6<sup>th</sup> standard onwards in the CBSE affiliated Sera Jey Secondary School adjoining the Sera Jey Monastic College. This change has happened in the past decade under the reformatory initiative of the 14<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama. *The Collected Topics* (taught in the 1<sup>st</sup> three years) literature provides an introduction by teaching, for instance, that the meaning of a pot is not a pot and learning to distinguish between thinking and belief. Extensive memorization takes place during the early

stages of training and even this involves public examination of how well one has memorised the texts. (Dreyfus 2002, 90)<sup>3</sup>

The emphasis upon *negative dialectics* as an *instructional methodology* is largely a Tibetan innovation. Although philosophical debates originated in India, it is likely that they were not as extensive there as they were in Tibet, especially within the Gelug monastic universities during the last two centuries. Sera Je Monastic University is exactly placed at the centre of Tibetan tradition of Buddhist dialectics. (Lieberman, 2004)

Another westerner monk, Tenzin (name changed) said to me, *Words need to be fashioned to express meanings. The entire process of transference of words written on a page to spoken words are intended to express meanings. Debate is a process through doubts are explored. You cannot bring the meanings to experience. Analytical abilities increase, it is useful for meditation. My abilities of analytical meditation has improved. It helps in exploring one's own abilities. Debating is the verbal version of analytical meditation.*

#### **Conclusion:**

A learning culture which became non-existent in South Asian countries survives in the Monastic training of the Tibetans. This paper has tried to trace briefly, the meaning of a Monastic University and how this institution is existing as a part of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition by narrating some of its curriculum and pedagogic practice. The main emphasis in this education is on the basic Buddhist trilogy of first *hearing* the doctrine, then *thinking*, and finally *meditating* on what has been realized (Hopkins, 2002). In the historical trajectory that has been drawn there is an interplay of socio-political factors that have emerged in the structure and functioning of Monasteries. Through some qualitative changes like the emphasis on education and advanced learning the Viharas became Mahaviharas or the Monasteries (*Gompa* in Tibetan) transformed from being just shelter for monks to seats of advanced scholastic learning. In exile the re-established big monasteries (in the present study Sera Jey of Bylakuppe and Jangchub Choeling Nunnery in Mundgod) have continued practicing the ideals set forth by the Indian Masters. The secondary literature available do not throw light on the academic training given in the Nunneries

<sup>3</sup> Dreyfus, George. 2002. *The Sound of Two Hands Clapping: Memory, Commentary and Debate in Tibetan Monastic Education*, Berkeley; University of California Press

leave alone Jangchub Choeling in particular. As it emerges there are distinct differences in terms of restrictions and number of vows (to name a few) in comparison with the monks. The nuns are conditioned to emulate the pattern of debate and rules of logic followed in the three main Gelug Monasteries. The status of Nuns has been disputed in several studies in terms of recognition of their full ordination status. Through the comparative account of the field research conducted an insider account has been attempted to be given into the Buddhist culture of learning of the Tibetans. The pedagogical exchange that is purely of the nature of Freire's Banking Model is based on the often mentioned three pillars memory, commentary and dialectical debate talks about a culture where everyday lives of the monks and nuns are woven around learning.

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