

# SANSKRIT ACROSS THE HIMALAYAS

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## I

It is a common place of Oriental studies that India has shared the heritage of Sanskrit with other countries. On purely philological considerations the ancient-most Sanskrit is the matrix of the speeches of more than half of mankind through ancient and modern times. On deeper philosophical considerations Sanskrit is reputed to have made profound impact on foreign mind, Mleccha or Yavana. The response to Vedānta or Kālidāsa of distant foreigner from Plato and Plotinus to Schopenhauer and William Jones has so much exercised the imagination of our scholars that the role of Sanskrit in the cultural milieu of our neighbours is often overlooked. Countries across the Himalayas happened to be most important acquisitions of Sanskrit abroad and yet more than the Trans-Himalayan highlands other lands interest Indian Sanskritists. This is despite the fact that India produced two pioneers in the field, namely, Sarat Chandra Das and Rahul Sankrityayana. I have no claim to be a Sanskrit scholar. It is only as a student of history, specializing in the survivals of Indian culture abroad, that I venture to present the contribution of Tibet and Mongolia to Sanskrit through the ages. The story of Indian Panditas and their Bhota collaborators is an edifying chapter in the history of Asia.

The history of Asia is a sort of triangular complex composed of Iranic, Sanskritic and Sinic traditions. Much of Asian history is the product of permutation and combination of the three. In Northern Buddhist terms, history is a process of flux and there is no set pattern in history except the *Dharma*; and strange are the ways of the *Dharma*. The encounter between Sanskrit and other traditions had thus no fixed norm in history. It is now well known that in the confines of Indic sub-continent Sanskrit yielded, in different ways, to Irano-Persian and Sino-Mongoloid encroachments while in the highlands of Trans-Himalayas Sanskrit most successfully encountered Iranic and Sinic traditions, both in linguistic form and literary expression.

Yet the Sanskrit which accomplished this *Digvijaya*, from Kashmir to Kokonor or from Bangala to Baikala, had no title to high caste; this Sanskrit hardly conformed to the grammar or finesse of what is called Vedic or Classical form. Buddha Śākyamuni is known to have spoken the dialects of the diverse regions. In short Buddha did not preach in "perfected and refined form" which happened to be the preserve of the Brāhmaṇa and the Kṣatriya. So Sanskrit, Vedic or Classical, was first ruled out "for the profit of the many, for the bliss of the many and out of compassion for the world". Yet Sanskrit and nothing but Sanskrit was found worthy and capable of expressing or expounding the Perfected Wisdom or Transcendental Learning. Thus the texts of *Prajñāpāramitā* and the commentaries and dissertations of the saints and scholars from Nāgārjuna (c. 150) to Atiśa (c. 980-1054) happened to be in

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Sanskrit which Brahmanical and Hindu scholars described as bad or impure Sanskrit. Recently, some western scholars have started calling this medium Hybrid Sanskrit. Nepali scholars and Vajrācaryās are also not happy with the label Hybrid as Nepal for centuries has preserved the learning enshrined in Buddhist Sanskrit and for a century now has been helping the modern scholars to explore the esoteric texts in this medium. The Buddhist Sanskrit had to be bad or impure, as conformity to Vedic or Classical grammar would have made the new lore more obscure and less open than the ancient one. The spirit of tolerance and the anxiety for adaptation, which made Buddhism the national creed wherever the *Dharma* migrated, accounted for the historic success of Sanskrit Buddhism outside India, particularly in Tibet and Mongolia.

## II

“The waters of Ganga made fertile the arid steppes of Inner Asia”. That is how a German scholar had described the great efflorescence of Buddhist literature in the sands and snows of Inner Asia. The Bhagiratha who took the stream to the arid north was in the grateful imagination of Northern Buddhists, come from Vārānasi, where Buddha Śākyamuni had turned the Wheel of Law. In trans-Himalayan legend the Sacred Lotus after it withered away in Vārānasi blossomed in Lhāsa, and the Master’s “body, speech and mind” made a re-appearance in the Trans-Himalayan highlands. Lhāsa in welcoming Sanskrit was no doubt sheltering the language of the Land of Enlightenment and Bod-skad (Tibetan) as the medium of the *Dharma* became as sacred as Sanskrit. The layout, content and presentation of Tibetan canon and all later works down to the last days of Lamaism have been such that a Nepali Vajrācārya proud of his country having been the refuge of Sanskrit learning has no hesitation to describe Bod-skad (Tibetan) as Lhāsa Sanskrit. By the label Lhāsa Sanskrit a Nepali Buddhist would not merely imply that the Tibetan script is derived from Sanskrit source but also acclaim that Tibetan literature preserves the treasures of Sanskrit literature. Much of the original are lost to the world today while most of the remnants in Sanskrit the world owes to the care and zeal of Nepali scholars during the centuries when Sanskrit learning in the Land of Enlightenment was in shade. Western scholarship would testify further that the monastic universities in Tibet and Mongolia not merely preserved the treasures of Sanskrit but also developed the Sanskrit traditions in their seats. Thus Logic and Metaphysics, Medicine and Chemistry from India flourished in Sakya, Tashilhunpo, Drepung, Derge, Kumbum and Urga.

Why the legendary author of Tibetan alphabet, Thomi Sambhota, did not seek inspiration for a script from the great neighbouring country in the east, has puzzled many Sinologists today. As the medium of expression in the Celestial Empire, the Chinese script had a sanctity of its own. Mastery of the ideograph was a hall-mark of academic and bureaucratic power inside the Middle Kingdom while beyond the outermost frontiers of the Middle Kingdom the ideograph was a symbol of culture. A barbarian speaking the Celestial language was a lesser barbarian and if a barbarian could read and write the script his access to power and privilege in the Celestial court was ensured. Besides dissemination of Chinese language and Chinese script beyond the Han frontiers was a fundamental principle of imperial statecraft throughout history. Thus the Manchu, the Mongol and even the Turki (Uighur) had to accept Chinese language and script for varying periods to

varying degrees and the vertical form was adopted in Manchu and Mongol scripts. An American Sinologist has therefore described the Tibetan escape from Chinese language and script as an inexplicable phenomenon. The truth of the matter is that the Tibetan speech is not as near the Han as many Sinologists presume. If the term Mongoloid is used in a wide sense both Tibetan and Chinese languages are Mongoloid languages. Tibetan is also a tonal speech like Chinese but Tibetan is not so predominantly monosyllabic as Chinese. Even if there are affinities, as presumed by some Sinologists, an ideograph established in one language is not necessarily adequate for the imagery and idiom of another. While linguistics and morphology conceal the secrets of failure of Chinese ideograph in Tibet, Tibetans have their own explanation for the success of Sanskrit *Akṣara*. Sixteen years ago in Tashilhunpo and Drepung I made enquiries as to why the pictograph was found unsuitable for transcription of Tibetan speech and how did Thomi Sambhota and his colleagues adjudicate the claims of different Indo-Iranian and Mediterranean scripts. I had in mind that the Brāhmī script was possibly an import from the west of *Saptasindhu* and that in the first half of the seventh century Kharosthi and several other scripts were prevalent in the regions west and northwest of Tibet. The answer of the Tibetan scholars was, however, as simple as the Tibetan mind. I was told that there was no need to adjudicate the merits of different phonetic scripts known to Thomi and his friends. The need for a script had arisen out of the need for translating Buddhist texts in Tibetan language. It was thus "a good act" or "a natural process", interdependent on the other processes of *Dharma* as in *Pratītyasamutpāda*. Thus the script had to be looked for in the same region from where came the Sacred Books. The process did not end with the *Svara Vyañjana* of Sanskrit or the horizontal *Rūpa* from left to right. The Tibetan book, though made of paper, did not follow the format of Chinese scroll but adopted the palm-leaf format of India. An honorific designation for a Tibetan loose-leaf book is *Poti* derived from Sanskrit *Punthi/Pustika*. Indic or Sanskritic sentiments for books and learning have influenced Tibetan mind ever since.

To start with, the invention of alphabet was treated as a divine gift as in Sanskrit tradition; Brāhmī was reputed to have come from the mouth of Brahmā. It is not certain whether Thomi Sambhota, the formulator of alphabet, devised his set of thirty letters from the archaic Nāgarī (Ranjana/Lantsha) or from Kashmiri (Sārāda) characters. What is certain and indisputable, both among Tibetan believers and modern scholars, is that the Tibetan alphabet was of Brāhmī origin. It is curious that while the words Brāhmī and Nāgarī were obsolete in many Indian vernaculars by the beginning of the nineteenth century, these words were current among the Lamas and other learned people all over the Tibetan-speaking world. A Sanskrit-Tibetan Thesaurus of 1771 from Kham enters the word Brāhmī with its Tibetan equivalent as the first item under the head "speech". This was undoubtedly following the ancient Sanskrit tradition. For instance, the *Lalitavistara* list of sixty-four kinds of writing begins with Brāhmī. It is relevant to point out that in India the term Brāhmī was a re-discovery towards the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to archaeologists and epigraphists. In Tibet terms like *Akṣara*, *Śabda*, *Vāk* or *Varṇa* came to be sanctified exactly as in India and each term was most meticulously translated to convey the different meaning under different contexts. The veneration for *Akṣara* as in traditional India was fully reflected in Tibet in handling of books as if they were icons. I was surprised to notice such usage in Tibet in 1955-56. A Tibetan book, even if it be on a mundane matter, cannot be left on the floor or cast away

like an old pair of shoes. The Imperishable Object, as the Sacred Letter or *Akṣara*, is the heart of the matter. Much later in Sikkim I had another experience. A signboard warning the visitors to take off their shoes while entering the temple was fixed right on the floor. The signboard was intended mainly for the foreigners and the trilingual inscription : Tibetan, Hindi and English, was my responsibility. On protest against the written word being on the floor I had proposed that the Tibetan inscription could be erased and the signboard left as it was. An ordinary man, who was not a monk or priest, protested that Nāgarī script being the matrix was more sacred than even the Tibetan. The signboard had to be raised a few inches from the floor but still today no Tibetan or Sikkimese would keep his shoes near that trilingual inscription. The Tibetan veneration for Nāgarī as the kin of Brāhmī should be an enlightenment to several Indian scholars who, having read Sanskrit in the Western seats of Occidental learning, champion transcription of Sanskrit works in Roman and would discard Nāgarī as internationally less honourable than Roman. I am not a linguist nor by any means am good in reading scripts obsolete in our country today. But for me the most important evidence of Indian culture in Sikkim, Tibet and even the Baikals has been the most ubiquitous presence of the Six Mystic Syllables OM-MA-NI-PAD-ME-HUM on rocks and boulders, *stūpas* and temples, prayer-wheels and altars; and I had not the least doubt on my first sight of Six Mystic Syllables that the Tibetan *Akṣara* was a *Rūpa* of Sanskrit *Akṣara*.

The Tibetan veneration for the Sacred Letter from the Land of Enlightenment was also expressed in calling the vowels and consonants as *Ali* and *Kali*, the two mystic terms used in Tantra but can be traced back to the Veda. The learned Tibetan unhesitatingly affirms that *Akṣara* goes back to pre-Buddhist times in Rig-jhe, that is the Veda. The adoration of *Vāk* and *Akṣara*, Brahman and Sarasvatī in *Rg Veda* and later literature needs no presentation to an assemblage of Sanskritists. What needs emphasis here is that Sarasvatī is the only Vedic deity and for that matter the only Brahmanical or Hindu deity who is held in highest adoration in Mahāyāna pantheon and therefore in Northern Buddhist countries like Tibet and Mongolia. While other Hindu deities like Brahmā, Indra or Gaṇeśa were incorporated into Mahāyāna pantheon simply as accessory deities aiding and serving Buddha Śākyamuni or other Buddhas and while even some Hindu deities were depicted under the feet of a Buddha or held in utmost ridicule, Sarasvatī was admitted as a goddess on her own right. The Mahāyāna veneration for Sarasvatī progressed across the Himalayas, and as Yang-chen in Tibet and Mongolia, Sarasvatī is the deity for scholars and laymen alike irrespective of any sectarian considerations. The Tibetan literature from Thomi Sambhota down to the twentieth century abounds with utterances and remarks about the significance and sanctity of Śabda Brahman.

### III

The translation of the Buddhist canon from Sanskrit into Tibetan has been universally admitted as the most scientific and yet lucid ever before the present day UNESCO programme. The national endeavour in Bod-yul (Tibet) running through four centuries may be best described in esoteric diction as the union of *Prajñā* (Wisdom) of India and *Upāyakaūśalya* (Ingenuity) of Tibet. Infinite wealth and refinement of Sanskrit had to come to terms with the originality and independence of Tibetan. Western scholars who have mastered Iranic, Sanskritic and Sinic languages have not discovered any

affinities between Tibetan and any of these groups. Basil Gould and Hugh Richardson—speaking, reading and writing Tibetan almost like the Bod-pa (Tibetan)—wrote in 1943 that “Tibetan is widely separated in vocabulary, grammar and mode of thought from any language with which the learner is expected to be familiar”. Earlier a renowned master of languages, Denison Ross, had admitted the same, though he felt that his mastery of Russian was complementary to his mastery of Tibetan and *vice-versa*. Knowledge of Sanskrit, which Denison Ross and Hugh Richardson had acquired before beginning Tibetan, did not determine the proficiency of such eminent Tibetologists.

To obtain the exact meaning of Sanskrit words and phrases Thomi Sambhota and his successors had first resorted to a servile imitation of Sanskrit layout and style and ignored the claims of Tibetan syntax. This resulted in monstrous compositions which misrepresented the potentialities of Sanskrit and denied the genius of Tibetan language. These translations were later on considerably revised or altogether replaced; a few survive in the manuscripts discovered from the Caves of Thousand Buddhas and other sites in the north and north-west of Tibet. In the later or revised translations imagery and idiom of Sanskrit underwent welcome Tibetanization along with honourable acceptance of native idiom imagery.

No effort was spared to probe into the etymology of a *Śabda* or to unravel the aphorisms of *Vyākaraṇa*. Pāṇini and later *Sārasvata Vyākaraṇa* were studied with the same zeal as in the Tols in India. Thus while each word of the original was rendered into its exact appropriate in Tibetan, the Tibetan syntax was complied with. For every translation there would be one (or two) Indian scholar knowing Tibetan and one (or two) Tibetan scholar knowing Sanskrit. For support to translators, compilation of grammars and lexicons was also taken in hand. For widely used or commonplace terms like Buddha, Dharma or Sangha uniform sets of equivalents were fixed by a central council of translators. The result of the translations from the time of Thomi (c. 650) till the propagation by Atiśa (c. 1050) were later incorporated into two encyclopaedic collections called Kanjur and Tanjur. Kanjur stands for *Buddh-avacana* and Tanjur for *Śāstra*. Thus *Abhidharma*, *Prajñāpāramitā* and *Vinaya*, the treatises of Nāgārjuna, Asaṅga and Dīñnāga or the latest Mahāyāna tracts from Pāla Bengal are all enshrined in these collections. But for this faithful and yet idiomatic translation many of the Buddhist Sanskrit works would have been lost forever. I need not recite the great Mahāyāna works recovered by Brian Hodgson and Rahula Sankrityayana or refer to the Gilgit Manuscripts read by Nalinaksha Dutt. I would however remind that Nāgārjuna’s *Suhṛllekha* or Dīñnāga’s *Pramāṇasmuccaya* are yet to be discovered.

Through such scientific translations and regular exchanges with Nepali and Indian scholars, imagery and idiom of Sanskrit became a part and parcel of Tibetan literature and later, when Mongols embraced the *Dharma*, of Mongol literature. This impact is noticed most in the art of dialectics, science of poetics, and historiography. Buddhist logic with Indian art of polemics and Indian logician’s mannerisms flourished in refuge in Sakyā, Drepung and Urga. For models of rhetoric and prosody, men of letters in Tibet and Mongolia invariably referred back to *Kāvyaḍarśa* and such works from India. Dialectics or poetics were, however, not much developed in Tibet before the advent of *Dharma*; therefore such Indic elements in Tibetan literature

were more in the nature of innovations than revolutions. For a true revolution in Tibetan literature one has to notice the historiographical writings in Tibet. In the beginning, that is, before Sanskrit made its impact, the annals and chronicles of Tibet were inspired by the Chinese tradition of Shih-chi (the Record of the Scribe—the Record of a Historian). The Chinese method of record-keeping meant a meticulous regard for events and their dates. The Indian tradition of historical writings, as will be accepted by this distinguished gathering of Sanskritists, was indifferent to mundane happenings and their chronological sequence. The victory of Buddhism in Tibet was eventually the victory of Indian attitude to objects mundane. Men of letters, including historical scholars, submitted to the Indian school of history. The Tibetan nomenclature for records, Yig-tshang, yielded to a new form Chon-jung (Chos-hbyung) or the Growth of Religion. As the new nomenclature suggests the content of chronicles, that is, the subject-matter of history, was now the *Dharma*, its origin in India and its growth in the Trans-Himalayas. The *Dharma* was eternal and everything else was transitory; therefore the story of *Dharma* was history *par excellence*. The ideal history was no longer the Records (Yig-tshang) or the Line of Kings (Rgyal-rabs) but the Dharmakahini (Chos-hbyung). The lives and thoughts of the saints and scholars, the doctrinal debates and the construction of temples and monasteries were now the stuff for the historiographer. Even then a strong sense for historical sequence and a high regard for firm chronology continued to characterize the chronicles of Tibet. It cannot be denied that Tibetan historical writings contained much useful data for history of the neighbouring countries. Tārānātha's 'History of Buddhism' abounds with legends and myths but provides some unimpeachable evidence where Indian literary sources are silent.

A measure of Sanskrit impact on Tibetan and Mongol languages is provided by the wide currency of loan-words from Sanskrit. While a most faithful and yet perfect translation of the entire corpus of Sanskrit vocabulary was achieved and even many proper names like Aśoka and Vaiśali were rendered into Tibetan, for academic as well as sentimental grounds the Sanskrit forms of certain words were preferred. Thus while Buddha, Dharma and Sangha or Veda and *Vijñāna* were always expressed in Tibetan forms, terms like *Guru* and *Muni* or Śākyamuni and Pāṇini have been used in the original form down to our times. Not that good Tibetan equivalents could not be coined but that such coinage could not satisfactorily convey the full context of the term. It will be interesting to give a few examples of Sanskrit loan-words : Om, Mani, Padma, Vārāṇasi, Nālandā, Takṣaśilā. Some Sanskrit words underwent sea-change in spelling and pronunciation. Five such loan-words common to Tibetan and Mongol would be - Ārya, Dharma, Paṇḍita, Ratna, Vajra. In Mongol there was a greater zeal to have as many Sanskrit words as possible for the Mongol translators rightly found that in the relay of *Dharma* from Sanskrit to Mongol via Tibetan the original context would be more obscure. A thirteenth century Mongol version of *Lalitavistara* is conspicuously punctuated with Sanskrit words. I cull here some as per transcription of Professor Nicholas Poppe with regular Sanskrit form in brackets. Duvaja (Dhvaja), Lakṣa (Lakṣmaṇa), Bodi (Bodhi), Dibangkara (Dīpaṅkara), Erdini (Ratna), Arsi (Rṣi), Diyan (Dhyāna), Esrua (Iṣvara), Kadali (Kadali), Tusid (Tuṣita), Manggal ((Maṅgala), Sarati (Sārathi), Vinai (Vinaya), Yaśodari (Yaśodharā), Sidi (Siddhi), Darm-acari (Dharmacari), Kumuda (Kumuda), Vcir (Vajra), Maqaraja (Mahārāja), Maiydari (Maitreya), Sarvaartasidi (Sarvārthasiddhi), Akas (Ākāśa), Citiri (Citra), Usnir (Uṣṇiṣa), Arata Kalmi (Arāḍa Kalama), Badir (Patra), Badmi (Padma), Samadi

(Samādhi), Maqamayi (Mahāmāyā), Siramani (Śramaṇa), Vayiduri (Vaiḍūrya), Gunamati (Guṇamati), Ratnagarci (Ratnagarbha), Ridi (Riddhi). It is not necessary to extend the list of Sanskrit words in the Trans-Himalayas. I need however record my most pleasant experience in the Baikals regions to hear the Buriat Mongols uttering the words like Adisa (Atisa), Bandita (Paṇḍita) and Erteni (Ratna) without any efforts in their prayers in Mongol and their talks in Russian.

If I tell a Lāmā (Mongol or Tibetan) that modern researches have proved that there are substantial non-Āryan elements in Sanskrit vocabulary and that such words as Candana, Daṇḍa, Paṇḍita and Bilva are probably of Dravidian stock the Lāmā would retort that whatever is Sanskrit is Ārya. If I argue further I may offend the Trans-Himalayan believer be he a monk or a layman, a scholar or a muleteer. I had on several occasions told Lāmās that in modern Indian opinion Buddha Śākyamuni would be traced to Tibeto-Mongoloid stock and not Indo-Āryan. Far from pleasing the Lāmās my statement was a sort of blasphemy which pained them considerably. To a Northern Buddhist all moral and spiritual values are from Āryabhūmi (Phags-yul in Tibetan) and Buddha Śākyamuni could not but be Ārya and the language of *Prajñāpāramitā* was indeed Ārya or Sanskrit *par excellence*.

[Acknowledgement : My own on-the-spot observations as well as the words of pioneers in the study of Trans-Himalayas provide data for this paper. All necessary references will be found in V. Bhattacharya : *Bhojaparakāśa* (Calcutta 1939); N. Dutt : *Gilgit Manuscripts I* (Srinagar 1939); N. Dutt (ed) : *Prajna* (Gangtok 1961); and F. W. Thomas : "Brahmi Script in Central Asian Sanskrit Manuscripts" in *Asiatica Festsehrift Friedrich Weller* (Leipzig 1954). In a recent paper entitled "Study of Sanskrit Grammar in Tibet" (*Bulletin of Tibetology*, Vol. VII No. 2) B. Ghosh narrates the history of Sanskrit grammar in Tibet down to the nineteenth century. Regarding Tibetan (and Mongol) sentiments on Buddha's nationality vide N. C. Sinha : *Greater India : Fact, Fiction & Fetish* (Bhagalpur, 1971) and "Indic elements in Tibetan culture" in *Man in India*, Vol. 49, No. 1. For an authoritative statement of Tibetan sentiments about Tibet's indebtedness to Sanskrit vide the Dalai Lama's address to the Buddha Jayanti Symposium on November 29, 1956, in Shakabpa : *Tibet* (New Haven 1967), Appendix.]