

ON TIBETOLOGY

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The Sikkim Institute of Tibetology was inaugurated by Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru on 1st October 1958. It is thus relevant to talk on Tibetology this evening.

As Indology studies culture, history and language of India, as Sinology studies culture history and language of China, Tibetology studies culture, history and language of Tibet. As an academic discipline the expression Tibetology came into usage in the second quarter of this century. The statute incorporating the Sikkim Institute defines Tibetology thus: "The word Tibetology is used as a convenient and conventional term meaning the study of Chhos, and the culture and all arts and sciences associated with Chhos. Tibetology has thus linguistic and cultural connotations not limited to any regional boundaries."

The same statute defines Chhos thus: "Chhos in Tibetan is equivalent to Dharma in Sanskrit but is generally used among Tibetan speaking

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people in a special sense as the Doctrine of Buddha". This makes clear that the main thrust in Tibetology is the Dharma expounded by Gautama Buddha and recorded in Tibetan language. Most of Buddha's teachings and commentaries of Acharyas and Sthaviras are lost in Sanskrit and can be found in faithful systematized translations in Tibetan. Saints and scholars of Tibet, however, did not rest with the translation of Sanskrit works. They delved deep into the contents of both the teachings and the commentaries and made their own expositions. The contributions of Tibetan saints and scholars were not only lucid expositions of the original texts but also added considerably to learning and thought about the Dharma.

Being the medium of propagation of the Dharma all over Trans-Himalayas Tibetan eventually became a major language from the Himalayas in the south up to the Altai Karakorums in the north. The Hungarian scholar Alexander Csoma de Koros whose bi-centenary is observed this year had found in the first half of the last century that with its dialectical variations Tibetan was the lingua franca over the greater part what was then known as High Asia. Its religious associations combined with its linguistic associations thus make Tibetology an extremely vast field of study.

Alexander Csoma de Koros was the first non-Tibetan scholar to probe into the treasures of Tibetan literature. Csoma Koros spoke to an astonished modern world about the diverse contents of Tibetan literature. He unveiled besides those on Dharma and Darsana Tibetan books on very mundane subjects like medicine and geography. Two generations later an Indian scholar Sarat Chandra Das had opportunities to visit Central Tibet and study Tibetan texts on the spot with the monks and scholars in Lhasa and elsewhere. Sarat Das wrote on all aspects of Tibetan life and culture. He wrote on Geography and History, Language and Literature, Religions and Cults, and in fact revealed the depths and dimensions of this field of study.

The depths and dimensions of Tibetology are primarily because of two facts. Prior to the introduction of Buddhism Tibetan religion was Shamanism or Bon in which occult mystic rituals dominated; besides there was some associations with Chinese Confucian civilization. So contacts with Shaman world in the west and north and with Han world in the east have to be studied for proper investigation into the history or culture of Tibet. In the seventh century A.D., Tibet adopted Dharma and Akshara from south, that is India. The rejection of ancestor worship and pictograph

thus marked the Tibetan identity as quite distinct from the Han. Later towards the end of eighth century, Tibetans expelled Buddhist monks from China and banned preachings of Dharma by Chinese monks for all time. This completed the alienation of "barbarian" Tibet from "civilized" China. With the religion and alphabet from India came a world of learning and science which released Tibet from the closed world of Han pictograph into the open world of Brahmi phonetic.

The phonetic script provided Tibet with a key to translate not only from Sanskrit but also from Iranian, Arabic and even Greek writings. To illustrate this point I must refer to the development of Ayurveda in Tibet with additional knowledge of Unani medical texts, the translation of Aesops Fables and the exchange between Sufism and Sunyata. So Indology and studies relating to West Asia have associations or interconnections with what we call today Tibetology.

Within the time limits for this talk I can highlight a few treasures of Tibetan literature on which is based Tibetology. The progress of Indian learning in Tibet and later in Mongolia is well known. Not so well known is that Tibetan chronicles and historical writings throw much light on the history of neighbouring countries

like India in the south and Mongolia in the north and even China in the east. Much knowledge about geography of India from Buddha's time till the first quarter of nineteenth century can be gleaned from Tibetan works.

The renowned fact about Tibetan literature is that it preserves the lost treasures of Sanskrit literature. The translations made by bilingual scholars, that is Tibetan scholars with adequate knowledge of Sanskrit and Indian scholars with adequate knowledge of Tibetan, covered nearly three centuries. Such planned scientific translations are now admitted to anticipate the modern UNESCO Translations in which bilingual scholars with mastery of each other's idiom and imagery, grammar and syntax have to agree and testify to each other's satisfaction. From these translations modern world learns that many centuries before Hegel, Kant and Bradley Indian thinkers like Nagarjuna, Dignaga and Vasubandhu examined the question of God or Creator with a fearless mind typical of modern West.

The gain for India from the studies of Csoma Koros, Sarat Das and their successors is, however, much wider and much deeper than academic. Intelligentsia of modern India discovered some lost chapters of our ancient history from Tibet.

As we know the story of our past glory had much to do with the renaissance in India under foreign imperialism. Evidence from monasteries and monastic universities of Sakya, Lhasa, Tashilhunpo Kumbum and Urga contributed considerably to the recovery of our past and to our renaissance. Tibetology for us in India is not merely an academic discipline. It is of great moral if not spiritual interest for any Indian who cares for the past as well as the present.

I now strike a sad note. Tibetology as an academic discipline is not as valued in India as in the West. With a good number of Tibetan scholars now settled in India we should do even better than the Western scholars. Besides, one of the three largest collections of Tibetan literature is in India at Gangtok with the Sikkim Institute, the others are one with Oriental Library of Leningrad and the other with Toyo Bunko of Tokyo. But the Sikkim collection is far more representative and comprehensive than the other two. The Sikkim Institute has preserved the texts in a manner convenient to both traditional and modern scholars. Our direct photo-mechanic reproductions of rare Tibetan texts and *Bulletin of Tibetology* covering the diverse contents of Tibetology should attract greater notice at home. It is high time Indian Pandits and Tibetan Lamas jointly work again in what is now called Tibetology.