

## Buddhist Artifacts in Tattapani, Paddar Valley: Evidence of Vajrayāna Influence

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The Himalayan regions of Jammu and Kashmir-UT have historically been a crossroads of cultural, religious, and artistic interactions between India, Tibet, and Central Asia. The discovery of Buddhist artifacts' within Hindu temple contexts in such regions is significant, as it reveals both the continuity of Buddhist traditions and their integration with local religious practices. In Tattapani village of Paddar valley, Kishtwar district, the breakthrough of a bronze Buddha in bhūmisparśa mudrā, a small copper statue of Amitābha (Medicine Buddha) holding a bowl, alongside ritual objects like a vajra-bell and seven conch shells, presents an important case for examining the historical spread of Tibetan Buddhism and its interaction with Hinduism in this part of the western Himalayas. The presence of such objects indicates the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, a major branch of Vajrayāna Buddhism, in the area.

**Keywords:** uddhist Artifacts; Vajrayāna Buddhism; Tattapani; Paddar Valley; Kishtwar; Syncretism; Hindu-Buddhist Interaction; Bhūmisparśa Mudrā; Medicine Buddha; Vajra and Bell; Conch Shells; Western Himalayas; Religious Pluralism; Tibetan Influence; Cultural Heritage

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## INTRODUCTION

The research paper deals with Buddhist sculptures and its influence to the local Hindu population of Tata-pani village. Paddar Tehsil has a population of around 21,548 (according to a 2011 Census estimate). Paddar is a small valley of Chenab not far away from Kishtwar. Distance between Kishtwar to Gulabgarh (Paddar) is about 62 km. The Paddar valley is rich in minerals; storing the world famous Sapphire mines of Jammu and Kashmir at its higher elevations. To its north lies valley of Krishan Ganga inhabited by the Dard Tribes (Known as Dardistan) and to the east lays Baltistan and Ladakh inhabited by the people of Tibetan race. Further, south along the range on the east of the valley is situated narrow valley known as Maru-Wardwan (Rabbani, 1981, p. 22). Balde or Palder is the Tibetan Dpal-dar, Indian Paddar, a district of the (Chandrabhaga valley) Chenab River, east of Kashtwar comes under Chamba before it, this region was occupied by the Dogras in 19th century (Francke, 1926, p. 262). This place was annexed from Chamba (presently in Himachal Pradesh State) by the troops of Maharaja Gulab Singh through his General Zorawar Singh in 1836 CE (Hutchison & Vogel, 1982, p. 664). The western Himalayan region of Paddar which lies in the southern part of the Indian State of Jammu-and-Kashmir in olden days came under Doda district, which presently makes a part of Kishtwar district situated to the South-West of Zanskar. However, it is a known fact that most of the non – Buddhist or half-Buddhist population of Chandrabhaga valley is the settlers from across the Rohtang-la or Chamba. Chandrabhaga valley indeed formed a part of Chamba state earlier and this part of Lahul was known as the Chamba-Lahul (Handa, n.d., p. 111).

The Himalayan regions of Jammu and Kashmir-UT have historically been a crossroads of cultural, religious, and artistic interactions between India, Tibet, and Central Asia. The discovery of Buddhist artifacts' within Hindu temple contexts in such regions is significant, as it reveals both the continuity of Buddhist traditions and their integration with local religious practices. In Tattapani village of Paddar valley, Kishtwar district, the breakthrough of a bronze Buddha in bhūmisparśa mudrā, a small copper statue of Amitābha (Medicine Buddha) holding a bowl, alongside ritual objects like a vajra-bell and seven conch shells, presents an important

Case for examining the historical spread of Tibetan Buddhism and its interaction with Hinduism in this part of the western Himalayas. The presence of such objects indicates the influence of Tibetan Buddhism, a major branch of Vajrayāna Buddhism, in the area. The vajra, symbolizing indestructibility, together with the bell (wisdom), and the conch shells (auspicious offerings), are strongly associated with Vajrayāna ritual culture. Their placement within a Hindu temple highlights processes of syncretism and shared sacred spaces, a hallmark of Himalayan religiosity. This paper provides an in-depth examination of these artifacts', exploring their iconography, symbolism, and cultural significance. It further situates them within the broader historical context of Buddhist transmission into Jammu and Kashmir UT and reflects on the implications for understanding religious pluralism in the Himalayas.

## HISTORICAL AND GEOGRAPHICAL CONTEXT

Tatapani village is situated 7 km far from Gulabgarh and 3 km north- west far from Athole village (Nirmohi, 2005, p. 78). The village Tatapani is situated between 33°15'40"N and 76°7'45"E in Paddar tehsil of district Kishtwar. The geographical area of Paddar lies between 33°16'6" north latitude and 76°10'13" east longitude. The land lies about 3500 feet on the lower part of the Chenab and nearly 10,000 feet in some of the highest estates of Paddar above the mean coastal line; it is generally surrounded by forests (Civil Secretariat, 1914). The Paddar valley lies in the southeastern part of Kishtwar district, Jammu and Kashmir, bounded by the Great Himalayas. This valley is culturally linked to Ladakh, Zanskar, and Tibet, regions where Vajrayāna Buddhism flourished from the 8th century onwards (Snellgrove, 1987). Historically, the western Himalayas witnessed a layered religious presence: Vedic and Hindu traditions, local animist practices, and the spread of Buddhism during the Mauryan, Kushan, and Gupta periods (Singh, 2008). By the early medieval period, Buddhism in Kashmir had declined in urban centers but persisted in remote valleys and along trans-Himalayan trade routes (Sanderson, 2009). The proximity of Paddar to Ladakh and Zanskar would have facilitated the flow of monks, traders, and artisans, bringing with them Tibetan Buddhist iconography and ritual implements. The integration of Buddhist artefacts within a Hindu temple setting in Tattapani reflects not only this history of religious interaction but also the fluid boundaries between traditions in Himalayan religiosity.

The name of the village Tata-pani is dragged from two Padri words, which literally stands for hot water. The entire Tatapani village abounds in hot springs ranging from extremely hot to mild water. The main hot spring is located at the vicinity of Shesnag Temple and it is rectangular in shape. There is a belief in the area that hot water dispels sins and pains, so people rush there to take showers under the water. Bath rooms are constructed separately to gents and ladies, for that the hot water is diverted to the bath rooms.



On the left side of the main hot water, there is a small ruined structure of an ancient temple having a modern Siva Ling installed in one corner (Nirmohi S. 2009). The temple is wooden in structure and the design was brought from Spiti valley of Himachal Pardesh. And the wooden parts are carved with different designs from back to front. According to tradition, Bal Ram, elder brother of Shri Krishan came to the valley in disguise of Nag Sadhu called Shesnag.



Just next to the ruined temple a new temple is built, having black stone (marble) statue of Sheshnag (Nirmohi S. 2000) along with a 3" bronze statue

Of Buddha in bhumi sparash mudra and a 4.5" copper statue of Amitaba Buddha (Medicine Buddha) holding a bowl in both hands. Vajra-bell and seven conch shells are offered to the deity (unidentified), here the Vajra-bell and the offering of seven shells shows the influence of Tibetan form of Buddhism is in practice in the area. As the Tibetan Buddhism is a major form of Vajrayana Buddhism, here Vajra is taken as an indestructible object. So here it is interesting to note that the temple reflects a hybrid culture of Vaishnavism and Buddhism.

### THE BRONZE BUDDHA IN BHŪMISPARŚA MUDRĀ

The bronze Buddha statue depicts the Enlightened One in Bhūmisparśa mudrā ("earth-touching gesture"), with the right hand extended downward to touch the earth, calling it to witness his victory over Māra. If we talk about the Iconographic significance, the gesture symbolizes the moment of enlightenment at Bodhgayā (c. 5th century BCE). The right hand represents resolve and victory, while the left hand in meditation posture signifies inner calm and wisdom (Huntington & Huntington, 1990). The combination embodies the union of wisdom and compassion, central to Mahāyāna and Vajrayāna thought.

The presence of such a statue in a Hindu temple may suggest that the figure was not abandoned but assimilated into local devotional life. In many Himalayan contexts, Buddha and Bodhisattva were incorporated into Hindu pantheons, often reinterpreted as forms of Vishnu or Shiva (Sharma, 2015). The bronze medium also highlights the importance of metal casting traditions in the Himalayan region, which were deeply influenced by Kashmiri and Tibetan art.





## THE COPPER STATUE OF MEDICINE BUDDHA / AMITĀBHA

The second sculpture, a 4.5" copper statue identified as Amitābha (Medicine Buddha), holds a bowl in both hands. This attribution requires elucidation. Amitābha ("Infinite Light") is usually shown seated in meditation, often associated with the Pure Land (Sukhāvatī). Bhaiṣajyaguru (Medicine Buddha), however, holds a bowl of healing nectar or herbs and is deeply venerated in Tibetan Buddhism as a deity of healing and longevity (Gyatso, 1998). Given the bowl attribute, it is more accurate to identify this figure as Medicine Buddha, though the conflation with Amitābha may reflect local variations in naming. The bowl represents the healing power of Dharma, curing both physical ailments and spiritual afflictions. Medicine Buddha rituals are common in Tibetan Buddhism, often conducted for community health, protection, and spiritual well-being (Mrozik, 2007). The small size of the statue suggests personal devotion, perhaps part of a household shrine, later absorbed into the Hindu temple. Its presence highlights continuing Buddhist devotional practices even within predominantly Hindu cultural landscapes.



## THE VAJRA-BELL AND SEVEN CONCH SHELLS

### The Vajra (Dorje)

The vajra, or *dorje* in Tibetan, symbolizes indestructibility (diamond) and irresistible power (thunderbolt). In Vajrayāna ritual, it represents the method or skillful means (upāya) necessary for enlightenment (Thurman, 1991).

### The Bell (Ghaṇṭa / Drilbu)

The bell symbolizes wisdom (prajñā) and the emptiness of all phenomena. Together,

Vajra and bell embody the inseparability of wisdom and compassion, the core of tantric Buddhism (Beer, 2003).

## The Seven Conch Shells

The conch shell (*śaṅkha*) is one of Buddhism's Eight Auspicious Symbols (aṣṭamaṅgala), representing the sound of Dharma spreading across the world (Lopez, 2001). The number seven has multiple resonances in Buddhism: the seven factors of enlightenment, the seven steps taken by the infant Buddha, and the seven offerings in Vajrayāna rituals. The offering of seven conch shells and a vajra-bell in a Hindu temple setting strongly indicates that Tibetan Buddhist ritual practices once flourished in the area. Their survival in a syncretic environment suggests cultural layering, where ritual objects are preserved but their meanings evolve.

## SYNCRETISM: BUDDHISM WITHIN A HINDU TEMPLE

The most striking feature of this discovery is that Buddhist artefacts and ritual objects were found in a Hindu temple of Tattapani village of Paddar area. This reveals a pattern of syncretism and shared religious space, characteristic of Himalayan regions. In many parts of Kashmir, Himachal Pradesh, and Ladakh, deities and artefacts moved between Buddhist and Hindu contexts (Kapstein, 2000). Local communities often perceived no rigid boundary between traditions; instead, they integrated Buddhist figures into Hindu cosmology or retained them as protective deities. The unidentified deity to whom the vajra-bell and conches were offered may represent a local Hindu or folk deity, with Buddhist ritual implements reinterpreted within Hindu practice. This syncretism highlights the fluid religious identity of Himalayan communities, shaped by geography, trade, and cultural interaction.

## Cultural and Historical Implications

The artifacts from Tattapani village of Paddar valley of Kishtwar district provide insights into the diffusion of Tibetan Vajrayāna Buddhism into peripheral Himalayan valleys beyond its strongholds in Ladakh and Zaskar. Material culture as markers of identity, bronze and copper statuary, vajra-bell, and conches were not merely ritual objects but also signifiers of religious belonging. It also shows continuity and adaptation, even after Buddhism's decline in Kashmir, its symbols persisted in popular

Devotion, absorbed into Hindu and local traditions. It also shows Heritage and pluralism, these objects underscore the shared heritage of Hinduism and Buddhism, reminding us that religious boundaries were historically porous.

## CONCLUSION

It is possible that before the construction of this Sheshnag temple may be this place belongs to the Buddhist Chaitya or Stūpa and when it was break down thereafter these statues are placed in the new erected temple. And it is also possible that in Paddar area the worship of both Naga and Buddha may be prevalent in ancient times. The discovery of a bronze Buddha in bhūmisparśa mudrā, a copper Medicine Buddha statue, and ritual implements like the vajra-bell and seven conch shells in a Hindu temple at Tattapani village (Paddar valley, Kishtwar) reflects the deep historical presence of Vajrayāna Buddhism in this Himalayan region. These objects embody rich iconographic and symbolic meanings: enlightenment, healing, the inseparability of wisdom and compassion, and the sound of Dharma. Their placement in a Hindu temple demonstrates the syncretic religious culture of the Himalayas, where traditions overlap and objects acquire layered meanings. Such evidence not only enriches our understanding of Tibetan Buddhist influence in Jammu and Kashmir but also sheds light on the shared religious heritage and pluralistic ethos of the region. Future research could include archaeological dating, stylistic analysis, and ethnographic study of local traditions to further illuminate the trajectory of these artifacts'. Their preservation underscores the need to view Himalayan heritage as an interwoven tapestry of traditions, rather than as isolated religious systems.

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