INTRODUCTION
The Problematic, Methodology and Literature Survey

The primary objectives of the research are the study of the Mandala, a significant Buddhist symbol of meditation as a unifying conceptual construct. The dissertation will also undertake a study of the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala in great detail within the larger framework of the Gangtey Goenpa (the Monastery at Gangtey), in Bhutan.

The neuter noun Mandala has been the source of much reflection and also, at times, misinterpretation. Different streams of thought comprehend it variously but, essentially, it signifies a circle such as the sun or the moon. In keeping with the Vajrayana tradition, it refers to a diagram of the world used as an aid to religious practice. This ‘world map’ or cosmogram is generally depicted in the form of a square palace surrounded by a circle of flames within which Buddhas and Bodhisattvas are arranged in systematic orders. The term is mandala in Sanskrit, whereas in Tibetan, it is known as a khilkhor, and it refers to a mnemonic aid to enlightenment within Tibetan Buddhist practice or Vajrayana Buddhism. The term however, has two distinct meanings: mandala as khilkhor and mandala as mandal. The former is the celestial abode or palace of various tantric deities of meditation and can be visualised only after receiving initiation/empowerment/Wang from a particular teacher or guru. Some khilkhors are drawn on consecrated ground with the help of coloured sands, and are called Dultshon Khilkhor, others are executed on cloth, walls and paper and are called Redri Khilkhors, while yet another medium is the three dimensional model or a Loilang Khilkhor. Apart from these, the Body, Speech and Mind of the practitioner also form mandalas or khilkhors.

The other term mandala is used for the act of offering and is associated with the seven offertory practices that include prostration, offering, confession, rejoicing, supplication, entreaty and dedication. By offering the mandala, one visualises the offering of the entire universe and its precious contents to the deity that one is praying to. A mandala, therefore, is a graphic, geometric representation of the cosmos. It is a
'psychocosmogram' that symbolises the extremely high level of order and harmony, attained by an enlightened mind. As mentioned earlier it consists of a series of circles enclosing squares, but with a central focal point. The circles radiate from the centre and are drawn from it. Once an initiate has entered the four gated city of the deity, s/he has to move inwards both physically as well as mentally towards the palace of knowledge/gnosis and head eventually towards the centre, in order to achieve a state of mystical union with the Buddha.

The mandala is very rich in symbols and signification, and the structure and function of the mandala are also directly transposed onto the structural functions of the architectonic sphere of the monastery. Hence, there is a need for research and detailed study of the problematic enunciated above. Moreover, all monasteries are built and arranged according to the disposition of the deities in a mandala. Thus, a person stepping into a monastery would at once feel the difference in the spatial sphere between the outside and the inside of the monastery. When s/he enters the main hall of a monastery s/he would feel as if s/he has reached the centre of the 'sacred' integrated whole of the temple. A mandala may therefore, be looked upon as a pictorial representation of the cosmos while the monastery is a replica of a mandala which in turn is a reduced model of cosmology.

**SCOPE OF THE RESEARCH**

The primary scope of this thesis is to study the Buddhist mandala with reference to Gangtey Goenpa in Bhutan. The broader scope of this thesis is the study of the structural and functional aspects of a monastery and a particular mandala as a reduced model of cosmology. Moreover, semiotically studying the Buddhist mandala in its totality is unexplored hitherto. The need for this research also arises from an acute absence of scholastic work on the Peling tradition, (the legacy left behind by Terton Pema Lingpa, the most revered and famous of all Treasure- Revealers of Bhutan). Moreover, this tradition may also be referred to as the Kanying sect, a harmonious synthesis between the official state religion of Bhutan (Drukpa Kagyukpa School of Buddhism) and the oldest sect of Mahayana Buddhism - the Nyingmapa sect that is still
practiced in Bhutan today. This research also attempts to study Buddhist symbolism in the Kanying sect. While the purpose of many previous scholars has been to introduce Bhutan and Buddhism to their readers they have restricted themselves to merely dealing with religion in general or the political and socio-economic aspects of the country, the present study proposes to, as has been stated above, focus on the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/khilkhor of the Peling tradition with special reference to Gangtey Goenpa in Bhutan.

EXISTING LITERATURE: A BRIEF SURVEY

There is a large body of literature on Buddhism, Buddhist Art, and Architecture but, very little by way of a semiotic analysis of a mandala of what is known as the Peling tradition or the legacy of Terton Pema Lingpa as is prevalent in Bhutan today. Graham Coleman, John Blofeld, Andrew Skilton, Alex Wayman, and W Y Evans-Wentz have all worked on Buddhism per se. Tucci’s The Theory and Practice of the Mandala, and Chogyam Trungpa’s Mandala provide the doctrinal basis of the mandala/khilkhor whereas R F Thurman's The Architecture of Enlightenment is a more recent work in this area. The existing works of Blanche Christian Olshack, G N Mehta etc., deal with Buddhism in general or Bhutan as a whole. They take into account the total framework of Buddhism leaving out vital information that can be appreciated by researchers in semiotics. While O C Handa has worked on Buddhist Monasteries in Himachal Pradesh and Romi Khosla has talked at length about Buddhist Monasteries in the Western Himalayas, no such work has been initiated on Bhutan as such.

Four seminal works relevant to our work are Guiseppa Tucci’s, The Theory and Practice of the Mandala, Charu Sheel Singh’s, Concentric Imagination: Mandala Literary Theory, Venerable Chogyum Trungpa Rinpoche’s, The Mandala Principle and Denise Patry Leidy and Prof Robert A F Thurman’s The Architecture of Enlightenment.

Alan Houghton Brodrick has translated Tucci’s The Theory and Practice of the Mandala from Italian to English. Tucci begins by stating the aim of the book as something that will reconstitute, the theory and practice of “these psycho-
cosmogrammata" that may lead ordinary human beings into what he calls the light, but what may be interpreted as enlightenment that reveals the invisible forces at play in the universe and within ourselves, and that which might eventually enable us to reconstruct the unity between the two (i.e., the Universe and ourselves). He also mentions the fact that the spiritual background/ doctrines of the study and practice of the mandala is the same between those of the Hindu and the Buddhist tantric traditions. Mandalas may also be looked upon as “Complex arrangements of patterns or pictures used in Hindu and Buddhist tantraism to give expression to the infinite possibilities of the human subconscious.”

Tucci places the mandala at the centre as the symbol of this psychologically liberating experience. He defines a mandala as a map of the cosmos, “the whole universe....in its process of emanation and of re-absorption,” and as “a geometric projection of the world reduced to an essential pattern.” When the initiate meditating on the mandala, wishes to reach a state of mind in which an attempt to locate the unity of a secluded consciousness has not been diverted, and seeks to restore the “ideal principle” of things within himself/herself, the mandala no longer represents a cosmogram of the universe, but becomes instead a psychocosmogram. Tucci lays stress on the fact that though the mandala is born of an impulse, it is also a support to meditation. From here on, he goes on to describe a mandala as one that is to be drawn only upon a purified surface—a surface that is purified by consecration. The various processes of drawing a mandala, and the placement of the deities and their consorts, and the symbology of the mandala are also discussed. Tucci discusses the philosophical background of the mandala its growth and development within the Tantric practice and explains the mandala as the disintegration of the individual ego and the re-generation and re-integration of that ego with the universe and the self. Tucci also cautions that such a form can be given to the hidden possibilities only if the initiate knows how to interpret the symbols and symbology. The significance of the figures that the initiate needs to interpret in order to understand the full meaning and significance of the mandala and the complexities involved in constructing and designing the mandala are also examined. Tucci deals with
the transfer of the external *mandala* to the internal *mandala* or the body of the initiate, wherein the psychic life of the individual is reflected in that of the universe.

The Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s discourse on *Mandala* is another book that needs to be examined closely in this literary survey. The book comprises a series of 21 lectures that the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche gave in 1978. The *mandala* principle according to Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is ‘Orderly Chaos’, and includes the *mandalas* of samsara and nirvana. Not only does he explain the meaning of the *mandala* but he also provides a complete philosophical treatise through the series of 21 lectures and discussions that he held with some of his disciples. He explains the concept of the Five Buddha Principles, discusses the function of the *Samsaric Mandala* and describes the three types of worlds in the tantric traditions. He also explains the concept of the body, speech and mind *mandalas* and expands the *Trikaya* Buddha into the Dharmakaya, Sambhogakaya and the Nirmanakaya. He discusses the *Five Buddha Families* and analyses the ego and the intelligence of the practitioners of the faith/Dharma. In the discussion on *The Charnel Ground* he talks about the three *yana* principles in connection with the idea of a *mandala*. The first *yana* is the Hinayana, the second the Mahayana and the third the Vajrayana tradition and their relations to the *mandala* principle are also discussed by the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche.

It must be noted that these discourses are a series of 21 talks and discussions the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche held with his followers and is a transcription of the same. It, therefore, lacks the structure of a book on the *Mandala*.

The next book we must take note of is *Concentric Imagination: Mandala Literary Theory* (1994) by Charu Sheel Singh. Singh examines the concept of space. Space as enclosed – be it in architecture or religion – is discusses and the author looks at different meditative techniques expounded by Yoga and tries to link the creation of poetry with the enclosed space or *mandala* principle. The notion of the centre in religion, philosophy, architecture and literature is dealt with, while comparing the act of composing a poem with that of drawing a *mandala*. Singh examines the *Kundalini Yoga Mandala* as a manifestation of poetry creation and relates the different aspects of the
mandala with the creation of poems. Singh also compares the human body to a mandala and then to a poem, the symbolism of which forms the principle organisation of Singh’s book.

Singh discusses the result of the inter-radiality of the art-form that may be achieved through meditative techniques prescribed by Yoga and unearths the meanings that lie hidden in the symbolism of the mandala drawing, the cakra and in poetry. In Singh’s analysis of poetry as a mandala, philosophy, psychology, literary theory, Buddhist and Hindu theories of the Mandala Principle are all brought into consideration. Singh has tried to examine the mode of poetry writing and creation through the analysis of a mandala—two completely disparate genres, but yet, with very basic essential similarities. Singh’s work is a significant attempt at a fusion of two cultural traditions—the eastern and the western. While the Eastern tradition is that which pertains to religion and philosophy the western tradition relates to poetry writing, I call the latter the western tradition because Singh seems to be examining largely the western poets in this book.

Denise Patry Leidy and Prof Robert A F Thurman’s book, The Architecture of Enlightenment is a classic by all standards. Calling the mandala the best known of Buddhist iconography in the world, they explain the term mandala etymologically as well as ontologically and trace the Place and Process in Buddhist History and examine Stupas and the Development of Buddhist Thought as well. Having discussed the connotations of the world ‘Stupa’, and various types of Stupas, they move on to a description of the Cosmic Buddhas through the centuries and from there, on to the concept of the Pure Lands and to a description of the Mandala of the Eight Bodhisattvas. All the discussions are elucidated with pictures. Beginning from a general description and introduction to the concept of a mandala, the Diamond World Mandala of Borobudur in Central Java and the Womb World Mandala of the Shingon Order in Japan are discussed at great length. The history of the spread of Buddhism through the ages, and through the countries particularly in India is also traced. Next is a discussion on the Mandalas in Tibet, followed by one on East Asian Mandalas: Later
Traditions. The two authors examine the notion of Space and Sanctity not only in the mandala drawing, but also, in all forms of Buddhist art. They also point out that Tibetan Buddhist mandalas are structured in the “palace-architecture” composition. While some of these mandalas are composed of the figures of deities, the others are composed of symbols and still others are symbolic representations of the cosmos. Depending on the order of Tibetan Buddhism that the mandala represents, differences in style, composition, and iconography may be discerned in the mandala drawings.

Robert Thurman’s explication of the mandala as The Architecture of Enlightenment is of relevance for this research work. He explains the concept of the mandala as ‘a matrix or model of a perfected universe, the nurturing environment of the perfected self in ecstatic interconnection with perfected others.’ The world according to Thurman is revealed as a Mandala for the sake of human beings as a symbol of the highest evolution of humankind towards their own enlightenment. According to Thurman, the Sanskrit world manda was translated into Tibetan as dkyil, meaning essence/ snyingpo, as well as seat/ khri, mind/ sems, and even center/ dkyil. Moreover, the word la may be translated as a circle or a perimeter that contains the essence of Buddha’s teachings. He too relates the mandala to human beings as other theorists have done. He describes the mandala as not just an esoteric diagram but as compassion, as infinite wisdom expressing infinite love, as a gateway to freedom and a portal to the infinite.

What Thurman has tried to do in this chapter is to draw the esoteric tradition closer to lay human beings, even while describing its esoteric nature and its higher, metaphysical implications. From there on, he examines the mandala as an architecture of enlightenment, and explains the mandala principle as the idea that buddhahood is a perfected reality that does not exclude ordinary reality, thus, transforming others as well as self, community as well as individual, environment as well as sentient beings. He traces the origins of the mandala to its pre-historical Buddhism stage and relates it to the Rig Veda and other Indo-European religions and then goes on to talk about the varieties of the mandala that are used in practice and performance by Tibetan Buddhism. The secret initiations according to Thurman enables the initiate to practice
speech and mind isolation, self-consecration perfection stages. The wisdom initiation enables him/her to practice the clear light translucency Perfection Stage or the Mahamudra Stage. And finally, the Supreme World initiation enables the initiate to practice and attain the two reality-indivisible Perfection Stage or the Stage of the Union of the perfected magic body and the ultimate clear light. Having explained the four main initiations thus, Thurman moves on to explaining the Mandala Principle in Exoteric Buddhism. Thurman then discusses the mandala principle in the Mahayana Sutras and the mandala in the Tantras. In the latter section he looks at the initiation ceremony in great detail. He then talks about ‘the creation stage’ or the “Systematic creative visualisation that forms the stuff of vision into a universe of fulfilment.” The next stage to be discussed is what Thurman calls the ‘Perfection Stage’ or the stage where the focus is on the subtle realms of physical experience and mental awareness.

He concludes with a summarising section on The Mandala Principle in the Arts and Sciences of Asia. This book also gives excerpts from The Wheel of Time Sand Mandala by Barry Bryant, an Introduction to the Purpose and Symbolism of the Mandala in Tibetan Buddhism by Matthieu Ricard, excerpts from Navajo and Tibetan Sacred Wisdom: The Circle of the Spirit by Peter Gold and an Excerpt from Mandala Symbolism by C G Jung.

THE PROBLEMATIC

The mandala under study is the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala dedicated to Guru Rinpoche/Guru Padmasambhava, the great Indian Buddhist saint, who hid Termas in the 8th century, prophecising that various Tertons such as Terton Pema Lingpa would discover these treasures several centuries later. This mandala is drawn on the ceiling of the Guru Tshen Ghey Lhaghang at the Gangtey Goenpa in the Phobchika Valley of the Central Black Mountains of Bhutan, one of the seats of Terton Pema Lingpa.

The research is proposed to take off from what has been stated by Padma Tshewang, Khenpo Phuntshok Tashi, Chris Butters, Sigmund K Soeteng, in their book, The Treasure Revealer of Bhutan, by Philip Rawson in Sacred Tibet, by Geshe Alexandra

Even if religion is studied or dealt with and mention is made of Buddhism, being rich in symbols, no serious attempts have been made so far to analyse these symbols with the aid of semiotics. In this research, it is proposed to amalgamate the available data and information with the pre-conceived structures and notions of signification and explain the symbology of the *Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala* under study. It is also intended to highlight the culture specificity of the *mandala* under study. The chief purpose underlying this thesis is to ensure its difference from other extant esoteric works. This study will analyse the *mandala* and its organisation as a reduced model of cosmology, within a certain cultural framework. It is an attempt at comprehending man's destiny and will deal with the dialectics between 'nature' and 'culture' amidst other juxtapositions. The Buddhist theory of transcendence would be explained in the light of the discussion on the *mandala*. The history of *Gangtey Goenpa* will be traced very briefly in order to place the Monastery within the socio-economic and historical context of this research.

**RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

This thesis would be different from other research in this area, as it will adopt a different method for the study of symbols, and their organisation within the broader framework of the *mandala* and the monastery. The rites of passage are to be observed once again as a 'reduced model of cosmology', while the manner in which the structure of the conceptual universe of the *mandala* is constituted, would form the core reason behind an exercise of this kind. The theoretical paradigm being based on certain conceptual structures that, from a functional point of view are culture specific but will at the same time transcend all cultures. This thesis will also study all religious and socio-cultural activity related to the *Gangtey Goenpa* in Bhutan. This study will attempt to explore the semiotic relationship between the anthropological world and the cosmological universe mediated through the specific physical and spiritual forms
which function as mental exercises to transcend the physical reality within which a
given society operates.

The study attempts to look at the ‘system of signs’ such as ‘musical sounds, objects,
gestures’, etc and the ‘complex associations of all of these’ that actually contributes to
the formation of the contents of ‘the rituals and conventions’ and constitutes what
Roland Barthes' calls ‘systems of signification’. This study will involve a semiotic study
of a Buddhist mandala as the title suggests. It will adopt Umberto Eco’s definition of
semiotics as ‘being concerned with everything that can be taken as a sign’, and will
examine the Buddhist mandala/ khilkhor along with its symbols, the deities with varied
gestures, objects as a part of a larger semiotic ‘sign system’ such as an understanding of
the Buddhist cosmology. We shall attempt to look at the manner in which meanings are
generated; as well as the manner in which communication takes place between the
signifier and the signified. This study will also attempt an observation and an
understanding of how “reality is not only constructed but also maintained.” The text that
this semiotic analysis will examine is a Buddhist mandala – the Norbu Gyamtsho
Mandala/ khilkhor, a non-verbal sign, an ensemble of signs that have been constructed
and maintained in accordance with the conventions of the Peling tradition and Gangtey
Goenpa in Bhutan, within the larger framework of Vajrayana Buddhism. This study is
also concerned with not only the communication of meaning per se but also with our
own ascription of significance to things in the tangible world.

Though this study borrows the term ‘semiosis’ from Charles Sanders Peirce, it uses it in
the sense that Eco does to analyse a problematic wherein, a particular culture produces
signs (in the form of the practice of the mandala) and assigns meaning to those signs.
The meaning that is assigned to those signs is not an individuated process but one in
which the whole society participates. This study will therefore, also engage with the
socio-cultural aspects of signification and will adopt a holistic approach while
examining the use of signs and signification for communication. This study will adapt
Peirce’s methodology as well when interpreting symbols in accordance with the
convention or ‘rule’ or a ‘habitual connection’. 
SOURCES

The sources for this study are interviews with various Khenpos and Lopens. Apart from which the Gangtey Trulku will be interviewed and his opinions duly recorded. Besides, the extant work in this area will provide helpful background information on some sections of the research, as will some religious texts, the gist of which may be utilised. For the history of the Vajrayana tradition, the data acquired will be of a secondary nature, from the extant works of eminent writers, whereas the sections dealing with the monastery will be based on interviews and religious texts. The Buddhist Mandala under specific study will be the Norbu Gyamisho Mandala and will be understood with the help of the Khilkhor Lopens of Tashichho Dzong and Gangtey Goenpa and Dasho Karma Galely, besides owing its theoretical organisation to Tucci's Theory and Practice of the Mandala. Talks with the Trulku, the Khenpo, the Uzin of Gangtey Goenpa and Lopen Tashi Penjore, Mr Kunzang Thinley, Mr Phunthso (Special Commission for Cultural Affairs, Royal Government of Bhutan), Khilkhor Lopens and the people of Gangtey Goenpa.

The Secondary sources will be abstracted from extant writings, studies and doctoral thesis of various dimensions. It will also include, among others, magazines, journals and Internet postings and articles on Buddhist studies.

CHAPTERISATION

This thesis is divided into five chapters. The First Chapter titled Religion and Society in Bhutan will define religion and then examine the role religion plays in society. It will also deal with the history of Bhutan, the topography, people, religion, rituals and then move on to a discussion of Bhutanese art and architecture. From here on, the chapter will talk about the Terma tradition and of the biography of Terton Pema Lingpa after which will follow a brief history of Gangtey Goenpa.

The Second Chapter titled Mandala As A Reduced Model of Cosmology will, seek to locate the theoretical framework of the mandala/ khilkhor within the Buddhist world -
view. It will also trace the history and spread of Buddhism very briefly, and examine
the three yanas – the Hinayana, the Mahayana and the Vajrayana traditions before
attempting to define a mandala/ khilkhor which is read as a reduces model of
cosmology born of an initiate’s impulse and as a mnemonic aid the meditation and
visualisation of which will eventually lead to enlightenment/ nirvana or freedom from
the cycle of birth- death and re-birth. This chapter also seeks to highlight the
relationship between the two worlds/planes of existence – the world of samsara and the
world of nirvana and looks upon these two worlds as not two separate entities but two
sides of a coin, or to put it in the Venerable Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche’s words, “the
double edged sword”, the understanding and acceptance of which will eventually lead
to supreme understanding or gnosis/ nirvana.

The Third Chapter titled The Analysis of the Norbu Gyathso Mandala/Khilkhor will as
the title suggests examine the Norbu Gyamtsho Mandala/ khilkhor in detail from three
perspectives: one as a two - dimensional mandala drawing/khilkhor, two, as a loilang
khilkhor/ three - dimensional miniature and three, the monastery as the extension of the
blue print (that is the mandala drawing/ khilkhor). This mandala/ khilkhor is extremely
sacred both to the followers of the Peling tradition as well as Nyingmapa Buddhists of
Bhutan. For the followers of the Peling tradition, it is one of the Termas/ Treasures
revealed by Terton Pema Lingpa, one of the most revered religious figures of Bhutan
and for the Nyingmapa followers, this monastery is the biggest Nyingmapa monastery/
goenpa in Bhutan but also the only Nyingmapa monastery on the western side of the
Black Mountains of Bhutan. An analysis of the symbolism of the Norbu Gyamtsho
Mandala/ khilkhor and a look at the various elements that comprise the mandala/ khilkhor will indicate that not only is the mandala/ khilkhor highly invested with
symbolism and signification but also that there is no element that is redundant or
superfluous or even ornamental in the mandala/ khilkhor.

Chapter Four titled, The Conceptual Relationship between the Mandala and the
Monastery will talk about the nature of worship in the individual space as well as in the
collective space. It is important to talk of spaces here as the mandala is all about space
and the organising of space. It will read the mandala/ khilkhor as a two-dimensional representation of an extremely well crafted meditation methodology and will discuss the monastery as an extension of the mandala/ khilkhor or blue print in an architectural form/shape. The intrinsic relationship between the Monastery/ religion and the worshippers will also be studied.

The Fifth Chapter titled Mediatory Role of the Rites of Passage deals with the three important stages of our lives, the various social mores, religious significance and practices linked with these rites. Rites of Passage is, essentially the coming to terms of human beings with life and death. The rites that will be discussed in this chapter are largely related to the followers of the Bhutanese Buddhist tradition in particular but may also be looked upon as symptomatic of the rites of passage practiced amongst all followers of Tibetan Buddhism. These rites of passage also serve to provide a platform where the two worlds of samsara and nirvana coalesce. A reading of the rites of passage in such a manner indicate what this thesis is trying to elucidate – that, the main principle behind the worship of the mandala/ khilkhor is the attempt to strive for enlightenment/ nirvana and that without understanding or coming to terms with the world of samsara, one cannot comprehend the concept or nature of nirvana and that one cannot exist in the absence of the other. It also needs to be reiterated that both of them by nature, are also, extremely fluid and in a state of constant flux. Death particularly is a state of being that frightens people to a great extent.

The Conclusion Mandala as a Unifying Conceptual Construct serves to reiterate once again that all such knowledge and praxis that this thesis has been talking about so far is related to the Tantrayana/ Vajrayana School of the Mahayana Buddhist tradition. This chapter tries to examine the mandala/ khilkhor as a construct that unifies and brings under a common umbrella the vast and esoteric tradition of Vajrayana Buddhism. It looks at the mandala/ khilkhor as a signifier signifying the discourse of the enlightenment process. This chapter also re-examines the nature and worship of a mandala/ khilkhor.