SANSKRIT ACROSS THE HIMALAYAS

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1

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-rooted Sanskrit is the matrix of the speech 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 minds, Greek and Latin. The response to Vockes or Kâlidasa or du Bois Frémiet has in different periods from Plato and Spinoza to Schopenhauer and William James has so much exercised the imagination of oriental scholars that the role of Sanskrit in the cultural milieu of our nearest neighbors is often overlooked. Countries across the Himalayas happened to be most important acquisition 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, Satre 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 Pandits and their bhuta collaborators is an edifying chapter in the history of Asia.

The history of Asia is a sort of tangled complex composed of Iranian, 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 not set pattern in its history except the Dharma; and change are the ways of the Dharma. The encounter between Sanskrit and other traditions has thus no fixed norm in history. It is now well known that in the confines of Old continent Sanskrit yielded, in different ways, to trans-Persian and Sinop-Mongolid encroachments while in the highlands of Trans-Himalayas Sanskrit most successfully encountered Iranian and Sinic traditions, both in linguistic form and literary expression.

Yet the Sanskrit which accomplished this Dhyana, from Kashmir to Kokonor or from Baigala to Rukhak, had no title to high caste; this Sanskrit hardly conformed to the grammar or etymology of what is called Vedic or Classical form. Buddha Shakyamuni 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 Brahmanas and the Kaphis. 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 Pratyaharamit and the commentaries and dissections of the saints and sages from Nagari (c. 150) to Atisha (c. 980-1054) happened to be in

Sanskrit which Brahmanscal and Hindu scholars described as bad or impure Sanskrit. Recently, some western scholars have started calling this medium Hybrid Sanskrit. Nepali scholars and Vajrayana 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 Buddhist 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 steeps 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 Bhagavata who took the stream to the arid north was in the grateful imagination of Northern Buddhists, come from Varanasi, where Buddhavamsi had turned the Wheel of Law. In trans-Himalayan legend the Sacred Lotus withered away in Varanasi bloomed in Lhasa, and the Master’s "body, speech and mind" made a re-appearance in the Trans-Himalayan highlands. Lhasa 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 Lamasm have been such that a Nepali Vajrayana proud of his country having been the refuge of Sanskrit learning has no hesitation to describe Bod-skad (Tibetan) as Lhasa Sanskrit. By the label Lhasa 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, Tashi lhunpo, 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 hallmark 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. Taus 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
trend of the matter is that the Tibetan script 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,
the 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 ideographs in Tibet, Tibetans have their own
explanation for the success of Sanskrit Akṣara. Sixteen years ago in Tashu-
humpo and Drungyü I made enquiries as to why the picturegraph was found
useful for transcription of Tibetan speech and how did Thonmi Sambhota
and his colleagues adjudicate the claims of different Indo-Iranian and
Mediterranean scripts. I had in mind that the Balhei script was possibly
an import from the way of Sangs-die and that in the first half of the seventh
century Khonruzhi and several other scripts were prevalent in the regions
west and northwest of Tibet. The master of the Tibetan scholar 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 Thonmi
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", independent on the other processes of Dharma as its Pratived-
muktik. 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 Sutra Viśuddha
of Sanskrit or the horizontal. It was from left to right. The Tibetan book,
though made of paper, did not follow the format of Chinese script but adopted
the right-left format of India. An honorific designation for a Tibetan holo-
leaf book is Priti derived from Sanskrit Panthi-Pustika. Indic to 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: Brāhmi was refused to have come from the mouth of
Brahmā. It is not certain whether Tibetan Brahmanism, the formal
alphabet, devolved his set of thirty letters from the archaic Nāgarī (Rajput
Lantaka) or from Āśokan (Gigada) characters. What is certain and in
 disputable, both among Tibetan believers and modern scholars, is that the
Tibetan alphabet was of brāhmi origin. It is curious that while the old
scripts Brāhmi and Nāgarī were obsolete in the Indian vernacular, by the begin-
ing of the sixteenth century, these were current among the Lamas
and other learned people all over the Tibetanspeaking world. A Sanskrit-
Tibetan Thesaurus of 1771 from Kham attests the word Brāhmi with its Tibetan
equivalent as the first item under the head "speech". This was undoubtedly
following the ancient Sanskrit tradition. For instance, the Latihanavali
list of sixty-four kinds of writing begins with Brāhmi. It is relevant to point
out that in India the term Brāhmi was a re-discovery towards the end of
the nineteenth century, thanks to archaologists and epigraphists. In Tibet
terms like Aksaryā, Pāli or Pāramu came to be inscribed exactly as in
India and each term was most meticulously translated to convey the differing
meaning under different contexts. The version for Aksaryā 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 1953-56. A Tibetan book,
even if it be on a noahman matter, cannot be left on the floor or cast away

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like an old pair of shoes. The Impeccable 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 Nagari 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 if Tibetan or Sikkimese would keep his shoes near that trilingual inscription. The Tibetan veneration for Nagari as the kin of Brahmi should be an enlightenment to several Indian scholars who, having read Sanskrit in the Western sets of Occidental learning, champion transcription of Sanskrit works in Roman and would discard Nagari as internationally less honourable than Roman. I am not a linguist nor by any means am I 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 Balkans has been the most ubiquitous presence of the Six Mystic Syllables OM-MA-NI-PAD-ME-HUM on rocks and boulders, stupas 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 Aśi and Kali, the two mystic emblems used in Tantra but can be traced back to the Vedas. The learned Tibetan unhesitatingly affirms that Akṣara goes back to pre-Buddhist times in Rājya, that is the Vedas. The adoration of Viśnu and Akṣara, Brahmā 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 Gan̄eṣa 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 Yangchen in Tibet and Mongolía, Sarasvatī is the deity for scholars and laymen alike irrespective of any sectarian considerations. The Tibetan literature from Thonmi Sambhota down to the twentieth century poohs with utterance and remarks about the significance and sanctity of Śūdra Brahmā.

III

The translation of the Buddhist canon from Sanskrit into Tibetan has been universally admitted as the most scientific and yet held ever before the present day UNESCO programme. The national endeavour in Bod-yul (Tibet) running through four centuries may be best described in ecstatic dictation as the union of Prajñā (Wisdom) of India and Upāyu (Ingenious) 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 Tibetan, Sanskrit and Sinoic 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 Bud-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 Thomya Sambhota and his successor had first resorted to a service imitatio 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 Buddhists 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 hitherto unequalled acceptance of native idiom imagery.

No effort was spared to probe into the etymology of a śūdra or to untrace the aphorisms of Vākaraṇa. Pāṇini and later Śānkarācārya Vākaraṇa were studied with the same zeal as in the Tuls in India. Thus while each word of the original was rendered into its exact appropriate in Tibetan, the Tibetan syntax was compiled with. For every translation there would be one (or two) Indian scholar knowing Tibetan and one (or two) Tibetans 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 Sanha uniform sets of equivalents were fixed by a central council of translators. The result of the translations from the time of Thomyi (c. 650) till the propagation by Atīla (c. 1050) were later incorporated into two encyclopaedic collections called Kanjur and Tanjur. Kanjur stands for Buddhist and Tanjur for Sāstras. Thus Abhidharma, Pratīkāprāṇamā and Vinaya, the treatises of Nāgārjuna, Asanga and Dignāga 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 Sanisiritya or refer to the Gilgit Manuscripts read by Naunakshita Dutt. I would however remind that Nāgārjuna’s Sarvadeka or Dignāga’s Pramāṇavācaucaya 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 Dharmas of Mongol literature. This impact is noticed most in the art of dialectics, science of logic, and historiography. Buddhist texts with Indian art of grammatical and Indian logician’s mannerisms flourished in refuge in Sakya, Drigung and Urga. For models of rhetoric and prose, men of letters in Tibet and Mongolia invariably referred back to Kārikāśāstra and such works from India. Dialectics or poetics were, however, not much developed in Tibet before the advent of Dharme; therefore such Indian 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-thang, yielded to a new form Chon-jung (Chon-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 Dharmā, its origin in India and its growth in the Trans-Himalayas. The Dharmā was eternal and everything else was transitory; therefore the story of Dharmā was history par excellence. The ideal history was no longer the Records (Yig-thang) or the Line of Kings (Rgyal-ubs) but the Dharma-mahāmi (Chon-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 neighboring countries. Tarānātha’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 Sanskrit words. While a most faithful and yet perfect translation of the entire corpus of Sanskrit vocabulary was achieved and even many proper names like Aksak and Vajrā 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 Vījñāna were always expressed in Tibetan forms, terms like Guru and Mani or Śākyamuni and Pāramī have been used in the original form down to our times. Not that good Tibetan equivalents could not be coined but that 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, Vārāhāra, Nālandā, Taksāla. Some Sanskrit words underwent sea-change in spelling and pronunciation. Five such loan words common to Tibetan and Mongol would be – Arya Dharma, Pratīta, Ratna, Vajra. In Mongol there was a greater zeal to have as many Sanskritic words as possible for the Mongol translators rightly found that in the story of Dharma from Sanskrit to Mongol via Tibetan the original would be more obscure. A thirteenth century Mongol version of Lallaśrīsūla is conspicuously punctuated with Sanskrit words. I call here some as per transcription of Professor Nicholas Poppe with regular Sanskrit form in brackets: Devaś Manjushrī, Lokya (Laksmīya), Rodi (Bodhi), Dibhākara (Dīpamāra), Īśāna (Īśana), Arjī (Arjī), Dīya (Dhīya), Erua (Iṣyāra), Kaddāl (Kadāli), Tuād (Ṭuād), Moga (Mūgabā), Sarati (Śaraiti), Vima (Vimaya), Yaśadāri (Yaśhabāri), Sidī (Śidī), Darnāci (Dharmacari), Kumuda (Kumudā), Vīr (Vīrā), Māqāra (Mārājāra), Māyadi (Māyādi), Sarvavṛttdi (Sarva-vṛttitādi), Aksak (Āksaka), Chitā (Chīta), Ćer (Ćer), Umer (Uśpa), Arata Kalmi (Arāda Kālam), Bādir (Bātra), Badmi (Badma), Samudr
(Samādiḥ), Maqamayi (Mahāmāya), Siramani (Śramaṇa), Vayūdūti (Vāyūdūya), Guṇamati (Guṇamati), Ratnagarcī (Ratnagārccī), Rūdi (Rūdhī). 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 Buriat Mongols uttering the words like Adisa (Aśīsa), Bandita (Panḍita) and Erteni (Ratna) without any efforts in their prayers in Mongol and they talk 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, Dāndā, Panḍita and Bīva 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 lama, a scholar or a muleteer. I had on several occasions told Lāmās that in modern Indian opinion Buddha Śākyamunī would be traced to Tibet-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 Aryabhūmi (Phags-pa in Tibetan) and Buddha Śākyamunī 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: Bhagavad-gītā (Calcutta 1939); N. Dutt: Gilgit Manuscripts I (Srinagar 1939); N. Dutt (ed.): Prajñā (Gangtok 1961); and F. W. Thomas: "Brahmi Script in Central Asian Sanskrit Manuscripts" in Asiatica Festschrift Friedelk Weise (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 Rakhahpa: Tibet (New Haven 1963), Appendix.]