

Notes & Topics

UTTARAKURU IN TIBETAN TRADITION

The world in Tibetan written and oral tradition is composed of four continents on four sides of Mount Ri-rab. (རི་རབ་ Skt सुमेरु): Sar Lu-phag (གང་ལུ་ཕག་པག་པག་ Skt पूर्वविदेह) in the east, Dzam-ling (འཛམ་གླིང་ Skt जम्बुद्वीप) in the south, Ba-lang-chyo (བ་ལང་ཅུ་ Skt गोघान्य) in the west and Jhang-damini (ཇམ་གླང་མའི་རྒྱལ་ Skt उत्तरकुरु) in the north.

It is not possible, in the present state of our knowledge at least, to construct any satisfactory geography out of the available data about these continents. Besides Dzam-ling (Jamvu-dvipa), which was a firm geographical reality, the other three continents were, if not altogether fabulous lands, largely *terra incognita*. All information from Kanjur, Tanjur, other literary texts and oral traditions may be fitted *par excellence* into what Turrell Wylie designates "Religious Geography" (supra p. 17).

Ri-rab (Sumeru) for instance is a concept more useful and necessary for rituals and meditations than for travel, trade or even pilgrimage in physical sense. For location of this traditional focal point of the universe a modern enquirer has to trace a line stretching from Mount Kailas in the east to Pamirs in the west. From the data in Chinese Buddhist cosmography, obviously built on Indian Buddhist tradition, Needham firmly identifies Mount Sumeru with the Kun Lun Mountains (*Science and Civilisation in China*, Vol. III, Cambridge 1959, pp. 565-568).

For location of Jhang-damini (Uttarakuru) we have a few premises to start with. It was on the north of Ri-rab (Sumeru), that is, far north of Dzam-ling (Jamvu-dvipa). Dzam-ling in Tibetan tradition included India as well as Tibet. Therefore Jhang-damini (Uttarakuru) was on the north of Tibet as well.

Now if the Kun-luns be the Mount Sumeru there can be no objection to locating Uttarakuru (Jhang-damini) in the Tarim basin as Buddha Prakash suggests (supra p. 28).

The picture of Uttarakuru drawn from Sanskrit literature tallies broadly with that of Jhang-damini in Tibetan literature. In both, this is a paradise on earth: a weird land with a bracing climate and a kind soil; a people with promiscuous morals and high longevity. In comparison with the cold and desolate plains in the south (Jhang-thang) and the sandy waste (Samo) in the north (Gobi) the Tarim valley with its oasis townships and wandering lakes was indeed a paradise. According to Buddha Prakash the emigration of the Kurus from their northern home began in the middle of second millennium B. C. It is a well-known fact that even in historical times the contour and soil of Eastern Turkestan have changed considerably. There was more of water and less of sands in prehistoric and proto-historic times. It is not unlikely that the inroads of sandy waste began in the second millennium B. C. only and led to dispersal of the Kurus. Even with the present conditions Tarim valley is a rich land surrounded by less fortunate ones. Its crops include barley, wheat, rice and cotton. The fruits which appear at all tables are melons, apples, pears, apricots, peaches, nectarines, pomegranates, plums, cherries and mulberries.* Mineral wealth is not inconsiderable. The items which concern us here are jade-stone and gold from the Kunlun range. Garlands of jade and gold came from Uttarakuru to the court of Yudhisthira (supra p 28). Tarim valley was the meeting ground of races and cultures, commodities and concepts. Perhaps all this accounted for diverse morals and lax morals.

The Tibetan tradition adds a curious piece of information about the Uttarakuru people, viz., that this people possessed an unpleasant speech or coarse voice. Otherwise the Sanskrit tradition about Uttarakuru, the Tibetan tradition about Jhang-damini and modern travel accounts about Tarim valley (e.g. Menon: *Delhi-Chungking*, Oxford 1947) agree in describing the people concerned as strong and sturdy, gay and pleasure loving.

From the Chos-Jung (མ་ལོ་གཏམ་ = history of the religion) two important facts about Jhang-damini (Uttarakuru) have come down to us. (i) One of the Sixteen Arhats, Vakula, settled down in Jhang-damini to uphold the Sacred Doctrine there. (ii) People of Jhang-damini could become Buddhists

but were debarred from entry into monastic discipline. This second point is no doubt of great interest.

In view of their promiscuous morals people of Jhang-daminen have been all through considered to be unfit for ordination. They were in fact branded to be as unfit as the hermaphrodites, on the authority of Vasubandhu. བ་མ་མ་ནིང་ལྷ་མི་རྒྱུ། མཚན་གཉིས་མ་གཏོགས་མི་རྣམས་ལ། ལྷ་མི་ནི་ལྷ་པའང་དེ་བཞིན་ནི། (Tanjur, Mnon, Ku)

Presiding officers and abbots of Tibetan monasteries were rather meticulous in implementing this ban. Enquiries about a monk candidate's qualifications and antecedents contained a specific question as to whether he was a native of Jhang-daminen. An instance may be cited from Sakya Lama Phag-pa (1235-1280). A great proselytizer though he was, Phag-pa in his Instructions for Ordination laid down this specific question: Are you or are you not from Jhang-daminen? ལྷ་མི་རྒྱུ་པ་མ་ཡིན་ནམ། (Sakya Kabum Vol. 15. This reference has been traced for me by my pupil Mynak Tulku Jamyang Kunga). It is evident that, though today few Tibetan scholars and monks can make any guess about its location, from about 815 A.D. (when *Abhidharmakosa* was translated into Tibetan) till about 1280 A.D. (when Phag-pa died) Jhang-daminen was a reality, a part of this phenomenal world and not a mythical land.

It is however a riddle why people of Tarim valley or its neighbourhood came to suffer from such disability at the hands of Tibetan Lamas. One is tempted to add to this the fact that a Tun-huang document entitled The Religious Annals of the Li-Country even indicates Uttarakuru in the direction of Tarim valley somewhere in the Eastern Turkestan (Thomas: *Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents*, Part 1, London 1935, page 318, fn 11).

It is to be noted that the Eastern Turkestan was a famous Buddhist country long before Tibet became Buddhist. This land not only nursed and nourished Buddhism but was instrumental in its passage to China. Much of the Tantric practices—which characterize Tibetan Buddhism—was earlier in prevalence in the Eastern Turkestan. Yet ironically enough the natives of the land which had produced Dharmanandi, Dharmaraksa, Kumara-bodhi and Kumarajiva were refused ordination in Tibet later.

It is also a fact that Buddhism began its decline in the Eastern Turkestan from about 800 A.D. and by the time of

Phag-pa in Tibet (1235-1280) it had become an insignificant element in the Tarim valley. Even the community of Indian merchants (? Sartha/सार्थ = Sart) settled there embraced Islam and became the elite of the new Musulman population.

It is not unlikely that the Mongol tradition may preserve useful data for drawing a clearer picture of Jhang-daminen. The Tibetan tradition developed out of Indian Buddhist tradition and obstinately adhered to the ban for entry into monastic discipline in respect of natives of Jhang-daminen. It is to be noted that Mongolia, a country on the north of Tibet, did not suffer from such disability. The Mongol recruits to Tibetan monasteries (first Sakyapa and then Gelugpa) were esteemed agents for propagation of the Mahayana in a land where Shamanism, Christianity and Islam counted their priests also and where eclecticism was a characteristic feature of the people's life. This *Bulletin* expects to publish in a later issue findings of eminent Mongol scholars on Mongol tradition about Jhang-daminen.

The Classical writers (of the West) referred to a people called Attakorae or Ottokorus. Some scholars identify Attakorae with the Uttarakuru and locate them in Turkestan, preferably the Eastern Turkestan. This would place the habitat of the Uttarakuru on the north of Mount Meru. But the attempt to identify the Hyperboreans with the Uttarakuru has to encounter the theory of Tomaschek as developed by Hudson. This theory places the Hyperboreans in the neighbourhood of what is today Peking (Hudson: *Europe and China*, London 1931, ch. 1). Peking is in the direction of Sar Lu Phag or Purvavideha of Buddhist tradition. Jhang-daminen or Uttarakuru has to be found somewhere on the north both of India and Tibet.

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