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 (Skt रिब विश्वकोर), Sar Lom-bug (Skt लोम्बुग) in the east, Dzam-ling (Skt द्सम लिंग) in the south, Ba-lang-chyo (Skt भालंक्ष्यो) in the west and Jhang-dam-mchen (Skt जंघ दाम्म्चेन) 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 (Jambu-dvipa), which was a firm geographical reality, the other three continents were, if not altogether fabulous lands largely terra incognita. All information from Kanjur, Tangyur, 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 west 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 Civilization in China, Vol. III, Cambridge 1959, pp. 565-568).

For location of Jhang-dam-mchen (Uttrakuru) we have a few premises to start with. It was on the north of Ri-rab (Sumeru), that is far north of Dzam-ling (Jambu-dvipa). Dzam-ling in Tibetan tradition included Lom-bug as well as Tibet. Therefore Jhang-dam-mchen (Uttrakuru) was on the north of Tibet as well.

Now if the Kun-luns be the Mount Sumeru there can be no objection to locating Uttrakuru (Jhang-dam-mchen) in the Tarim basin as Buddha Prakash suggests (supra p. 29).

The picture of Uttrakuru drawn from Sanskrit literature tallies broadly with that of Jhang-dam-mchen in Tibetan literature. In both, this is a paradise on earth: a weird land with a tracing 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 (Samoo) in the north (Golgo) the Tarim valley with its oasis townships and wandering lakes was indeed a paradise. According to Buddha Prakash the emigration of the Korus 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 inundation of sandy waste began in the second millennium B. C. only and led to dispersal of the Korus. Even with the present condition 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 Kunfan range. Garlands of jade and gold came from Uttrakuru to the court of Yudhisthira (supra p. 29). Tarim valley was the meeting ground of races and cultures, commodities and concepts. Perhaps all this accounted for diverse morals and lex morals.

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

From the Chos-Jung (the history of the religion) two important facts about Jhang-daminen (Uttrakuru) have come down to us. (i) One of the Sixteen Arhats, Vakula, settled down in Jhang-daminen to uphold the Sacred Doctrine there, (ii) People of Jhang-daminen 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 consired to be unfit for ordination. They were in fact branded to be as unfit as the hermaphrodites, on the authority of Vasubandhu.

(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-damten. An instance may be cited from Sakya Lama Phag-pa (1238-1280). A great psephist though he was, Phag-pa in his Instructions for Ordination laid down this specific question: Are you or are you not from Jhang-damten? (Sakya Kham Vol. 15. This reference has been traced for me by my pupil Myat Tukia 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 Abhutharmakosa was translated into Tibetan) till about 1280 A.D. (when Phag-pa died) Jhang-damten was a reality, a part of this phemenal world and not a mythical land.

It is however a riddle why people of Tarim valley or its neighbors 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 Anceiv of the Li-Country even indicates Utarra-kure in the direction of Tarim valley somewhere in the Eastern Turkestan (Thomas: Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents, Part I, London 1935, page 318, In 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 Dhammarma, Dhammarakas, Kunarabodhi and Kunaraivre 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 (? Sarta/i.e.—Sart) settled there embraced Islam and became the elite of the new Muslim population.

It is not unlikely that the Mongol tradition may preserve useful data for drawing a clearer picture of Jhang-damten. 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-damilen. 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 Sakya 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-damilen.

The Classical writers (of the West) referred to a people called Attakore or Ottokorus. Some scholars identify Attakore 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 Tomasek 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 La Pheg or Purvavidheha of Buddhist tradition. Jhang-damilen or Uttarakuru has to be found somewhere on the north both of India and Tibet.

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