

# THE LAMA

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## I

Tibetan or Mongolian Buddhist monk'—that is how the *Concise Oxford Dictionary* explains the word Lama and this no doubt reflects the current English (or European) usage. Phrases like 'Land of Lamas', or 'Lamasery' are coined on this meaning of the word. Yet in Tibet, as in any other Land of Lamas, the word Lama (properly transcribed BLAMA) is restricted to a few categories of monks and priests and is not used indiscriminately for all monks and priests.

The word Lama means the Superior One or "the one who has no superior" and is taken to correspond to Guru or Uttara in Sanskrit; a specific connotation is that one who can administer initiation (Skt. Diksha=Tib. Dbang) is a Lama. A Lama is thus not necessarily an incarnate (Tib Sprul-sku=Skt. Nirmanakaya), while any incarnate is not ipso facto a Lama. Both Tibetan religious literature and Mongol/Manchu regulations testify to the spiritual authority and temporal immunities of the Lamas. Not unoften these immunities were claimed and enjoyed by other ranks of monks and priests and this added piquancy to the politics of Inner Asia.

## II

The word Lama meaning preceptor or priest was in currency in Tibet before the advent of Buddhism and the priest in the pre-Buddhist Bon religion was as is still, called Lama. Thus no new coinage was needed to render into Tibetan the Indian term Guru abounding in the Mahayana literature, particularly the treatises and tracts on Tantra; there are numerous examples in Kanjur and Tanjur authenticating Lama for Guru. A historic example, and perhaps the first such, designating an Indian master as Lama is noticed in the grammar of Thonmi Sambhota, the reputed author of Tibetan script (circa 640). In his grammar Thonmi makes obeisance 'to all the Lamas' (bla-ma nam-la). Who are all these Lamas? They would no doubt include the Indian masters with whom Thonmi studied Indian script Indian grammar and Indian metres. Shalu Lotsava in his commentary on Thonmi's grammar identifies two of these Lamas as Devavidya Simha and Lipidatta and calls them Thonmi's "own Lamas" (bdag-nyid kyi bla-ma).

The label of Lama for a Buddhist priest in Tibet commenced with

Padmasambhava (circa 750). Appropriately known as Mahaguru or Guru Rinpoche, Padmasambhava not only vanquished the priests of Bon religion in encounters of miracle and polemic but also instituted an order of native priests for the preservation and propagation of the Dharma. The seven Tibetans ordained as monks by the Mahaguru are the first Lamas of Buddhism. They and their successors became the First Estate of the country and even monarchy took precedence after the Lamas. A royalist reaction allied with the Bon and launched a most cruel persecution of Buddhism. In desperation and against heavy odds the Lamas engineered a regicide (842). The monarchy was discredited; the royal house was divided and got dispersed while the Lamas grew in popularity and strength.

Without a spiritual guide an esoteric system ( Skt. Tantra=Tib. Rgyud ), as was the form of Dharma propagated in Tibet, cannot succeed. Thus Buddhism in Tibet begins with Guru ( Lama ) and the saviour of Buddhism in Tibet, Padmasambhava, goes down in history as the Guru. In the two centuries following the regicide ( 842 ) and the Buddhist priests, return to the Court, the formula for "Refuge in Three Gems" came to be prefixed with "Refuge in Lama." At the outset the refuge in Lama was for purely spiritual or moral needs. Being the custodian of the script (an import from the Land of Enlightenment) and being the organizer of the educational system ( all schools were monastic ), the Lama was destined to be the refuge in a much wider sense. On the breakup of centralized monarchy and on the dissolution of ancient land-holding, the abbot of a well-organized monastery would be the natural refuge for the common man in the neighbourhood. It is thus appropriate to note that government of the Sakya Lamas for about a century (1250-1350) was as much due to the internal forces calling for monastic leadership as to the support of the Mongol Emperors. The Karmapa Lamas also, though to a lesser extent, wielded political power in parts of Tibet before the rise of the Gelugpas (Yellow Sect) at the beginning of the fifteenth century. The Dalai Lamas ruled as Kings over all Tibet for roughly three centuries (1642-1950); it was admittedly the reign of Lamas. It is not necessary in the present context to detail the events of the Sakya, Karmapa and Dalai Lamas. Besides the complexities and niceties of the Lamaist polity cannot be handled in the space of this essay. It is however necessary to note here that much of the sectarian wars sprang from indisputable privileges and immunities of the Lamas.

In Mongolia propagation was first made in the thirteenth and

fourteenth centuries, that is, during the period of the Great Khans. Kubilai promulgated "a decree of two principles" laying down the relations between Church and State thus: "the Lama is the root of the high Religion and the lord of the Doctrine; the Emperor, the head of the Empire and the master of the secular power. The laws of the True Doctrine, like the sacred silk cord, cannot be weakened; the laws of the Great Emperor, like the golden yoke, are indestructible". The *White Annals*, a contemporary chronicle obviously compiled under the Emperor's blessings, records this decree. (The excerpt is made from Zamcarano; *The Mongol Chronicles of the Seventeenth Century* tr. Loewenthal, Wiesbaden 1955.) Several Mongol chronicles and the Tibetan chronicle *Hu-lan-deb-ther* (*The Red Annals*, Gangtok 1961) refer to the decrees of Jenghiz Khan and his successors confirming the special prerogatives of the Lamas. All priests were exempted from taxes, military service and manual work for non-monastic purpose while the top ones enjoyed precedence over nobles and secular dignitaries. The Church-State relations in Mongolia, under the Great Khans, recall the Brahmanical theory of relations between the Purohita (Brahmana) and the Raja (Kshatriya) as in the colourful portrait of Coomaraswamy: *Spiritual Authority and Temporal Power in the Indian Theory of Government* (New Haven 1942).

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the second propagation and the final victory of the Dharma in Mongolia. This propagation was made by the Gelugpas (Yellow Sect) and all temples and monasteries in Mongolia eventually subscribed to the Yellow Sect. By the middle of the seventeenth century the Yellow Sect became the central temporal authority in Tibet and shortly afterwards the head of the Yellow Sect, the Dalai Lama, became the priest and ally of the Manchu Emperor. In Mongolia thus the Lamas soon became the First Estate par excellence.

The Manchu Emperor Chien-lung (1736-96) in his famous Dissertation on Lamaism (1792), which he got inscribed on a marble stele in the Lamaist cathedral in Peking, said: "Buddhism originated in India and spread eastward ..... Its barbarian priests are traditionally known as Lamas. The word Lama does not occur in Chinese books.....I have carefully pondered over its meaning and found that *la* in Tibet means "superior" and *ma* means "none". So *la-ma* means "without superior" .....Lama also stands for Yellow Religion." (From Lessing's translation in *Yung-ho-kung*, Stockholm 1942).

The Lama was indeed "without superior" both in Tibet and Mongolia and the head of the Yellow Religion was the supreme "without superior".

The head of the Yellow Sect—the incarnation of Avalokitesvara (Tib. Spyan-ras-gzigs)—was the temporal ruler of Tibet. In Tibet he was known as Skyab-mgon Rin-poche (Precious Prime Refuge) or Rgyal-wa Rin-poche (Precious Conqueror). The Mongols addressed him as Dalai Lama. It is of historic significance that the Mongol form gained currency all over the steppes of Eurasia and the Mongol expression *dalai* (ocean) formed a prized loan-word in Tibetan language.

At the opening of the twentieth century the relations between the Dalai Lama and the Manchu Emperor had deteriorated due to fuller Confucianization of the Manchu House and the imperialistic designs of China. On the Expulsion of the Manchu (1911-1912), Dalai Lama XIII formally declared himself sovereign of Tibet by Command of the Buddha (summer 1912). Even then the Lamaist Buddhists in China continued to adore the Dalai Lama as the Refuge or Protector because the priest-disciple relations transcended secular or territorial loyalties.

In their first memorandum to the Tripartite Conference between Britain, China and Tibet the Tibetan Delegation described the situation thus: "Firstly, the relations between the Manchu Emperor and the Protector, Dalai Lama the fifth, became like that of the disciple towards the teacher. The sole aim of the then Government of China being to earn merits for this and for the next life, they helped and honoured successive Dalai Lamas and treated the monks of all the monasteries with respect ..... Gradually the Chinese Emperor lost faith in the Buddhist religion, and he treated the precious Protector, the Dalai Lama, with less respect ..... At last the Tibetans, driven by sheer desperation, had to fight, which ended in the defeat of the Chinese . . . The people of Mongolia and China send monks to the different monasteries in Tibet and also pay vast tributes to the monasteries. The Buddhist monasteries and other religious institutions in Mongolia and China recognise the Dalai Lama as their religious head ..... " (English text as that of Lonchen Shatra reproduced on pages 1-6 of *The Boundary Question Between China, Britain and Tibet: A Valuable Record of the Tripartite Conference held in India 1913-1914*, Peking 1940.)

### III

Tibetan scholars with knowledge of Hindu society would liken the word *bla-ma* to Sanskrit *brahmana* and *brahma*. The literary and historical evidence culled above no doubt indicates that the Lama's status was not inferior to that of the Brahmana in Hindu society.

The Present writer is not a student of linguistics but would venture to point out a few facts in this connection. It is not Possible to transcribe satisfactorily in Tibetan *brahmana* or *brahma* as in Tibetan *br* has the sound *d*. A Brahmin (who usually came from Nepal) was called *bram* (Pronounced *dam/dram*) and oftener *bram-ze* (Pronounced *damje*) after (Nepalese) Baje (cf. Sarat Das: *Dictionary* p. 890). On the other hand Skt. *brahma* could change into Tib. *blama* through dialects of eastern India. In the eastern dialects *r* often changes into *l* as Professor Suniti Kumar Chatterji amply demonstrated four decades ago (*Origin and Development of Bengali Language*, Calcutta 1926, PP 484-5). So *brahma* to *blahama* would be natural for the Mongoloid groups not adequately 'Aryanised.' These were groups living in and around Bengal and Assam. In parts of Bengal and Assam *h* is not pronounced with the result that in common speech *brahma* and *brahmana* are pronounced as *bamma* and *bammon*. (On the loss of *h* and aspirates in Nepali and Bengali see Chatterji: op. cit., PP 444, 557 and same author's *Indo-Aryan & Hindi*, Calcutta 1960, PP 111-113) If we add to this the fact that in Tibetan there is no short *a* and that every *a* is long *a* it is not difficult to accept *bla-ma* as the Tibetan for *brahma*.

[ In Tibet itself change of *r* into *l* would not be unusual. When Ra-sa (Place of goats) became the cathedral city the change of name was no problem. It was called Lha-sa (Place of gods). ]

[ It is relevant to cite here the suggestion of an Assamese scholar, Mr. Bishnu Rabha, that the name of the river Brahma-putra is derived from Mongoloid Bhullam-buthur (making a gurgling sound). Vide Chatterji: *Kirata-jana-Krti* Calcutta 1951, PP 47-48. It was not a one way traffic; if Sanskrit *r* could change into Mongoloid *l*, Mongoloid *l* could change into Sanskrit *r*. ]

#### IV

The present paper notices any similarity between the status (and role) of the Brahmana and that of the Lama and does not suggest any identity in the charisma sported by both. That question entails investigation into (i) the respective theories of salvation in Brahmanism (Hinduism) and Buddhism (Mahayana) and (ii) the mechanics of living among predominantly agricultural and settled peoples as in the plains of India and among predominantly pastoral and nomadic peoples as in the highlands of Tibet. While this task will take considerable time to complete, it may be stated in conclusion here that a Brahmana is born with the status while a Lama is not born with such status.