

The Spiritual Significance of Prayer Flags of Monpa Community: A Symbol of Peace, Harmony, and Balance

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Abstract - This paper explores the significance of "Phan" (prayer flags) in the Monpa community of Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh. The paper focuses on the spiritual and socio-religious importance of prayer flags among the Monpa community. Prayer flags, adorned with Buddhist sutras and symbols like the wind horse, are hung in sacred places such as mountain tops, rooftops, and near water bodies. The flags' colours represent the five elements (earth, water, fire, air, and space), and their fluttering in the wind is believed to spread blessings, balance elements, and promote harmony and well-being. The study highlights various types of prayer flags used by Monpas, including Darthang, Darbuche, Chhu Phan, and others, each with specific purposes and symbolism. The tradition of hanging prayer flags is rooted in spreading positive energy to all living beings, fostering compassion, and symbolizing the impermanence of life as flags fade and tear over time.

This paper investigates the social and religious aspects of prayer flags in the Monpa community and identifies environmental and cultural challenges associated with the practice. Through participatory research and interviews with community members, the study underscores the importance of prayer flags in Monpa culture, reflecting their deep connection with spiritual beliefs, cultural heritage, and the natural environment.

Keywords: Monpa, Prayer flags/Phan, Lungta/Wind horse, Mantras, Bon/Shamanism

INTRODUCTION

With distinct cultures, traditions, and beliefs, Monpas are one among the twenty-six major tribes of Arunachal Pradesh. They inhabit the picturesque districts of Tawang and two sub-divisions of West Kameng district- Khalaktang and Dirang. The Monpas practice the Mahayana Buddhism, majorly the Gelug Sect of it with a tinge of their indigenous Bon faith. They are known for their unique technique in building warm stone houses, yak rearing, terrace cultivation,

exquisite handicrafts and rich folklores. Monpas from both the districts are very similar in their socio-religious beliefs. From differences in their dialect, geographical location and few other cultural traits, many writers have divided them broadly into three groups, viz., Dirang Monpa, Khalaktang Monpa and Tawang Monpa. The Monpas of Dirang and Khalaktang call the Tawang Monpas as Bрами. The Monpas of Khalaktang and Dirang collectively call themselves Tsangla. The Tawang Monpa call them as *Shershokpa*(people from east). The Monpa of the present Dirang are also known as *Rongnangpa*, the name derived from the river flowing in their respective region. (Norbu,2017) Of all the Monpas, Tawang Monpa is numerically the largest and the study is pivotal to Tawang Monpa's flagging custom of Phan and its socio-religious significance.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This paper aims to study the significance of Phan (prayer Flags) of Monpa community. The main objectives of the paper are:

1. To study the importance of Phan in Monpa Tribe of Tawang District.
2. To investigate the social and religious aspect of Phan.
3. To identify different environmental and cultural challenges associated with the practice of flagging Phan.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is conducted using participatory research method. The investigator conducted in-depth interviews with experienced members of the community. Books and different articles were consulted for the topic.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Barker Diana's Book (2003) "Tibetan Prayer Flags, explores the cultural and spiritual significance of prayer flags in Tibetan tradition. The book likely delves into the symbolism, use, and meaning of these colourful flags that are ubiquitous in Tibetan Buddhist landscapes. Prayer flags, adorned with prayers, mantras, and images, are believed to spread blessings, peace, and compassion to all beings as the wind carries their prayers. Barker's work may offer insights into the role of prayer flags in Tibetan Buddhist practices, their connection to wind and elements, and their contribution to fostering harmony and positivity.

In Robert Beer's "Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs" (2004), explores the meaning of Tibetan prayer flags as symbols in Tibetan Buddhism. It likely discusses how these flags carry prayers and mantras via the wind, spreading blessings and compassion. The book delves into aspects of prayer flags within the context of Tibetan Buddhist traditions and symbolism. In "Tibetan Rituals of Death" by E.G. Margaret (2012), published by Routledge, the focus is on rituals and practices surrounding death in Tibetan Buddhism. While the book's primary emphasis is on death rituals, Tibetan prayer flags are mentioned in the context of broader Tibetan Buddhist practices or rituals aiming to benefit sentient beings, including the deceased. Prayer flags after the deceased and its important for the dead once are explained here.

In "Blessings on the Wind: The Mystery & Meaning of Tibetan Prayer Flags" by Tad Wise (2002), the author explores the significance, mystery, and meaning behind Tibetan prayer flags. This book likely delves into the cultural, spiritual, and symbolic aspects of prayer flags in Tibetan Buddhism. Tad Wise probably discusses how these flags, adorned with prayers and symbols, are used to send blessings on the wind to all beings, fostering compassion, peace, and harmony.

DISCUSSION

Phan or Tibetan prayer flags are coloured pieces of cloth that have Buddhist sutras printed on them, where

they were modified later.¹ These prayer flags are firstly believed to be introduced in Tibet no later than 1040 CE. Phan is also called as *Darchog* in Tibetan language, where '*Dar*' meaning to spread, expand, or multiply to the maximum extent, and '*Chog*' means to stacked together. So, '*Darchog*' can be understood as the expansion or multiplication of one's luck or fortune while stacking together or holding it. These prayer flags are strung up at mountain passes and along trails and streams and are attached to *chorten*, *gonpa* and other sacred structures so their prayers can be released in the wind to purify the air and appease the gods. Prayer flags have different kinds of Mantra (Sutra), through which we can feel spiritual and positive energy.

Those square-shaped prayer flags are combined with five different colours, blue, white, red, green and yellow. Each colour on these flags is not just for good looks, but these colours symbolize five elements of the Earth. White colour symbolizes cloud and Wind, red is fire, green is water and plants, yellow is earth, and blue is the sky.² These colours are to be hung left to right in this specific order: blue, white, red, green, and yellow. These colours are present directions - North, South, East, West, and Centre.

(Passang Tsering *Phaish*(Priest) at Jang) said According to some scriptures, the five colours in the prayer flags represent the moment of Gautama Buddha's enlightenment in Bodh Gaya. It is said that when he attained enlightenment, a ray of five colours emanated from his body. These colours have since been used in prayer flags to symbolize his enlightenment.

Types of *Phan*/ Prayer Flags:

1. *Darthang*: These are the square-shaped, horizontally strung prayer flags. These prayer flags come on ropes to be hung in horizontal display. These are printed on five different colours so set are always in multiples of 5. To prevent this prayer flag from getting upside down, we follow a specific order where order starts with blue on the right-hand side. So, we place the blue section on

¹ Tad Wise (2002). *Blessings on the Wind: The Mystery & Meaning of Tibetan Prayer Flags*. Pp. 11-12

² The meaning of prayer flags in the Himalayas. Mountainkingdoms.com. Retrieved 2025-08-25.

the right-hand side and then tie the flag accordingly.

2. *Darbuche*: These are vertical prayer flags mounted on wooden long poles. It is common to see displays of many plain white prayer flags on poles erected around.
3. *Chhu Phan*: These prayer flags are believed to have originated from Bon shamanism. According to tradition, when someone falls ill, a local spiritual practitioner or astrologer may determine that the illness is caused by a malevolent spirit, such as a *Lu*/snake god in the form of a Rock. To appease these gods and restore balance, people offer prayer flags, which are placed near water. As the water flows, the wind generated by its movement causes the flags to flutter, carrying the prayers and intentions to these deities. This ancient custom is thought to have its roots in shamanistic practices.³
4. *Finger Flags*: For the Shamanist deities, monpa use another type of prayer flag, which comes in sets of five. These flags are small in size and features five finger-like structures, created by cutting the flags to resemble fingers. To create a stand, we select a tree with a visible head or a bundle of leaves at the top. We cut the tree, trim it to size, and use it as a flagpole. The bundle of leaves at the top serves as a base to attach the flags. Typically, we use five flags, which are tied to the stand, and they flutter in the wind, carrying our prayers and intentions to the deities.

These flags are specially offered to Shamanist deities such as *Deva*, *Naga/Lu*, *Yanggyal/Sinp*, *Ganara/ Dhiss* (deity roam around to smell), *Asara/Lhomin*, *Garuda/sada mem (God of earth)*, *Kinara/God* which is neither fully male nor female, *Manuka/man* and *Amanuka/Mi-ma-yin* (other living being other than man) etc.

5. *Darshing*: These prayer flag comes in a series of different coloured flags. The colour of flag is determined by an individual's *Kham* or God assigned to them on birth. *Kham* also varies *Lopta*

(A birth animal symbol of a person) to *Lopta* are as follows:

Kham Meh whose animal symbols are, Tiger Horse and Dog

Kham Shing whose animal symbol are, Mouse, Dragon and Monkey

Kham Cha, whose animal symbol are, Tiger, Horse and Dog

Kham Chhu whose animal symbol are, Bird, Cow and Snake.

Based on the *Kham* the prayer flags colour is determined:

Kham Meh: Red Colour

Kham Sa: Yellow Colour

Kham Shing: Green Colour

Kham Cha: White Colour

Kham Chhu: Blue Colour.

6. *Choi Phan*: These are handmade prayer flags, which are crafted from *Mon shugu*, a white, handmade Monpa paper. To create them, simply cut the paper to your desired size and fold it twice to form a flag shape. Then hang these flags the at meaningful place, such as a mountain or a sacred site, allowing the wind to carry your prayers and intentions.⁴

Traditional Printing of Prayer Flags

Skilled craftsmen carefully carve intricate designs, mantras, and symbols into wooden blocks. These carvings are often done with great precision and attention to detail, ensuring that the final product is both aesthetically pleasing and spiritually significant. The carved wooden blocks are then dipped in ink and pressed onto the fabric, transferring the sacred images and texts. This process requires great care and skill to ensure that the prints are clear and vibrant. Once printed, the flags are cut to size, typically into rectangular or square shapes. The edges may be trimmed or finished with decorative elements to enhance their appearance. The finished flags are then attached to strings or poles, often in a specific pattern or arrangement. This may involve threading the flags

³ Passang Tsering aged 55, a phaish, a Priest in Jang Circle, Tawang District, Scheduled phone Interviewed on 25th August, 2025.

⁴ Passang Tsering Ibid.

onto a rope or attaching them to a wooden or metal frame. Some prayer flags may undergo additional processing, such as the addition of tassels, ribbons, or other decorative elements. These embellishments can add to the flag's spiritual significance and visual appeal.

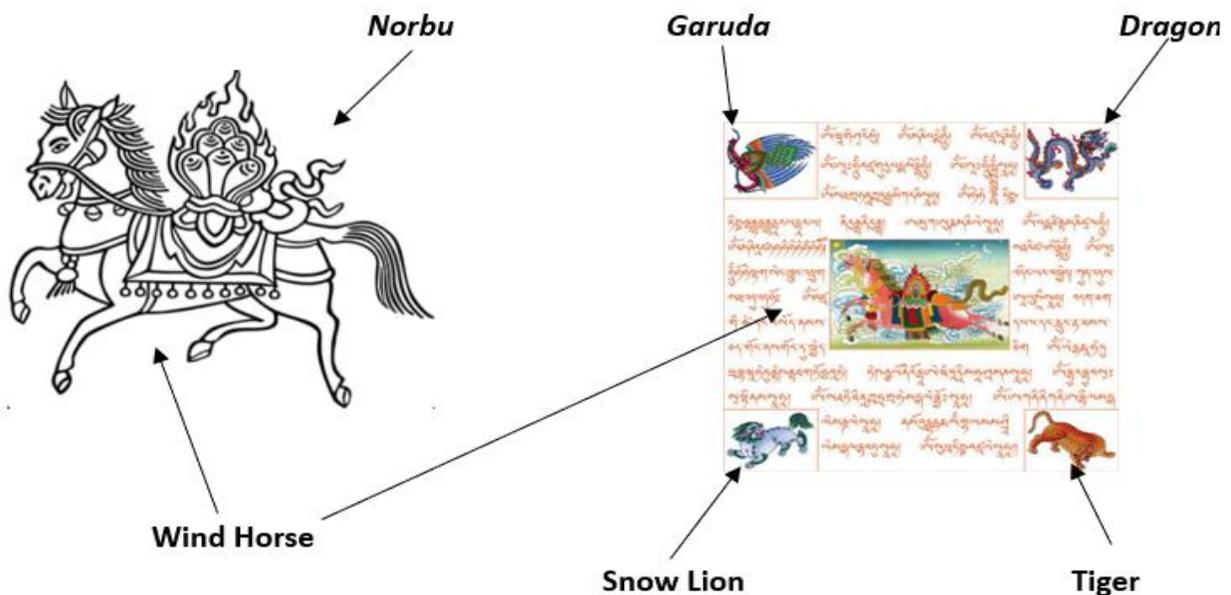
Prayer flags are traditionally made using simple yet durable materials, such as cotton or hemp, that withstand the harsh weather conditions of the Himalayas. These materials are chosen especially for their ability to hold the printed images and texts well. Modern flags might also use synthetic fabrics

Symbols on Tibetan Prayer Flags

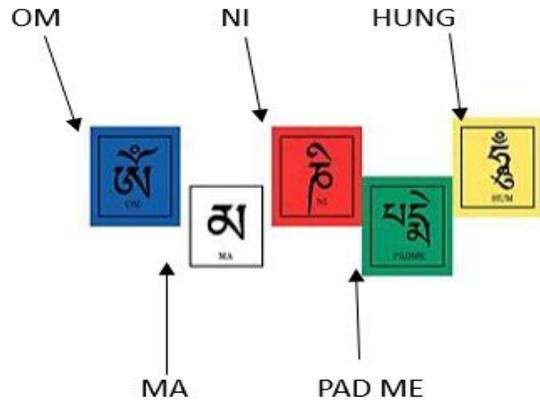
a) **Wind Horse:** The wind horse is the main symbol found on prayer flags. On his back the horse carries the three jewels of Buddhism- the Buddha, dharma, and Sangha. In the Tibetan Buddhism, it was included as the pivotal element in the centre of the four animals symbolizing the cardinal directions and a symbol of the idea of well-being or good fortune. Wind horse is typically shown without wings, but carries the three Jewel, or the Wish fulfilling jewel called *Norbu Lungta* (Wind horse) prayer flags are the most common prayers flags. The wind horse is drawn on the centre of the prayer flag while the outside corners are guarded by the four great animals, clockwise starting from the top left corner of the prayer flags are: Garuda/*Kyung*, (Wisdom), Dragon/*Dhug* (gentle power), tiger/*Taag* (confidence) and a snow lion/ *Seng*

(Fearless Joy). Tradition says a “Wind horse” swiftly delivers the printed prayers to the Gods. The wear out and faded prayer flags by the wind indicates the prayer have been answered and blessings are received.

- b) **The Four Dignities:** The Four animals- 1. Kyung/ Garuda, 2. Sky Dragon, 3 the snow Lion, 4. The Tiger- are seen in the corners of many Tibetan prayer flags- often accompanying the wind horse.
- c) **Goddess Tara:** Tara prayer flags with a lovely image of Tara in the center. Tara represents virtuous and enlightened action. It is said that her compassion for living beings is stronger than a mother’s love for her children. She brings about longevity, protects travel, and guards her followers on their spiritual journey to enlightenment.
- d) **Guru Rinpoche:** Guru Rinpoche prayer flags. Padmasambhava, the renowned 8th-century saint, was a central figure in shaping Buddhism’s history in Tibet. Revered as the second Buddha, Guru Rinpoche (Precious Guru) conquered the local deities and demons of Tibet and bound them by oath to become guardians of Buddhism.
- e) **Gyaltzen Tsenpo:** Gyaltzen Tsenpo prayer flags are printed with sutras bestowed by Lord Buddha to Indra, king of the gods, to overcome his enemies and achieve victory. This is a common prayer flag, especially at New Year, symbolizing new ventures and beginnings.



Scriptures on the Flags: One of the most common mantras found on prayer flags is “Om Mani Padme Hum”. It’s associated with Avalokiteshvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion and each syllable of this mantra carries a deep spiritual meaning.



Om: Purifies the ego and the body.

Ma: Purifies jealousy and the speech.

Ni: Purifies passion and the mind.

Pad: Purifies ignorance and the condition.

Me: Purifies greed and the touch.

Hung: Purifies hatred and the spirit.

It is thought that when the wind blows through the flags, it carries the meaning of these mantras and positive energy across the land, promoting peace, compassion, and wisdom to all beings.

History of *Phan* (Prayer Flags)

Prayer flags have a long history. Before Buddhism, people in Himalaya including Tibet followed a tradition called *Bon*. Tibetan prayer flags have its genesis in 7AD. Prayer flags are believed to be originated within the religious tradition of *Bon*⁵. Shamanistic *Bonpo* used primary-colored plain flags in Tibet.⁶ These coloured flags are used in special healing ceremonies to help people get better when they were sick, but it is not known whether or not the *Bonpos* ever wrote on their flags. Prayer flags come in different colours and even written on them. Each colour represented a different primary element: yellow for earth, red for fire, blue for space, green for water, and white for air- the fundamental building blocks of

both our physical bodies and of our environment. According to the Eastern medicine health and harmony are produced through the balance of the 5 elements. Properly arranging coloured flags around a sick patient harmonized the elements in his body helping to produce a state of physical and mental health. Therefore, when these flags were put up around someone who was sick, it was believed to help balance the elements in their body and make them feel better. People also hung these flags in mountains, valleys, and lakes to make the local gods happy and bring good fortune. If the gods were unhappy, people believed that sickness and natural disasters would happen. When Buddhism came to Tibet, a great teacher named Guru Rinpoche wrote prayers sutras and drew pictures on special flags. Later, in the 15th century, people started using wooden blocks to print these flags. Buddhist masters designed the flags, and craftsmen helped make copies. But during a difficult time in Tibet's history called the Cultural Revolution, people were discouraged from hanging these flags. Despite this, the tradition of prayer flags continues to this day.

Some Legend attributes the origin of prayer flags to Gautama Buddha. According to this legend, Buddha's prayers were written on battle flags used by the devas against the asuras in mythological conflicts.⁷

There is another legend about the creation of prayer flags. Once a monk obtained an important scripture from India, but unfortunately, while he was returning home, the scripture got wet in a river. Having laid the scripture open to dry in the sunshine, the monk then sat and meditated with his legs crossed under a big tree. Suddenly, gongs and horns rang out, and the sound of Sanskrit reverberated in the air. As the gentle breeze stroked his face under the blue sky, the monk felt utterly refreshed and all of a sudden, seemed to understand everything in the universe completely. Slightly opening his eyes, the monk found the scripture had been blown all over - in the sky, the tree, and the river. He let out a loud laugh and disappeared in the distance, leaving behind the flying scripture and the bursts of sound of Sanskrit. From then on, the Tibetans began to print lines of the scripture on cloth

⁵ Barker, Diane (2003). *Tibetan Prayer Flags*. pp 14.

⁶ “Radiant Heart: The Prayer Flag Tradition” (PDF). Prayerflags.com. Retrieved 2025-08-05

⁷ Robert Beer (2004). *Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*. pp 60

and hang them in the air to commemorate the monk's attained enlightenment and as a tribute to the Buddhist scripture.

Places to Offer *Phan*: We place prayer flags in high and clean areas, where the wind can blow strongly. If we place them very high, the wind will blow more, and the flags will flutter more. We often place them on rooftops, mountaintops, or tall trees, where they are exposed to the wind. We prefer places where fewer people visit, so the flags remain clean and undisturbed. Mountains and rooftops are ideal because they are less likely to be polluted, and the wind blows more strongly. By placing the flags high, we believe that the wind will carry the prayers and blessings written on them to a wider area. The more the flags flutter, the more we believe the prayers are being read and the blessings are being spread. The wind horse symbol on the flags carries our prayers and blessings far and wide, amplifying their effect.

Prayer flags are placed near lakes and rivers along the water's edge to show their reverence for the god of lake and water, some even offer on the mountain to the mountain god. Ropes of prayer flags can be strung horizontally between two trees (the higher the better).

When to Offer: These prayer flags are offer on occasions like, Birthdays and festive days, which believe to be capable of bringing auspicious and peaceful blessings to heaven, earth, human beings, and livestock. And also offer during the Buddhist Occasions of *Nyish Ngya* i.e on the 5th day of the Tibetan Lunar Calendar, and 8th, 10th and the most importantly 15th Day or Full moon days of every month according to Lunar Calendar. These days are considered auspicious it multiplies the benefits of prayer flags by 100 million

Hanging prayer flags not only serves oneself but to extend positive energy and wellbeing to all the living beings. Over time exposure to the elements causes prayer flags to fade and tear, this natural process symbolises the impermanence of life, when old prayer flags fade out, they are replaced with new ones, signifying the continuous cycle of renewal and rejuvenation. Because the prayer flags contain sacred texts and symbols they should be treated respectfully. They should not be placed on the ground or put in the

trash. When disposing of old prayer flags the tradition way is to burn them so that the smoke carries their blessings to the heavens.

Significance of the Prayer Flags:

When hang prayer flags, they not only carry prayers and blessings on the wind but also help balance the *Chhi Kham* (five external elements) - earth, water, fire, air, and earth. Additionally, they positively influence the *Nang Kham* (internal elements) that govern our physical and mental well-being. By balancing these elements, prayer flags bring harmony to the lives, protecting it from illness and promoting overall health and happiness.

By hanging prayer flags, it not only benefits human being but also extend positive energy and well-being to all living beings. As prayer flags fade and tear over time due to exposure to the elements, they symbolize the impermanence of life. This natural process reminds us to appreciate the present moment.

When old prayer flags fade out, they are replaced with new ones, signifying the continuous cycle of renewal and rejuvenation

CONCLUSION

The prayer flags (*Phan*) of the Monpa community in Tawang, Arunachal Pradesh, hold profound spiritual significance, symbolizing peace, harmony, and balance. Rooted in Mahayana Buddhism and influenced by indigenous Bon faith, these colorful flags carry prayers and mantras on the wind, spreading blessings and compassion to all beings. The Monpas' practice of hanging prayer flags in sacred places like mountain tops, rooftops, and near water bodies reflects their reverence for nature and the elements. The flags' colors represent the five elements, and their fluttering in the wind is believed to balance these elements, promoting harmony and well-being. As the flags fade and tear over time, they symbolize life's impermanence, prompting renewal and rejuvenation through replacement with new flags. The tradition of prayer flags among Monpas underscores the community's deep connection with their spiritual beliefs, cultural heritage, and the natural environment. By hanging prayer flags, Monpas extend positive energy to all living beings, fostering a sense of interconnectedness and compassion.

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Narrator

- [1] Passang Tsering, aged 55, a phaish, a Priest in Jang Circle, Tawang District, Scheduled phone Interviewed on 5th August, 2025.
- [2] Tenzin Dondup, aged 45 years, a priest as well as Gao Burah of Kharsa Village of Jang Circle, Tawang District, scheduled phone Interviewed on 20 August 2025.
- [3] Sangey Khando, aged 63 years, a senior Citizen of Jang, Tawang district, was scheduled an interview on 21st August 2025.
- [4] Sang Tashi, aged 40 years, a monk of Jang, Tawang district, was scheduled an interview on 1st September.