SANSKRIT ACROSS THE HIMALAYAS
—NIRMAL C. SINHA

I

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-most Sanskrit is the matrix of the speeches 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 mind, Mleccha or Yavana. The response to Vedanta or Kalidaas of distant foreigner from Plato and Plutarch to Schopenhauer and William Jones has so much exercised the imagination of our scholars that the role of Sanskrit in the cultural milieu of our neighbours is often overlooked. Countries across the Himalayas happened to be most important acquisitions 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, Sarat Chandra Das and Raul Sankritayana. 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 Panditas and their Bhota collaborators is an edifying chapter in the history of Asia.

The history of Asia is a sort of triangular complex composed of Indian, Sanskritite 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 no set pattern in history except the Dharma: and strange are the ways of the Dharma. The encounter between Sanskrit and other traditions had thus no fixed norm in history. It is now well known that in the confines of Indic sub-continent Sanskrit yielded, in different ways, to Iranian-Persian and Sino-Mongoloid encroachments while in the highlands of Trans-Himalaya Sanskrit most successfully encountered Iranian and Sinic traditions, both in linguistic form and literary expression.

Yet the Sanskrit which accomplished this Dvariyata, from Kashmir to Kokonor or from Bengal to Bakuila, hadock to high caste; this Sanskrit hardly conformed to the grammar or finesse of what is called Vedic or Classical form. Buddha Sakyamuni 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 Brāhmaṇa and the Kaśyapa. 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 Prājñāpāramitā and the commentaries and dissertations of the saints and scholars from Nāgājuna (c. 150) to Atīśa (c. 980-1054) happened to be in


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Sanskrit which Brahmans and Hindu scholars described as bad or impure Sanskrit. Recently, some western scholars have started calling this medium Hybrid Sanskrit. Nepali scholars and Vajrayānas are also not happy with the label Hybrid as Nepal for centuries has preserved the learning environment 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 cumbersome and less open than the ancient one. The spirit of tolerance and the anxiety for adaptation, which made Buddhism the rational creed wherever the Dharma migrated, accounted for the historic success of Sanskrit Buddhism outside India, particularly in Tibet and Mongolia.

II

"The waters of Gangā made fertile the arid steppes 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 Bhagirathā who took the stream to the arid north was in the grateful imagination of Northern Buddhists, come from Vārānasī, where Buddha Sākyamuni had turned the Wheel of Law. In trans-Himalayan legend the Sacred Lotus after it withered away in Vārānasī blossomed in Lhāsa, and the Master's "body, speech and mind" made a reappearance in the Trans-Himalayan highlands. Lhāsa 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 Lamaism have been such that a Nepali Vajrādārya proud of his country having been the refuge of Sanskrit learning has no hesitation to describe Bod-skad (Tibetan) as Lhāsa Sanskrit. By the label Lhāsa 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 is 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 flowered in Sakya, Tashilhunpo, Drepung, Derge, Kumbum and Urga.

Why the legendary author of Tibetan alphabet, Thonmi 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. Thus 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 Mancha and Mongol scripts. An American Sinologist has therefore described the Tibetan escape from Chinese language and script as an inexplicable phenomenon. The truth of the matter is that the Tibetan speech is not as near the Han as many Sinologists presume. If the term MongoloTibetan is used in a wide sense both Tibetan and Chinese languages are MongoloTibetan languages. Tibetan is also a total speech like Chinese but Tibetan is not so predominantly monosyllabic as Chinese. Even if there are affinities, as presumed by some Sinologists, an 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 ideograph in Tibet, Tibetans have their own explanation for the success of Sanskrit Aksara. Sixteen years ago in Tashilhunpo and Drepung I made enquiries as to why the pictograph was found unsuitable for transcription of Tibetan speech and how did Thami Sambhota and his colleagues adjudicate the claims of different Indo-Iranian and Mediterranean scripts. I had in mind that the Brāhmi script was possibly an import from the west of Saptasindu and that in the first half of the seventh century Kharoshthi and several other scripts were prevalent in the region west and northwest of Tibet. The answer of the Tibetan scholars 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 Thami and his friends. The need for a script had arisen out of the need for translating Buddhist texts into Tibetan language. It was thus “a good act” or “a natural process”, independent on the other processes of Dharma as in Pratityasamutpāda. Thus the script had to be looked for in the same region from where came the Scribed Books. The process did not end with the Svāra Prakṛtga of Sanskrit or the horizontal Rāpa from left to right. The Tibetan book, though made of paper, did not follow the format of Chinese scroll but adopted the palm-leaf format of India. An honorific designation for a Tibetan loose-leaf book is Poti derived from Sanskrit Pānti/Pancta. Indic or Sanskrit 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 reputed to have come from the mouth of Brahmā. It is not certain whether Thomi Sambhota, the reformulator of alphabet, devised his set of thirty letters from the archaic Nāgari (Rajana Lantha) or from Kashmiri (Sarada) characters. What is certain and indisputable, both among Tibetan believers and modern scholars, is that the Tibetan alphabet was of Brāhmi origin. It is curious that while the words Brāhmi and Nāgari were obsolete in many Indian vernaculars by the beginning of the nineteenth century, these words were current among the Laṅkā and other learned people all over the Tibetan-speaking world. A Sanskrit-Tibetan Thesaurus of 177 from Kham refers the word Brāhmi with its Tibetan equivalent as the first item under the head “speech”. This was undoubtably following the ancient Sanskrit tradition. For instance, the Lalitavistara lists many similar kinds of writing begins with Brāhmi. It is relevant to point out that in India the term Brāhmi was a re-discovery towards the middle of the nineteenth century, thanks to archaeologists and epigraphists. In Tibet terms like Aksara, Sāhita, Vik or Varpa came to be sanctified exactly as in India and each term was most maliciously translated to convey the different meaning under different contexts. The generation for Aksara 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 1955-56. A Tibetan book, even if it be on a mundane matter, cannot be left on the floor or cast away.
like an old pair of shoes. The Imperishable 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 Nāgari 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 no Tibetan or Sikkimese would keep his shoes near that trilingual inscription. The Tibetan veneration for Nāgari as the kin of Brahmi should be an enlightenment to several Indian scholars who, having read Sanskrit in the Western seats of Occidental learning, champion transcription of Sanskrit works in Roman and would discard Nāgari as internationally less honourable than Roman. I am not a linguist nor by any means am good in reading scripts obsolete in our country today. But for the most important evidence of Indian culture in Sikkim, Tibet and even the Bhiksalhas 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 Rāpa 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 Ai and Ku, the two mystic terms used in Tantric but can be traced back to the Veda. The learned Tibetan unhesitatingly affirms that Akṣara goes back to pre-Buddhist times in Rig-pha, that is the Veda. The adoration of Viś and Akṣara, Brahmān and Sarasvati in Rig Veda and later literature needs no presentation to an assemblage of Sanskritists. What needs emphasis here is that Sarasvati 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 Brahmad, Indra or Ganeśa were incorporated into Mahāyāna pantheon simply as accessory deities aiding and serving Buddha Siddhārtha or other Buddhas and while even some Hindu deities were depicted under the feet of a Buddha or held in utmost ridicule, Sarasvati was adored as a goddess on her own right. The Mahāyāna veneration for Sarasvati progressed across the Himalayas, and as Yang-chén in Tibet and Ga-swi in Mongolia, Sarasvati is the deity for scholars and laymen alike irrespective of any sectarian considerations. The Tibetan literature from Thormi Sambhota down to the twentieth century abounds with utterances and remarks about the significance and sanctity of Šākta Brahmān.

III

The translation of the Buddhist canon from Sanskrit into Tibetan has been universally admitted as the most scientific and yet local ever before the present day UNESCO programme. The national endeavour in Bodrul (Tibet) running through four centuries may be best described in esoteric direction as the union of Prajñā (Wisdom) of India and Upādhyākṣa (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 Iranian, Sanskrit and Sino 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 Bod-ka (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 Thomi Samshita and his successors had first resorted to a servile imitation of Sanskrit layout and style and ignored the claims of Tibetan syntax. This resulted in numerous 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 Buddhas 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 honourable acceptance of native idioms.

No effort was spared to probe into the etymology of a word in a text and unravels the phraseology of Sanskrit, but Sanskrit authors and critics were studied with the same zeal as in the Tolis in India. Thus, while each word of the original was rendered into its exact appropriateness 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) Tibetan scholar knowing Sanskrit. For support to translators, compilation of grammars and lections was also taken in hand. For widely used or commonplace terms like Buddha, Dharma or Suntha uniform sets of equivalents were fixed by a central council of translators. The result of the translations from the time of Thomi (c. 650) till the propagation by Atisa (c. 1050) were later incorporated into two encyclopaedic collections called Kanjur and Tanjur. Kanjur stands for Buddhist literature and Tanjur for Sanskrit. Thus Abhidhamma, Prātimāramitā and Vācaka, the treatises of Nāgārjuna, Asanga and Dharmakīrti 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 Hodson and Rahul Sankrityayan or refer to the Gilgit Manuscripts read by Nalimakha Dutt. I would however remind that Nāgārjuna’s Śulakīṭaka or Dharmācāra’s Pramāṇavācana 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 Dharma, of Mongol literature. This impact is noticed most in the art of dialectics, science of poetry, and historiography. Buddhist logic with Indian art of polemics and Indian logician’s mannerisms flourished in refuge in Sakya, Drigung and Urga. For models of rhetoric and prosody, men of letters in Tibet and Mongolia invariably referred back to Kāvyādārśa and such works from India. Dialectics or poetic works were, however, not much developed in Tibet before the advent of Dharma; therefore such Indic 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-shi (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-shang, yielded to a new form Chon-jung (Chos-bhuying) or the Growth of Religion. As the new nomenclature suggests the consent of chronicles, that is, the subject-matter of history, was now the Dharma. Its origin in India and its growth in the Tsino-Himalayas. The Dharma was eternal and everything else was transitory; therefore the story of Dharma was history par excellence. The ideal history was no longer the Records (Yig-shang) or the Line of Kings (Rgyal-rabs) but the Dharma-kahini (Chos-bhuyung). The lives and stoicisms 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 neighbouring countries. Textanatha's 'History of Buddhists' 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 loan-words from Sanskrit. While a most faithful and yet perfect translation of the entire corpus of Sanskrit vocabulary was achieved and even some proper names like Arjuna and Vāllālī were rendered into Tibetan, for academic as well as sentimental grounds the Sanskrit forms of certain words were preferred. Thus while Buddha, Dharma and Sangbodhisattva and Vajra were always expressed in Tibetan forms, terms like guru and muni or Dākyamani and Dākinī have been used in the original form down to our times. Not that good Tibetan equivalents could not be coined but that such coinage could not satisfactorily convey the full context of the term. It will be interesting to give a few examples of Sanskrit loan-words: Ora, Mani, Padma, Vārahasti, Nālandā, Takaśāli. Some Sanskrit words underwent sea-change in spelling and pronunciation. Five such loan-words common to Tibetan and Mongol would be: Arya, Dharma, Pañcita, Ratna, Vajra. In Mongol there was a greater zeal to have as many Sanskrit words as possible for the Mongol translators rightly found that in the relay of Dharma from Sanskrit to Mongol via Tibetan the original context would be more obscure. A thirteenth century Mongol version of Lalatavistara is conspicuously punctuated with Sanskrit words. I call here some of the transcription of Professor Nicholas Poppe with regular Sanskrit form in brackets. Duvaja (Dvajā), Lakṣa (Vākyamani, Bodī (Bodhi), Dīnapāka (Dīnapāka), Erdun (Patta), Arū (Rū), Dīyan (Dīyanā), Eruša (Eruša), Kadali (Kadali), Tūd (Tūta), Manggil (Manggil), Sarati (Sarati), Vīsā (Vīsā), Yedsari (Yedshā), Siddhi (Siddhi), Barm-ācari (Dhrmmacari), Kumudā (Kumudā), Vīr (Vīra), Mañjuśrī (Māñjuśrī), Manbār (Mantārā), Sarsaarsādī (Sarasvathīdhī), Akas (Ākās), Citī (Citī), Uñj (Uñj), Arata Kalmi (Arata Kalma), Bodī (Bodī), Bārēi (Padma), Sambād
(Samādhi), Muqamayi (Mahaṃśībā), Srimati (Sramaṇa), Vayudari (Vaiṣṇavī), Gunamati (Gurūmati), Raimagari (Rāmaṇa), Ridi (Ṛddhi). It is not necessary to extend the list of Sanskrit words in the Trans-Himalaya. I need however record my most pleasant experience in the Baidali regions to hear the Burial Mongol; uttering the words like Adina (Alīsa), Bandita (Pandita) and Erteni (Rasna) without any efforts in their prayers in Mongol and their talks in Russian.

If I tell a Lāmā (Mongol or Tibetan) that modern researches have proved that there are substantial non-Aryan elements in Sanskrit vocabulary and that such words as Candana, Danda, Pandita and Bilva are probably of Dravidian stock the Lāmā would assert that whatever is Sanskrit is Aryan. If I argue further I may offend the Trans-Himalayan believer be he a monk or a layman, a scholar or a mystic. I had on several occasions told Lāmās that in modern Indian opinion Boddha Sākyamuni would be traced to Tibet-Mongolian stock and not Indo-Aryan. Far from pleasing the Lāmās my statement was a sign of blasphemy which gained them considerably. To a Northern Buddhist all moral and spiritual values are from Arhathāmu (Phag-yul in Tibetan) and Buddha Sākyamuni could not but be Aryan and the language of Prajañapatrapitā was indeed Aryan 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. Bhatacharyya: Bhāyāprakāśa (Calcutta 1939); N. Dutt: Gāndhāri Manuscripts I (Calcutta 1939); N. Dutt (ed.): Puṣpa (Gāndhāri 1961); and F. W. Thomas: "Brahmi Script in Central Asian Sanskrit Manuscripts" in Asiatica Festschrift Friedrich Welser (Leipzig 1954). In a recent paper entitled "Study of Samskrit Grammar in Tibet" (Bulletin of Tibetology, Vol. VI No. 2) B. Ghosh narrates the history of Sanskrit grammar in Tibet down to the nineteenth century. Regarding Poetan (and Mongol) sentiments on Buddha's nationality vide N. C. Sier: Greater India: Fact, Fiction & Feasibility (Bhopalpur, 1971) 2nd "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 Shakabpa: Tibet (New Haven 1967), Appendix.)