GILGIT (AND SWAT)

—NIRMAL C. SINHA

The previous issue (Vol VII, No 3) of Bulletin of Tibetology has a learned paper entitled "Gilgit in Ancient Times". This study, as stated in its concluding paragraph, "shows how important Baltistan and Gilgit have been in the political, diplomatic and military history of Tibet, China, Kashmir, Taxila, Gandhara, Afghanistan and North India in ancient times". Tibet heads the list of countries enumerated here. The reason for this is to be found in the cultural history as recorded in Tibetan tradition and not in the political history as narrated in Chinese Annals or in Sanskrit River of Kings. I thus propose to present the cultural relations of Gilgit (and Swat) with Tibet in ancient times.

Gilgit as a strategic summit is a comparatively modern affair and may be traced from 1860s when Britain and Russia were nearing each other in Jaker Asia. I have no on-the-ground knowledge of Gilgit or Swat; the nearest point I have been towards Swat is Taxila. For geographical data of Gilgit and Swat I depend on the observations of explorers and scholars like Alexander Cunningham, Frederic Drew, Reginald Schomberg, Clarmont Skrine, Olaf Caroe, KPS Nëmon and above all Aurel Stein. Inferences drawn are mine. For cultural history of Gilgit (and Swat), I add my own observations to the findings of authorities like SCHLAGINTWET, VÄNCKE, THOMAS, TUCO, DUTT and STEIN.

GILGIT LOCATION & AREA

Gilgit township is on the river Gilgit near northern latitude 35.45 and eastern longitude 74.15; Gilgit river joins Indus thirty miles down SE. A much larger area that the township has from time to time been known as Gilgit. Ever since the occupation of Gilgit by Pakistan the area, few scholars have been permitted to Gilgit. Arnold Toynbee visited in 1960. Vide Bulletin Oms and Java (Oxford 1965), pp 121-4. Toynbee however is not a specialist in Inner Asia or Buddhism. In 1965 summer, a specialist scholar of Tibetan-Burman languages, Richard Keith Sprigg was issued permit for Gilgit-Baltistan but eventually returned from Rawalpindi. That was on the eve of Pakistan's War on India.
For a description of Gilgit Agency of Kashmir State prior to Pakistan occupation, the account from the then current edition of official publication Abbassian’s tracts (Vol XII 1957) in range till British withdrawal in 1947 is excerpted:

"The Gilgit Agency comprises the following districts:—
1. The Gilgit Wazarat, which includes the Tulsil of Gilgit (including Singi) and the Subah of Astore.
2. The States of Hunza and Nagar.
3. The Ghuzki republics of the Chilas district in the Indus valley.
4. The Governorship of Pinnacle.
5. The Governorship of Yasin.
7. The Governorship of Ianbonan.

The Gilgit Wazarat is administered by Kashmir State officials. Hunza and Nagar enjoy an internal autonomy which is complete, and the other states varying in degree". These districts "have all acknowledged the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir as their suzerain, and they all pay him some form of tribute".

Gilgit Agency thus stretches from Biltistan-Tibet in the east to Swat-Die-Chitral in the west. In layman’s language Gilgit Agency is situated between Tibet and Pathan areas. The political boundaries of Gilgit Agency do not by any means suggest its ethnolinguistic frontiers. From ethnolinguistic considerations it is difficult to demarcate Gilgit’s eastern frontiers as its western frontiers. Eastern parts of Gilgit are in Tibetan world while its western parts are in Pathan world. In ancient and medieval times Gilgit was the transit post between Ilmuz (Tibet) and Shukutu (Swat). It was a transit post in both commercial and cultural context. Gilgit’s strategic importance is a facet of modern history. Alexander of Macedon made a push into easternmost Swat (Aziz’s Acreos identified with Pir par by Stein) but had no reason to probe towards Gilgit, though the land of Hyperboreans would be due north of Gilgit.

Though as a place name, either in Sanskrit or in Tibetan, Gilgit is not much ancient, the confluence of the rivers (Gilgit and Indus) obviously made it an important point from ancient times; besides
the site was a convenient stage between places in the north and the south. A part of the Central Asian traffic through the Indus valley would therefore halt at Gilgit. It would not be unreasonable to associate Gilgit with the products and wares of Central Asia (and Tibet) found in the prehistoric sites like Harappa and Mohenjodaro. In later times Gilgit was more important as a transit post in cultural intercourse of peoples. In propagation as well as development of Mahayana, Gilgit (and Swat) had a distinct role. Earlier Arab missionaries to Khotan possibly passed through Gilgit.

SINDHU 841

Among the tributaries of the Indus are rivers, Gilgit and Swat and the two adjacent valleys, so the westernmost extensive of Tibetan world till Mahayana came in an end first in Swat and then in Gilgit. For pilgrims from China, GaLZata (Gilgit) to Swatva (Swat) was the convenient route for entry into Gandhara. The “hanging passages” and “impassable gorges” of Chinese accounts may be identified with similar spots between Gilgit and Swat. Vide Petech (L): Northern India according to the Shui-ch’ing-chu (Rome 1936). The hazardous journey was obligatory if Uddiyana in Swatvati was not to be omitted.

Indus river has a special sanctity for the Tibetans. Of the four legendary rivers arising near Kałasa (Manasarovara), Indus is a constant mention and a firm fact. Vide Wylie (T.V.): The Geography of Tibet etc (Rome 1961). The river, or the valley, must have been Tibet’s link with Sindhu par excellence, viz, the ocean, from earliest times, ideas as well as articles might have moved between Indus Valley and Western Tibet. Avalokitesvara as well as Tara could have come to Tibet via Swat and Gilgit.

Avalokitesvara’s seat Potala, as described in Mahayana Sanskrit literature, is generally located in South India and is so corroborated in Tibetan tradition. There were however several places called Potala. One such was Tatta a town in Sind not far from the mouth of the Indus. Tatta as ‘potala’ (harbour) could be reached from Western Tibet via Gilgit and Swat. This port of Sindhu Sauria was earlier known as Patala and was noticed by Greek geographer Agatharchides (c.110 B.C.). A new name, with perhaps a new site, was al-Bayhu at the time of Arab conquest of Sindhu Sauria. Vide Hourani (G.F.): Arab Seafaring in the Indian Ocean in Ancient and Early Medieval Times (Princeton 1951) pp 18-13, 53 and 65. Potala (or Patala) was by then a mystic spot for
those who adored the sanctity of Sindh. For Patala and Sindhu Saunira in Saka-Kushan times see Raychaudhuri (H.C.): *Political History of Ancient India* (Calcutta 1957) and Sircar (O.C.): *Cinematography and Geography in Early Indian Literature* (Calcutta 1967).

The northern regions of Indus valley are also known to be the homeland of Tara; Ladakh, Baltistan, Gilgit and Khotsun are suggested as the provenance. Vide Hirendranath Shome: *The Origin and Cult of Tara* (Archaeological Survey of India 1975). I would add Swat to this list as Uddiyana was undoubtedly an equally famous centre of Tantra and Tara worship; Uddiyana’s antiquity was as great in Tibetan tradition as that of Patnak. For Devi (Tara) in Saunira see Raychaudhuri, op. cit.

UROGYAN उरोग्यान

Uddiyana or Urgyan is generally located in Swat valley. In Tibetan tradition the Buddha Sakya Muni made a prophecy at the time of his Nirvana that a much wider and a more powerful Buddha would be born in a lotus in the Bhosakotba lake of Urgyan. Guru Rinpoche Padmasambhava, who preached Tantrik Buddhism all over the Himalayas and in Tibet in the eighth century of Christian era, is admitted to be the same incarnation. As late as the seventeenth century pilgrims from Tibet did visit Swat valley in quest of Padmasambhava’s birthplace. This pilgrimage ceased altogether when Burhiam disappeared from the west of Ladakh, that is, from Baltistan and Gilgit. When active contacts ceased long ago Uddiyana became “a kind of magic-land for many Tibetan pilgrims” not unlike Shambhala. Vide Tucci (G): *Travels of Tibetan Pilgrims in the Swat Valley* (Calcutta 1949).

Like Shambhala, Uddiyana was “transformed into a fairytale of which the geographical and historical reality faded and decayed” (Tucci). While the historical reality of Uddiyana remained obscure till the archeologist’s explorations of this century, the geographical reality was alive in Pahari poems of later days. To Khushbal Khan Khatak, Swat was a paradise on earth, lovelier than Kahlal and more like Kashmir.

50
"In climate it is glorious, lovelier far than Kabul,
Bleak is Kabul, Swat is mild and gentle,
Its air and verdure are like unto Kashmir.
Though it spreads not out so finely;
In every home there are cascades and fountains,
Fine cities there are, fine dwellings, and fair markets,
Such a country, with such a clime and such streams,
Wherein every place is by nature a garden of flowers."

Trans. Caroe

BRU-Za ब्रुज़ा! ब्रुज़ा! ब्रुज़ा! ब्रुज़ा! ब्रुज़ा!

"Bru-za in Gilgit" is how Ladakhi chroniclers would locate another mystic land. Vide Francke (A.H.): Antiquities of Indian Tibet, Vol II (Calcutta 1926), pp 132-3. Gilgit in Ladakhi tradition would include besides Gilgit Wazzat, the States of Hunza and Nagar and perhaps even some western States towards Swat. A leading authority on history and culture of Tibet, Hugh Richardson, narrows down the area of Bru-za to Hunza.

Gilgit, spelt Gyil-grid by Cunningham and Gyigt-grid or Gyl lid by Francke, is derived from the river with same name also spelt Gying-yul. Francke: op.cit, pp 136-7. The river valley has no doubt several times changed its dimensions and terrain through centuries. As a link between Tibetan areas on the east and Pathan areas on the west, the river valley continued its own role till the seventeenth century.

Gilgit was also a link between Tokhar-speaking men in the north and Sanskrit-speaking men in the south. When in Kushana times Buddhism commenced its voyage across the Pamirs, the valleys of Swat and Gilgit were on the route. So Bru-za was a centre for propagation of Buddhism a few centuries before Buddhism established itself in Tibet. Bru-za, along with Chang-zhung and Li-yul, was an ancient centre of civilization as recorded in pre-Buddhist tradition of Tibet. Before the monks and scholars from Kashmir would begin their missionary travels for Khotan, Kashgar or Kucha they must have made Bru-za itself a centre of Buddhism. In this process many pre-Buddhist ideas and rituals might have been accommodated as did Padmasambhava later. Thus Bru-za, the mystic land, is celebrated both in Bon and Buddhist traditions of Tibet. Thus we are presented with the curious fact that
in the eighth and ninth centuries. (Christian era) fugitive Buddhist monks from Khotan as well as fugitive Bon priests from Tibet sought asylum in Brza.

Selmut Hoffmann has worked on the literature concerning Brza and a part of his work is found in his English publication The Religions of Tibet (London 1962). It may be noted here that both Ubbiyana and Brza are associated with the wanderings of Padmasambhava, that many Nyingma texts are known to be translations from originals in the languages of Ubbiyana and Brza, that some obscure contents of Kanjur are claimed to be from Brza scripts and that Sakya Pandita (1183-1251) had among his accomplishments "mastery of Brza idioms".

Tibetan documents discovered in Tun Tsung contain significant references to Brza. Yaol Thomas (F.W.), Tibetan Literary Texts and Documents Concerning Chinese Tibetian & Yuls (London 1935-1951) The Prophecy of Samghadrakani says that the monks of Tibet and Kashmir being vexed by unbelieving will go to the Brza country. The Mirror depicting the Royal Lineage refers to the Bon priests of Brza and Zhang Zhung. Some references suggest that Brza might have extended to Khotan for sometime. There is also reference to Padmasambhava's visit to Brza.

GILGIT MANUSCRIPTS

Discovery of archaeological objects and antiquities in the State of Jammu and Kashmir began towards the end of the nineteenth century. An account of the archaeological explorations and preserved monuments till 1938 will be found in Kauk (R.C.), Ancient Monuments of Kashmir (London 1939).

The discovery of the Gilgit Manuscripts was announced by Mr. Aurel Stein in the Calcutta Statesman on 24 July 1931. Some shepherds "watching flocks above Naupur village, about two miles west of Gilgit Cantonment, one said to have cleared a piece of timber sticking out on the top of a small stone-covered mound. Further digging laid bare a circular chamber within the ruins of a Buddhist stupa filled with hundreds of small votive stupas and relief plaques common in Central Asia and Tibet... In the course of the excavation a great mass of ancient manuscripts came to light closely packed in what appears to have been a wooden box... The paleographic indications of some of the manuscripts suggest that they may date back to the sixth century A.D."

52
The great savant Sylvain Levi evinced much interest in this discovery and another Central Asian antiquarian Hackin visited the spot of finds. The Prime Minister of Jammu and Kashmir, Dewan Baladutt (later Sir) Gopalaswamy Ayyar, entrusted Professor Nalinaksha Dutt, the eminent Buddhist scholar of Calcutta University, with the work of deciphering and publishing the manuscripts. Dutt's work came out in eight books, Gilgit Manuscripts (Srinagar 1939-Calcutta 1939). The contents, with extensive notes, constitute an important source for the history of Buddhism, particularly about the interrelation between Mahayana and Hinayana before the spread of Buddhism in Tibet.

It is reported that the Government of Pakistan found several manuscripts after its occupation of Baltistan and Gilgit. Pakistan archaeologists having no interest in reading such manuscripts, these new finds were handed over to the Instituto Italiano per il Medio e l'Estremo Oriente in Rome. Dr Edward Come has edited some.

NOT FOR SILK

In medieval times Gilgit lost much of its importance as a trade post.

There is a current notion that both in ancient and medieval times Gilgit was a point on the famous Silk Road. This notion is altogether due to a misconception about Silk Road; the caravan routes branching out of the Silk Road are often erroneously called Silk Roads. Gilgit-Kashgar (and Yarkand) road was a southern feeder of the Silk Road which crossed through Yarkistan, without detour, between Turan (i.e., Turkestan) in the east and Marakanda (Samarkand) in the west. Gilgit-Kashgar (and Yarkand) road thrived on wool, dry fruits and silk. Even then Gilgit was not attractive to the British traders in the first half of the nineteenth century. In the opinion of an Indian authority on the British Period of Indian history, explorations of Moorcroft and Trebeck in the Western Himalayas did not promise as much as the earlier probes of Bogle and Turner in the Eastern Himalayas. Vide Sinha (Narendra Krishna): The Economic History of Bengal 1752-1848, Vol III (Calcutta 1970), p 50. Right from beginning the British probes for trade across the Himalayas were, in my submission, intended to reach China overland. If Gilgit was on the Silk Road, the East India Company and later the British Crown would not have ignored an opening through Gilgit, Kashgar and Yarkand. Instead the British authorities in India engaged in a systematic penetration through Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan for trade.
with China. Much information on this aspect of Anglo-Chinese relations from the middle of the nineteenth century will be found in the forthcoming works of two young scholars of Calcutta University: Arabinda Deb and Jabbar Sen. I need not anticipate their findings here in my words. I would however emphasize that Gilgit gained importance in British esteem in the second half of the nineteenth century for strategic reasons and not as an ancient post on the Silk Road.

Russian expansion in Turkestan, followed by Russian visitors to the Pamirs, was not a welcome situation for the British Empire in Asia. In addition to the Resident for Jammu & Kashmir at Srinagar, the British stationed in 1935 an Agent at Gilgit and developed the roads towards Swat-Dir-Chitral. Kashmir and Yarkand routes were also developed. In 1935 a Special Assistant to the Resident for Jammu & Kashmir was stationed in Kashmir. In 1934 the post was upgraded to His Britannic Majesty’s Consul; in 1941 redesignated as Consul General. The Consulate at Kashgar continued till the British withdrawal from India.

From 1893 to 1943 Gilgit flourished as a transit post for Central Asian trade but never lost its strategic value. Gilgit was useful for obscure, though disreputable, purpose also. In the third decade of this century, the tribal gunsmen in the pay of His Britannic Majesty’s Consul General, roamed through Swat and Gilgit, British arms for the Chinese Governor of Sinkiang. These arms were used to suppress the native Moslem rebellion against the Chinese rule. The Gilgit highway had then become so strategic that in 1935 the Maharaja of Jammu & Kashmir was obliged to grant a sixty years’ lease of Gilgit Agency to the British Crown.

In 1947-48 Pakistan invaded and occupied Gilgit and Baltistan. The raiders came from Swat-Dir-Chitral following the ancient tracks improved by the British. The contending World Powers in the Cold War promptly recognized Gilgit as a strategic summit. Its Tibetan past is now recalled in the usage Chos for Islam to certain dialects of Gilgit ans Baltistan.

For modern history of Gilgit see Fisher (M.W.), Rose (L.E.) and Hurtenback (R.A.): Himalayan Battleground (New York 1963) and Buzait (P.N.K.): A History of Kashmir (Deli 1963). For ancient history, the monumental works of Aurel Stein are the indispensable authority; two particularly The Route of Desert Cathay (London 1912) and Numism Ans (London 1918) describe the routes and passes in a