

The Buzhen performers - end of an era?

Nabila Siddiqui and Sejuti Basu
Research & Advocacy Team, PRAGYA

The Himalayan region is a cultural complex, with each of its little valley or plateau displaying its distinctive cultural forms. Their altitudinal variations and diverse ecosystems; seclusion and remoteness has made these areas the last bastions of globally significant indigenous knowledge and cultural heterogeneity. However, in a world in transition, these mountains lie at the cross roads, with its cultural sovereignty and distinctiveness eroding fast. One of the art form and a way of life that has been endangered in this process is that of the Buzhens. With only a handful of performers and teachers remaining, this art form faces obliteration from the cultural map of the Himalayas.

The Buzhens

The Buzhen are a sub sect of the Nyingma-Pa sect of Buddhism. They are a tantric cult known throughout the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan regions for their extraordinary sword dance and the *phowa dochak* (breaking of a stone placed on the stomach). They live in the Pin Valley of Spiti in Himachal Pradesh on the opposite side of the river Pin to the Kungri Gompa, the second oldest monastery in Spiti. The Pin is the largest tributary of the Spiti River that, in turn, joins the Sutlej at Khab in the neighbouring district of Kinnaur. The remote Spiti valley is a cold, beautiful, inhospitable desert with a population of barely ten thousand and has at various times in history been a part of the Tibetan realm. Himalayan Buddhism has flourished here for over one thousand years, a period that also saw the founding of the great monasteries at Tabo, Dhangkhar, Kungri, Key and Komic.

The descendants of the married monks of the Nyingma sect, Buzhens are a community of preachers; dare devil performers; harlequins and wandering minstrels. Buzhens entertain people by acting plays and chanting legends. These lamas wander about the country in small groups earning their livelihood by singing, dancing and acting plays. In the past they also engaged in some trade by bartering grain for salt, iron or honey. In the winters they wander from village to village in Spiti, Kinnaur and even parts of Ladakh, singing haunting ballads, playing single-stringed instruments, performing amazing feats.

Each group comprising of 4-5 performers, stays in a village for a week, during which the first few days are spent performing plays and on the final day the head *lama* performs a series of amazing feats like piercing his cheeks, neck & arms with a needle, inserting swords in the stomach, and splitting a thick rectangular slab of stone placed on a man's belly with the might of his fist and arms. The main performer Buzhen dresses much like other monks, but his helpers wear the traditional Spitian dress. Buzhens, unlike the monks of other orders do not shave their heads; instead they tie their hair such that it renders them a wild unconventional look.

The religious & historical significance of the Buzhen tradition

In traditional societies, fairs and festivals are held to rejoice and congregate. They are based on myths and legends and are arranged to propitiate deities, recreate and appease ancestors, propagate and market local skills. Likewise, the traditional Buzhen performances other than a display of local talent passed down from generations also have an underlying religious and moral message.

Though the Buzhen community is considered a source of entertainment in the remote areas of Spiti, they also have helped in propagating Buddhism and its teachings. In different areas they are referred to as Buzhen or Buchen, but locally they are known as 'Phowar-dochok' meaning those who break stones on their stomach. The backdrops of the performances are spiritual the performers are also believed to have spiritual powers.

The lamas of Pin valley in Spiti are allowed to marry as they belong to the Nyingma sect. They themselves live in the Gompas while their families and children live in the villages. Their daughters normally stay in the village and the sons join the community of Buzhens. Sometimes even the well-to-do families send one of their sons to join the Buzhen community. The head-Buzhen is given the status of the leader only once he has undergone a long training under a star performer.

The origin

The origin of the Buzhen institution is in Tibet. A rare group of dancers, the Buzhens who keep the centuries-old legend alive, are the last surviving members of a tantric Buddhist cult whose history goes back to a time when the people of the region had started ignoring the teachings of the Buddha. It was at that point that an esteemed mahasiddha (great accomplished master), Tangthon Gyalpo, took it upon himself to revive the faith. He recruited a band of devoted young men, who would wear colourful attire and go from village to village enacting anecdotes from the life of the Buddha and other great teachers. Over time the efforts of Tangthon Gyalpo and his dedicated troops bore fruit, and Buddhism once again attained its wonted place in the hearts and minds of the people of these regions.

Tangthon Gyalpo is believed to have been born in the fourteenth century (around 1385 AD). Legend has it that around the fourteenth century, a massive epidemic arose in Lhasa. People started dying at an alarming rate. The ruler of Tibet at that time, invited several medical practitioners, magicians, and spiritual healers but none were able to stop the epidemic. When the king Je Tsongkhapa Rinpoche heard of the famous Thang-Thong Gyalpo, he invited him to save his kingdom from the epidemic. Riding a white vulture, Thang-Thong Gyalpo reached Lhasa, and searched for a special stone, put the spirit of the demons in it, recited some verses to the small sword shaped stone, and crashed it on the large stone breaking it to pieces. The stone screamed and then silence prevailed. In this way he drove out the evil spirits that were believed to be causing the epidemic. Another version states that Tangthon Gyalpo arrived at the gates of Tsongkhapa's abode, and at once realized that the spirit was hiding at the threshold, under the door. He captured it in a brown stone and drove it to the market place where, in the presence of the elderly, he smashed the stone with his dorje phurba. Hala Tabgyad (the evil spirit) was dead; Lhasa was free of the scourge.

Another legend has that the *phowa dochak* ceremony was first performed in the fourteenth century, at the time of construction of the Chung Riwoche monastery in Tibet. It is said that whatever was built during the day by human endeavour would be destroyed at night by evil spirits. It was only after Tangthon Gyalpo performed the *phowa dochak* that the monastery could be completed.

This method of driving away evil evolved into a tradition and different versions of it diffused from Lhasa to surrounding areas. This tradition gained force as an effort to revive Buddhism in Tibet around the 11th century, when it was accompanied by staging plays based on Buddhist mythology. Since that time, the wandering minstrels carried forward this tradition as a legacy.

The Art Form of the Buzhens

During the months of winter, the Buzhen troupes of Pin valley travel to different villages, staying at one place for a period of 2-6 weeks, depending upon what the people want and the number of villages they have to cover during that winter. Sometimes they go to villages on special invitation. The host village makes arrangement for their stay and also provides food for them. Buzhen plays are usually organized in the open spaces in the village, like crossroads or in some cases the villagers put up stages where they can perform.

Lo-Chen: the star performer

The main performer in the troupe is known as Lo-Chen (Lo-Chaba-Chenyo). Lo-Chen is the head of the troupe, a preacher, and a teacher and the entire performance revolves around him. He can be identified by a five coloured hat or head-gear, known as *phodka* in Tibetan. The five colours signify

five directions - white is east, red is west, blue is north, yellow is south and green is sky. According to another interpretation, the five colours symbolises five elements - blue symbolizes sky or space, white symbolizes air or wind, red symbolizes fire, green symbolizes water, and yellow symbolizes earth. Lo-Chen wears silver earrings known as *pandap*, silk shirt with long sleeves (*hungchug*), and sleeveless jacket (*tonga*), dark red coloured long skirt (*mesham*), a belt (*kira*) to tie tonga with the mesaham. The kira is woven by women using multicolours and it is approximately 6 inches broad. Special snow boots *lham* (with yak skin sole) are worn to complete the dress. He also hangs a special cloth (*pungkhup*), with tantrik significance, on his back, while performing the stone-breaking feat and also wears a number of ornaments, especially necklaces made of eight metals, shells and precious stones. However, the Lo-Chen does not always wear the complete traditional costume. He often dresses up in simple attire with a long hat and goat hide overcoat (*righoy*) and woollen tights. Simple dressing is getting more common in present days as the tradition is now limited to only a few pockets in Spiti, and the troupes cannot always afford rich clothes and jewellery for their costumes.



A Buzhen performance in Spiti; 'Lugzhi'/shepherd with elaborate face make-up from Tsampa

The Lo-Chen is well versed in Bhoti / Tibetan language, physically and mentally healthy and spiritually enlightened. He should have performed the basic meditation following strict rules, for at least three years, three months and 9 days, in a secluded cave. During meditation he gains his teacher's tantric knowledge by an incipient method, by constant chanting. The Lo-Chen also needs to be free from worldly attachments, and has to constantly fast, pray and meditate. He needs to possess good knowledge of different forms of music, instruments, dances and other related cultural forms. On the other hand, he needs to have complete faith in the Buddhist doctrines to be a good preacher.

Musical instruments of the Buzhens

The musical instruments used by the Buzhen are the same as those used by the lamas in gompas - Conch Shell, Cymbals, Rattle (*Damru*), Trumpet, Traditional guitar (*kokpo*), local violin, etc. A special wind instrument is *kangling*, which is made from the human femur (thigh) bone, with a silver mouth piece. It is normally made from a pregnant woman's thigh bone. If a young traditional singer dies then his / her leg bone can also be used. In case of a female, the left leg bone is used and in case of a male, the right leg bone is used. The bone is hollowed and then purified by performing tantrik rituals. This instrument can only be played by lamas of Vajrayana, who have attained spiritual maturity. It is played to invite / attract the evil spirits, who are then preached to show them the right path. Another instrument is the mane (hand prayer wheel), which is rotated while reciting mantras.

The famous Buzhen performances

The main festival of Spiti is 'La darcha' and the main attraction is the spectacular buzhen sword dance. The buzhen are probably the only branch of Buddhism where the use of weapons is practiced.

The colourfully dressed lamas perform *the powar dochak* ceremony to destroy an evil spirit believed to have taken shelter in a stone.

A Buzhen performance commences with the setting up of an altar dedicated to the *mahasiddha* Tangthon Gyalpo, founder of the cult in the 14th century. The centre of attraction, of course, is the Lo-chen, the head Buzhen who prays, engages in some lively, hilarious and improvised banter with the *Lugzhi* (shepherd), sings; plays the *kokpo* and dances with his swords. The Lo-chen begins the sword dance with the blowing of conch shells, burning of incense and an invocation to the benevolent spirits. A traditional Buzhen performance may last up to three hours. Commencing with a prayer, the Buzhen act also comprises singing and playing musical instruments, and dance by the entire group, and some lively banter. The movement is swift and rhythmic. As in many folk art forms, inspired by the occasion and the audience, the exchange between the two artists is hilarious. Slowly, but definitely, their act moves towards the highly skilled sword dance wherein the Lo-chen, digging the hilts of his two swords into the ground and their tips into his flanks, balances himself horizontally upon them.



Daring stunts by the Lo-Chen

At the end of the dance, the Lo-Chen approaches the idol and begins praying. Then a person from the audience (*poohal*), dressed like shepherd (wearing a woolen hat, holding spinning instruments in his hand, face smeared with tsampa) appears in the center space. He entertains the people with his silly acts and then goes on the stage. As he approaches the idol, Lo-Chen pulls him back and asks him to identify himself and his whereabouts. To this the *poohal* gives all silly answers. Then Lo-Chen realises that he is none other than his age-old enemy - a king from the northern jungles - Chang Mirgoe Gyalpo. Then Lo-Chen defeats him and sings a song for the welfare of the village and the whole world.

After this, begins the second phase, in which two performers gather around the selected stone. One performer holds a bell and vajra. The other has two swords which he places on top of the stone and then covers it with a cloth. The Lo-Chen arrives bare torso and bare feet, with only ornaments. He picks up the two swords and circles around the stone, reciting mantras, dancing and swaying. At the same time one assistant scatters seed grains in all the directions and in a special cup for the Lo-Chen, he fills chang and then touches the stone with it and throws chang in every direction. He repeats this act five times and then returns the cup to the Lo-Chen, who folds his hands in front of the stone to honour it, removes all his ornaments and on his bare back a special cloth is pinned to the skin. The next feat is piercing a long needle through his cheeks. After this he dances around with the two swords in his hands. While performing, he keeps reciting some mantras and prays continuously.

The performance culminates with the *phowa dochak*. Lo-Chen puts on his robe again. At his waist he wears the *dorje phurba* (a dagger / religious artefact) on his belt. A cloth is placed on the stone and on it a bowl full of *Jo* (grains of barley). One Buzhen plays the *gubjal* and the other plays the *trilu*. Two other Buzhens stand nearby as assistants. Once again the Lo-Chen begins prayers with folded hands. Then with their hands raised to the sky, the two assistant Buzhens and Lo-Chen pray to the deities in the sky, to help them in overcoming the evil spirits. The grains are thrown in all directions.

One Buzhen lies down on his back and the *nehdag* (an approximately 35 kilo stone believed to be possessed with an evil spirit) is positioned on his chest. Two others hold him to the ground, and to the incantation of mantras, the Lochen lifts another big stone, weighing approximately 10 kilos, symbolic of the *dorje phurba* and brings it crashing down upon the chest. The *nehdag* splits; thus conveying that the evil spirit is dead. Traditionally the broken pieces of the sacred stone are taken with great respect to be used in the plinths of the houses to drive away evil spirits. As soon as the stone breaks, the people rush down to also collect the grains of *jo*, which are believed to keep away troubles. People place these grains on the altar in their homes.

The Buzhen Plays

During their stay in a particular place, the Buzhens perform a number of plays, depicting mythological stories. One such story depicts a rich, blind king called Tsa Kyong Dawa. His son Thimet Kuinden became a great, generous and pious king. He distributed all of his father's wealth among the poor. To take advantage of this situation, the King's enemy - Palkot - sent three of his ascetics, dressed as beggars, to ask for the king's wish-fulfilling jewel. The generous king could not refuse the beggars and gave away the precious jewel. When the king's blind father heard of this, he sentenced his son to death. But his sister and mother, begged the father to convert the death sentence to a 12 year exile. The prince's three sons and wife also went along with him. On the way the prince went on a donating spree. First he donated his horses, elephants, and other goods, and even his three sons. Then the gods tried to test him. One god asked his wife in alms and other asked for his eyes. The king donated them without hesitation. Thus, his generous nature was proven beyond doubt. And after twelve years when he was returning to his kingdom, he got back his wife, three sons, horses, elephants and other riches. He went on to become a great king, who spread Buddhism far and wide.

Another play talks about a hermit who had been meditating for twelve years went to wash his clothes in a lake. A female deer came to the lake to drink its water and became pregnant. The deer gave birth to a daughter, who was named Suryamukhi, and she grew up to be a beautiful lady. Once a handsome king came to that jungle to hunt and seeing Suryamukhi he fell in love with her and took her as his wife. All the other queens were jealous of her beauty and in their hatred they killed her son and left the body in her chamber, and blamed her for being a cannibal. The king was furious and he tortured her and left her in a forest full of ferocious animals. However, due to her pleasant and loving nature, even the ferocious animals became docile. Meanwhile, the king went through rumbled times and he lost his kingdom and assets. He was wandering in the forests one day when he again met Suryamukhi. Realizing his mistake, he sought her forgiveness and took her back as his wife. After that, he gradually regained his lost empire and they lived happily ever after.

Current State of the Buzhen Art

The rare Buzhen community of Spiti is on the brink of extinction and the tradition of the *phowa dochak*, unfortunately, is already extinct in Tibet and Ladakh. Today there are only 25 Buzhens surviving, that too within a tiny cluster of villages in the remote Pin valley in Spiti. Only 9 of them however, perform these days. For at least six months a year the area is snowbound, and its inhabitants virtually incarcerated. The Buzhen performances are mostly restricted to the local level, and remain unknown at the regional and national levels.

Apart from the loss of global cultural treasures, cultural erosion creates a society in psychological distress with its accompanying consequences in terms of social evils. The process of erosion however is gradual, and timely interventions could well halt or even reverse the trend. The Buzhen tradition itself is now no more visible in Tibet. In Ladakh too it is extinct, because practitioners of the art found it impossible to eke out a living from it. Thus the only Buzhens that survive today are in the Pin valley of Spiti, in the border district of Lahaul-Spiti in the state of Himachal Pradesh. Here however, bourgeoising tourism sector is helping this cult to survive.

The performing arts of the Himalayas lack recognition and encouragement. The artists feel isolated, undervalued and lack support. Networking among cultural actors, cooperation between different troupes, and linkages with relevant bodies of the government would serve to promote the forms.

Media needs to be harnessed for promoting these forms and increasing their popularity and value in the potential audience. Artisans are giving up the practice of these art forms also because of the lack of monetary benefits. There is an urgent need to enhance visibility of this art form through cultural tourism. The performances, however, also need to evolve to cater to tourist preferences and time constraints to keep pace with the modern world.

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