
TALES THE THANKAS TELL

by Prof. Nirmal C. Sinha

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Prof. Nirmal Sinha's contribution towards Buddhist studies especially that of the Mahayanic Lamaist tradition is immense. Equally true is his interest in arts and a deep sense of aesthetic values besides his prowess and rather 'encyclopaedic' knowledge in the subject of Mahayanic Buddhist lore. It is the interest in the realm of arts and aesthetics in general and art forms as related to Mahayanic pantheon and revealed through believers' vision in particular that made him wander across the Himalayan and trans-Himalayan region extending through desert lands of Central Asia including Tun-Huang (Known as 'Cave of the Thousand Buddhas') important seats of Buddhist learning from Urga in Mongolia to Kham in eastern Tibet observing and studying the relics, monuments, icons and art objects of all varieties through the eyes of not only a connoisseur but with the humbleness of a believer and a devotee having faith in concepts otherwise seemed obscurantist to sceptics or the uninitiated. His latest work 'Tale The Thankas Tell' is a book dedicated to the memory of Jawaharlal Nehru on his birth Centenary Year and published by Director SRIT (Gangtok- 1989) is intended to be a "popular guide" for lay readers as well as specialists "about the scroll portraits of Tibet and Mongolia" and seeks to "present in simple language all aspects of Thankas". The book is a follow up of the earlier publication by the author entitled SANG-RGYAS STONG (An Introduction to Mahayana Iconography, Gangtok, 1988) and fulfills, though belatedly, the wishes of a great soul who was himself an explorer in the vast realm of human intellect, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. It will also go a long way in fulfilling the long felt needs of lay observers who are often bewildered at the splendid portrayal of figures, symbols and apparent riot of colours that these fabulous art forms reveal.

While acknowledging the fact that "The original and sole inspiration of Thangka has been religious more precisely ritualistic" the learned author traces the sources for the mode and technique of these exquisitely decorative paintings in the following words, "for sculpture or icons in round in Tibet and Mongolia, the dominant if not the sole, influence was from South, that is, India and Nepal. The Northern Buddhist pictorial art....drew inspiration from all directions... Iranian, Nestorian or Byzantine murals and icons on wooden slabs or on textile made their influence felt..... further into Tun-Huang, Lhasa and Sakya. Above all the Chinese aesthetics made a heavy impact on portraits on textiles, silk or shrine wall."

As regards themes, the Thangka "paintings from the monk artists of Sakya, Narthang, Tashi Lhunpo or Lhasa in Central Tibet, Chamdo, Derge, Palpung or Kathok in Kham, Kumbum or Pomra Machin in amdo and Urga (Ulan Bator) in Mongolia constitute a very valuable source of not only the history of the Dharma but also of the general history and culture of the different religions concerned."

It is indeed a fascinating turn of history that transformed as if in one stroke a whole mass of humanity into believing in the Supreme message of compassion as propounded by Gautama Sakya Muni, leaving aside their traditional hostilities and primitive postures, that too with a rare display of faith and perhaps the staunchest adherence to Dharma and the teachings of Guru Rimpoche.

More striking feature of this spectacular spiritual resurgence was its humanistic inclination and a spurt of activities accompanying it over a period literally extending for centuries finally evolving into a pattern of culture that sought to promote side by side with the intense religious pursuits such secular practices as art, architecture, medicine and craftsmanship of superb excellence. The Thankas bear the unmistakable imprint of this highly impressionable order; the spiritual content expressed (or revealed?) through artistic forms--transcendental bliss realised at the level of the immanent. The master concept of 'Trikaya' (Three Bodies) was the foremost principle that provided the basis for all Mahayanic art forms including the Thankas. The Thankas tell the tales through innumerable legends, myths, imageries and mystic visions, the ascending order of the Three Bodies; Nirmanakaya (Assumed Body) leading to Shambhogakaya (Body of Bliss) and finally to Dharmakaya (Cosmic Body), the Absolute or Shunyata. This is the essence of the two books produced in succession by the author with characteristic mastery over the subject matter and the readers will be well advised to possibly go through them together in order to derive full benefit out of them.

Lastly, a word or two about some shortcomings certainly not of content but of form. Firstly, the size of the plates are too small to facilitate any objective comparison with the expository texts following them. Secondly the cover design leaves a little more to desire both in respect of selection of type face for the title as well as the broad colour areas in red and white. It seems a distribution of some blue (Lapis-Lazuli) somewhere, would have been possible without violating the scriptural injunctions.

That the book dedicated to the memory of Jawaharlal Nehru has come out just in the Nehru Birth Centenary Year will be welcomed by all.

- H.R. BHATTACHARYA

The articles 'Sakyamuni's final nirvana' by David Snellgrove and 'Vaidurya' by Marianne Winder were originally published in the BULLETIN OF THE SCHOOL OF ORIENTAL AND AFRICAN STUDIES, Vol. 36, Part II, LONDON 1973 and GRONINGEN ORIENTAL STUDIES, Vol. 2, 1967 respectively while the Book reviews were published in SIKKIM EXPRESS, GANGTOK, SIKKIM (INDIA) Vols. 19 & 18, 1988 & 1989.