

# Dynamics of the Sakya Buddhist Community in Mustang District, Nepal: A Holistic Study

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## Abstract

*This research article focuses on specificity in the economy, society, culture, and politics of Sakya Buddhist community in Mustang District of Nepal. Mustang is recognized for its Himalayan culture, especially its Tibetan Buddhism. There are many forms of Buddhist practices; Sakya is one of the important ones. Research analyzes how the Sakya community manages its economic difficulties by means of the traditional trade routes, and tourism; how it maintains social cohesion in the context of modernization; how it sustains the Bhot Buddhist cultural and the religious practices; and, how it exercises local power in the newly federalized Nepal. The literature on Mustang's Sakya community is scarce. The article, therefore, relies on literature for the rest of Mustang's Buddhist community and attempts to explore literature gaps. Findings show how resilient the community is; they can demonstrate their collective identity by adapting to the modern world yet retaining their traditions.*

*Keywords: Sakya School, Mustang District, Bhot Buddhism, Economic Dynamics, Social Structure, Cultural Preservation.*

## Introduction

In Mustang District, Nepal, the mountains, history, and religion fuse. The Mustang region was long known as the *Last Forbidden Kingdom* (Rengel). It only opened to the world in the early 1990s (Dhungel, *The Kingdom* 128-29). This deep social and cultural history of the region is a product of Bhot, or Tibetan, Buddhism and the social customs practiced for centuries. "Opening up the kingdom of Lo" to tourists in 1992 encouraged tides of foreign visitors, donors, scholars and seekers of "authentic" Tibetan culture to Mustang (Craig 14). The harsh climate, high altitude and closeness to Tibet have not only shaped the sustenance activities of the locals, but also the close-knit community and the sustenance of the religious activities.

The Loba or Lo, and other Tibetan associations, Loba, Tibetan and other, practice Bhot Buddhism, also known as Nyingma, Kagyu, Sakya and Gelug, which are various sectors of Tibetan Buddhism. These traditions, along with the region's monasteries and other ritual/ethnic concert practices, are layers of the region's unique and deeply blended culture. Though the Loba's Mustang Kingdom is a Tibetan area

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geographically, the cultural landscape of the region is Tibetan. Mustang is home to various Tibetan Buddhist practices and is not just a storage of monastic systems. Buddhism, as an everyday practice, influences people's morals and ethics, social interactions, community relations, governance and their celebrations. "Mustang is historically called the Kingdom of Lo, which is one of the Himalayan districts of Modern Nepal, located in the bordering areas of Tibet, with a cultural geography that is completely Tibetan in nature (Ramble 290)."

The Sakya Buddhist Community, especially in Lo Manthang and nearby villages, is one of the several communities. The Sakya School has always been, and still is, one of the main players in the region's politics and religion, being closely associated with the local leaders, the landownership system, and the cultural sponsorship (Chatterjee). Even with the rapid development of the Mustang economy and society, the Sakya community still remains one of the main keepers of Mustang's religious knowledge, the rituals, and the arts (Aase et al. 228).

This paper takes an integrated approach to the Sakya Buddhist community in Mustang and considers its social, cultural, political, and economic aspects. It examines the community's efforts to maintain its religious identity and the collective identity of the community while dealing with the challenges posed by the new situation brought about by increased tourism, migration, modernity, and the changing functions of state. The study aims to determine the Sakya community in relation to the other communities in the region in order to determine the interrelations of tradition and modernity and the way each impacts the other in this unique part of the Himalayas. Very few texts are available for the Literature Review. Some lines have been provided for this purpose.

Mustang, and especially Upper Mustang, has mostly been regarded as a culturally, historically, and anthropologically interesting area. For scholars, Mustang has a unique cultural formulation, owing to it being a trans-Himalayan region, the Bhot historical connection, and a long spell of political marginality (Dhungel, *The Kingdom* 128-29). Mustang is pictured, in some of the earlier works, as a culturally self-sufficient region, wherein the religious traditions, the forms of life, and the social structures, in a deep interrelation with the harsh surroundings of the region, were incorporated into a self-sufficient region (71). These works lay the groundwork to understand the various ways in which the Sakya Buddhist community, particularly, managed to sustain a culturally identifiable community over a long period of time.

Nevertheless, with the growing scholarship on Mustang and its Sakya community, the scholarship on the Mustang Sakya community still remains scant. Mustang is spoken about in relation to Buddhist studies, predominantly political history, verbose history of dominant monastic institutions, and often, references to Sakya, without

sufficient depth on Sakya community practices and perspectives. This deficiency strongly calls for detailed studies on the community of Mustang Sakya, particularly, social change, cultural continuity and local self-governance.

While there is a significant amount of literature available on the Sakya community in general and the Sakya Buddhist community in Mustang in particular, most of the available literature is written in the Bhot language. Thus, this article is a synthesis of available studies on the Buddhist communities in Mustang in general and some general knowledge about the Sakya School and the socio-political scenario in Nepal. Further, some gaps in the data are acknowledged and suggestions are made about further research.

## **The Objective of the Study**

The Sakya School is one of the four major schools within Bhot Buddhism and focuses on a combination of learning, ritual practice, and meditation. The Sakya community in Mustang is a part of the socio-cultural scenario in the region and is influenced by the geographic location of the region, the traditional trade routes, and the socio-political scenario in Nepal. This study aims to:

- a. Analyze the economic activities undertaken by the Sakya community.
- b. Examine the social structure and the community.
- c. Explore the culture and the way it is maintained.
- d. Investigate the political activities and their participation in the federal structure of Nepal.

## **Methodology**

This study is situated within a qualitative framework, incorporating as secondary sources scholarly literature, including articles, books and reports regarding the Mustang Buddhist communities and Bhot Buddhism. Online literature about the cultural diversity and federalism of Nepal has also been utilized. Due to the lack of primary research articles in English about the Mustang Sakya community, the author is compelled to extrapolate from other research relevant to the Bhot Buddhist communities of the region and, via default, make some critical assumptions concerning the Sakya School's practice from its given ideology and historical background. This paper has discussed economic, social, cultural and political dimensions of the issue.

## **Economic Dynamics**

### **Traditional Economic Activities**

The Sakya Buddhist community of Mustang has traditionally been dependent on a combination of agriculture, livestock and trans-Himalayan trade (Rai). The dry

climate of Mustang makes agricultural production unremunerative, with barley, wheat, potatoes, leafy vegetables and buckwheat being the main crops. Yak and goat rearing are also important, providing milk and wool, which are essential to the economy. The Sakya community, like other Buddhist sects in Mustang, is engaged in these sectors, organized around monasteries and family labor.

Mustang is an area that is of historical significance and is an important point in the salt trade between Bhot and South Asia. It is likely that the Sakya community, specifically in Lo Manthang, participated in the salt trade, taking advantage of their proximity to Tibet (*News Review* 35). Monasteries, like Sakya-affiliated monasteries such as Thupchen Monastery and Jampa Monastery in Lomonthang and other important monasteries in Mustang, are important in the redistribution of resources, specifically in collecting and providing welfare to the community (*The Tibet Journal* 3-4).

### **Modern Economic Shifts**

The decline of traditional trade routes and Nepal's integration into global markets have had a significant impact on Mustang's economy in recent decades (Dahal). Tourism is an important sector in Mustang's economy, given that many tourists visit Mustang and its associated monasteries, festivals, and heritage sites (Festivals of Upper). Although indirectly, the Sakya community benefits from tourism, specifically in tourism-related activities in Mustang. It is worth noting that those in higher social classes benefit more than those in lower social classes.

Remittances from Sakya community members, specifically those in urban centers like Kathmandu, are also a factor in Mustang's economy. There are certain challenges that the Sakya community faces, specifically in infrastructure, which limits diversification in the economy. Future research could explore how Sakya-specific economic practices, such as monastic endowments, adapt to these changes (Shakya 188-89).

### **Challenges and Opportunities**

The economic stability of the Sakya community is faced with the challenges of climate change, which impacts agriculture and water supply due to the high-altitude environment of Mustang. Opportunities include the development of sustainable tourism and specialized markets for organic products like Mustang apples and herbal remedies. In addition, the Sakya community's inclusion within Nepal's cooperative movement, as encouraged by Nepal's economic policy, could add to their economic stability.

## **Social Dynamics and Community Structure**

The social dynamics of the Sakya Buddhist community of Mustang include their family structure, monastery, and village. Their social hierarchy is based on tradition, with the monastery heads and aristocrats holding important positions. The Sakya School of Tibetan Buddhism's focus on learning is likely to have elevated the social standing of the educated members of the community (Rinpoche 54). In terms of gender, women have continued to maintain traditional roles, with the Sakya School teachings of female equality and freedom mainly applicable to domestic and agriculture-based work. However, younger generations have access to education and other opportunities.

## **Social Cohesion and Challenges**

Social cohesion is maintained through shared religious practices, festivals, and communal labor. Events like the Tiji Festival in Lo Manthang, while primarily associated with the Kagyu school, involve the broader Buddhist community, including Sakya practitioners, fostering unity. However, modernization, including out-migration and exposure to global cultures, poses challenges to traditional social structures. Youth migration to urban areas has led to a declining population in Mustang, affecting community vitality.

The Sakya community also navigates Nepal's broader social landscape, which includes issues of caste, ethnicity and inclusion. While Mustang's Buddhist communities are relatively insulated from lowland caste dynamics, subtle hierarchies based on lineage and wealth persist. Nepal's constitutional emphasis on social inclusion and equality offers opportunities for marginalized groups within the Sakya community, such as women and lower-income households, to assert their rights.

## **Education and Social Mobility**

Access to education has improved dramatically in Upper Mustang dramatically in the past two decades in Mustang, with government and monastic schools providing opportunities for Sakya youth. Monastic education remains a cornerstone of Sakya identity, preserving religious knowledge and cultural practices (Dhakal). However, the pull of secular education and urban opportunities often leads to a brain drain, challenging the community's social fabric. Initiatives to balance traditional and modern education could enhance social mobility while preserving cultural heritage.

## **Cultural Dynamics**

Sakya Buddhist community living in Mustang has strong roots in the traditions of the Sakya school of Buddhism, which emphasizes the practice of integrating sutra,

tantra and meditation, often referred to as ‘lambre’i, meaning path and fruition. Some of the practices include the recitation of texts such as the Hevajra Tantra (Snellgrove 14), the practice of rituals such as tsok and the practice of maintaining sacred sites such as Sakya monasteries.

Mustang’s cultural heritage, such as architecture, thangkas, and cultural events, reflects the blend of Tibetan and other influences. The Sakya community’s role in the cultural heritage of Mustang lies in the monasteries, which are the repositories of art, literature and ritual traditions (Dhungel, *Mustang Jillako* 31).

### **Preservation Efforts**

Preservation of the cultural heritage of Mustang, including the Sakya community, involves the efforts of both local and international agencies such as the American Himalayan Foundation, which provides support for the restoration of monasteries and the documentation of the culture of the region (Coburn). The Sakya community’s monasteries, such as the ones located in Lo Manthang, are the main areas of concentration for the preservation of the culture of the region and the constitutional provisions of the government of Nepal for the preservation of commitment to cultural preservation provides a legal framework for these efforts.

### **Challenges to Cultural Continuity**

The entry of tourists and modern media poses a threat to cultural authenticity and originality, with some practices and traditions being modified and exploited commercially. Furthermore, the declining monastic population and the entry of the younger generation into secular careers pose a challenge to the continuity of the Sakya traditions. Efforts to attract the younger generation to the cause of cultural continuity, such as incorporating Buddhist studies in modern curricula, may be effective in countering this challenge. “As this brief history illustrates, the diverse communities that comprise Mustang District have retained strong cultural, linguistic, political and economic ties to Tibet (Craig 13).”

## **Political Dynamics**

### **Historical Background**

In the past, Mustang has been a semi-autonomous kingdom ruled by the Lo kings. The lamas and monks, including those from the Sakya order, were in advisory positions (Principality of Mustang). In the 19th century, Mustang was annexed to Nepal and became part of the centralized state. In 2008, Nepal became a republic after the abolition of the monarchy (Jazeera). The Sakya order has informal power in local governance through its monastic leaders.

## **Engagement in Federal Nepal**

Nepal's new constitution, framed in 2015, has a federal system of government comprising three tiers: federal, provincial, and local governments. In Mustang, the local governments, rural and urban municipalities, are responsible for development, education, and culture (*Constitution of Nepal*). The Sakya community votes, and monastic leaders play an important role in influencing votes, given their spiritual position. However, the political representation of the Sakya community is lacking, as the political culture of Mustang reflects broader ethnic and regional identities, such as the Loba. Although Mustang once remained as part of Ngari Tibet, it became an independent kingdom in 1380 when A-Ma-Pal, a warrior and devout Buddhist, built a palace called 'Kha Choe Dzong' near Lo-Manthang (Loba in Nepal). He gradually defeated the local warlords and built a walled capital, Lo-Manthang. The late king Jigme Dorje Palbar Bista was the unofficial king of Mustang between 1964-2008, until monarchs, vassals and titular kingships were abolished in Nepal.

## **Inclusion and Challenges**

In the context of the constitution of Nepal, there is a focus on inclusion, ensuring that marginalized communities, such as ethnic minorities and women, are represented. This means that the Sakya community, as part of the Buddhist community of Mustang, benefits from such provisions, but there are still issues to be addressed. This includes the concentration of power among elite families, making it difficult for the community to participate, as well as the remote location of Mustang, making it difficult to provide services to the Sakya community.

## **Future Prospects**

The Sakya community's political activities can be improved by providing training for leaders and integrating the community into provincial and national politics. This includes the advocacy for the preservation of culture and the environment, as part of the sustainable development agenda of Nepal.

## **Conclusion**

The Sakya Buddhist community in Mustang is faced with a complex interplay of tradition and modernity in economic, social, cultural, and political contexts. In economic terms, the transition from trade to tourism offers both opportunities and challenges that require sustainable practices to ensure that the benefits are equitably distributed. In social terms, the community is held together by shared practices but is threatened by the effects of migration and modernization. In cultural terms, the traditions of the Sakya school of Buddhism are an essential part of the identity of the community, but these traditions require innovative approaches to attract the interest

of younger members. In political terms, the influence of the community is substantial at the local level, but representation at the national or international level is limited.

The absence of specific literature on the Sakya community in Mustang is an important indicator of the critical research gap that exists in this area. While this research has relied on general sources, primary research, such as ethnographic research and interviews with members of the community, is necessary to confirm and expand on these findings. Research that compares the Sakya community with other Buddhist communities in Mustang, such as Nyingma or Kagyu schools, could further illuminate the Sakya community's unique dynamics.

The Buddhist society in Mustang District, under the Sakya tradition, presents an inspiring case of coping with geographical, economic, and socio-political hurdles. Economic activities are a combination of conventional and contemporary pursuits, including tourism, while social unity is ensured through religious and social associations. Cultural practices, based on the Sakya tradition, are being preserved in the context of globalization, and political engagement is also changing in the context of the new federal system of government in Nepal. Nevertheless, issues such as out-migration, commercialization of culture, and lack of political empowerment require specific attention. In the future, emphasis should be given to primary data collection to better comprehend the Sakya Buddhist society.

## **Recommendations**

1. **Economic Development:** Fostering sustainable tourism and cooperative economic activities to improve economic resilience and ensure that marginalized households benefit from these activities.
2. **Social Inclusion:** Assisting education initiatives that combine secular and monastic education to empower the youth and women within the Sakya community.
3. **Cultural Preservation:** Building stronger partnerships with both local and international organizations to promote the cultural traditions of the Sakya people, engaging the youth through digital media.
4. **Political Empowerment:** Assisting leadership training programs within the Sakya community to improve their participation in local and provincial politics.
5. **Research Priorities:** Conducting ethnographic research to document the specific cultural practices of the Sakya community, as there is a gap in the literature regarding this ethnic minority group.

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