

TIBETAN STUDIES IN MODERN INDIA

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In ancient times and till about the end of 11th century India and Tibet had very active cultural and commercial contacts. With the Turkish conquest of North India and with the decline and destruction of Buddhist monasteries all over North India, active contact between India and Tibet ceased. Contact between the Buddhists of the Himalayas and the Buddhists of Tibet however continued as in the words of the Himalayan Buddhists "Lhasa became Varanasi". The trade contact continued thanks to the Himalayan agents and intermediaries. Tibetan traders and pilgrims, came to Varanasi and Vajrasana and good many of Tibetan pilgrims visited Jullundhar, Amritsar, Riwalsar, Purushpur en route Uryen, the mythical land where Guru Padmasambhava was born. Uryen or Udiyana is generally located in Swat or Suvastu, north east of Peshawer. Tibetan pilgrimages in North India also ceased in the 17th century. Thus in the plains of India knowledge about Tibet was rather meagre and mystic except for the trader families or scholarly pilgrims to Kailas Mansarovar. Tibet was known in India as 'the land of Lamas' and the land from where came the sacred fly-whisk or Chamar from yak tail. The only important centre for knowledge about Tibet till the last decade of 18th century was Varanasi known in its Urdu form as Benares. Tibetan traders would come down to Varanasi for exchange of wares as well as exploration for further prospects.

Modern India's contact with Tibet began 200 years ago when the East India Company attempted to shift the centre of Tibetan trade from Varanasi to Kalikata, that is, Calcutta. Warren Hastings, the first Governor-General of British India, made a grand plan for trading into the heart of Central Asia, that is, Lhasa and if possible, to reach the heart of China, that is, Peking via north eastern border lands of Tibet. The first Englishman to enter Tibet was George Bogle who

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came to Shigatse. the trading city adjacent to the Panchen Lama's monastery, Tashilhunpo. This was in 1774. The next English envoy was Samuel Turner who reached Tashilhunpo in 1783. These two British missions were possible because of active collaboration of merchants and pilgrims of India and Nepal. The leader of the team who advised and aided the British project was a wandering mendicant. This was Sadhu Purangir Gossain who was famous as having made a number of journeys across the Himalayas into farthest places in the high Asia. Purangir had visited Mongolia, Siberia and even Russia, west of the Urals. He was the friend of Grand Lamas of Tibet and Mongolia. Thus in seventeen eighties the stories of Purangir, Bogle and Turner revived the interest of India's intelligentsia about Tibet, Mongolia and such distant lands. Two generations later Raja Rammohun Roy went further into the Thomo Valley inside Tibet. These two Bengalis were the pioneers in modern India's quest about religion and culture of Tibet. Shortly after came a Hungarian scholar named Alexander Csoma de Koros, who made Calcutta and Darjeeling his seats for Tibetan studies. Tibetan xylographs collected by this Hungarian formed the first Tibetan collections of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta.

Fifty years later another Calcutta scholar presented modern world with detailed information on Tibetan culture and religion. This was Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917) who also had his base camp in Darjeeling and who made a number of exploratory journeys in Southern Tibet and Central Tibet. Sarat Chandra Das wrote and spoke on all aspects of Tibetan life and culture. His work covered Geography and History, Language and Literature, Religions and Cults and what not. His introductory account *Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow*, published in 1893, still remains a compulsory reading both for scholars and general readers, even after discovery of huge quantities of archaeological and literary materials in Tibet and places like Khotan and Tunhuang in Central Asia. Indian scholars claim with pride that Sarat Chandra Das laid the foundation of what is known today as Tibetology. The collection of Tibetan literature made by Sarat Das is also stored in the Asiatic Society of Calcutta

and have inspired both Indian and European scholars for researches in what is now called Tibetology.

As Indology stands for study of antiquities, culture and language of India as Sinology stands for the study of antiquities, culture and language of China, so Tibetology is an academic discipline to study antiquities, culture and language of Tibet. The main thrust in this study is, understandably, Buddhism as practised in the countries where the Tibetan language is spoken. This is an important point to note for Tibetan language is not confined within the geographical or political boundaries of Tibet at present or Tibet in the past. Tibetan language is spoken in various Himalayan states of India, in Bhutan, in northern and northeastern frontiers of Nepal, all over Tibetan high-lands and even beyond Tibet in the north in some places of Mongolia. Alexander Csoma de Koros had found in the first half of 19th century that Tibetan with its dialectal variations was the lingua franca over greater part of what was then known as High Asia. The linguistic associations of Tibet added to the religious associations make Tibetology an extremely vast field of study. Sarat Chandra Das worked on the diverse contents of this vast hitherto unexplored field.

The second great name and so far the only other great name after Sarat Chandra Das is that of Rahul Sakrityayan, a great Sanskrit and Pali scholar, who visited Tibet several times between 1930 and 1950. Besides Tibetan manuscripts and xylographs, Rahul Sankrityayan brought a good number of Sanskrit palmleaf Mss. all now stored in the collection of Jayaswal Research Institute. These Sanskrit manuscripts are the only extant copies of some of our ancient books which are lost in India.

The discovery of these lost Sanskrit works ranks Rahul Sankrityayan with explorers like Brian Hodgson in Nepal in 1830s and Aurel Stein in Eastern Turkestan in 1920s. Rahul was as great a scholar of Tibetan language as Sarat Das and with his background of Sanskrit and Pali Rahul made original contributions in reading the Mahayana

literature. Rahul was known in Tibet as the last Indian pandit in the Land of Snow.

The gain from the researches and publications of Tibetologists, be they Indian, European or Japanese has been great for the entire world. This is admitted by scholars of different Eastern and Western countries. The gain for India particularly goes much beyond the boundaries of academic learning. India, that is, modern India discovered herself much more in Tibet than in any other Asian country. The discovery was not merely the recovery of lost Sanskrit treasures in Tibet or the recovery of many lost items of Sanskrit learning. Modern India discovered that it was as much the DHARMA or Buddhism as the AKSHARA or Brahmi script which had revolutionized the life and thought among the nomadic pastoral communities in the Land of Snow. For India this discovery had an extra-academic consequence; If the knowledge of our ancient lore or tradition had something to do with our renaissance under foreign imperialism, that knowledge was no doubt based considerably on reports or researches of personalities like Purangir Gossain, Ram Mohun Roy, Krishnakanta Bose, Sarat Chandra Das and Rahul Sankrityayan, Both Gurudev (Rabindranath Tagore) and Panditji (Jawaharlal Nehru) most warmly acknowledged impact of such discovery from Greater India.

Thus when the current decade, that is, nineteen eighties mark the bi-centenary of Tibetan studies in India, it is relevant to notice an event of the last 25 years. The Institute of Tibetology in Sikkim of which the Foundation Stone was laid by His Holiness The Dalai Lama in February 1957 and which was officially opened by Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in October 1958 has completed 25 years of its active and fruitful life. It is thus necessary to highlight two principal achievements of this Institute. This is the first repository of Tibetan literature where works of all the four Lamaist Sects have been systematically collected and preserved under the same roof. This collection is one of the three biggest in the world today. The other two are at Leningrad and Tokyo. The three are bracketed as biggest collections and none can claim superiority over the other two. It is however

agreed that the Gangtok Collection is more comprehensive and more representative being neither dominantly Yellow, that is, Gelug nor dominantly Red, that is, Nyingma.

The other contribution of the Sikkim Institute of Tibetology is that through its publications, particularly the *Bulletin of Tibetology*, the Institute has expanded the frontiers of this discipline to its farthest limits. In nineteen fifties Tibetology was mostly a matter of CHHOS or religion and BOD-SKAD or language. Tibetology today is recognised as a major discipline in its own right ; it is not to be included within the contents of Indology or Sinology. The contents of Tibetology cover geography and history, language and literature, religions and cults, as well as aesthetics and icons. Prime Minister Smt. Indira Gandhi before inaugurating the Silver Jubilee Celebrations of the Sikkim Institute of Tibetology on 29 July last went round the Institute collections of art objects and literary treasures; and evinced as deep interest in rare and priceless manuscripts and xylographs as in extra-ordinary and exquisite images in different media. Tibetology, like Mahayana, is a many splendoured subject. Smt. Gandhi, in my finding, noticed with admiration the many splendours of BOD KYI SHES RIG, that is, BHOTA VIJNANA.

