

## INVENTORY OF TIBETAN HISTORICAL LITERATURE

-Nirmal C. Sinha

In 1971 His Holiness The Dalai Lama set up in Dharamsala a Library of Tibetan Works and Archives. Built from scratch, within 15 years this Library holds among the few best organized Tibetan collections in the world. The Library is planned to cover the entire range of Tibetan literature including works of secular or temporal interest. Thanks to ignorance about Tibet till 1950s and thanks to systematic propaganda since 1950s, Tibetan literature is generally known to consist of tracts and treatises on religion, mysticism and magic. For example, except for the experts designated Tibetologists, even encyclopaedic scholars and macro-historians of our times are blissfully ignorant of the historical works in Tibetan language spread over twelve centuries or more. Arnold Toynbee in his gigantic work **A Study of History** devotes appropriately adequate space to historians and historical works of different countries and rightly refers to Arab and Chinese traditions of historiography. But this great historian does not notice the historians or historiography of Tibet. Obviously the pioneer notices of Tibetan historical works, first by Alexander Csoma de Koros, second by Sarat Chandra Das and last but not least by Andrei Ivanovich Vostrikov never held Arnold Toynbee's attention. It may be added that most Indian scholars, including even Tibet specialists, subscribe to the well propagated opinion that there is very little Tibetan literature on history.

The Library of Tibetan Works and Archives has published **Catalogue of the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives, Vo.I, Historical Works** (Dharmasala 1983) quite timely and all Universities and centres of higher learning in India should acquire the book before the stock is sold out to foreign scholars and scholarly bodies abroad.

I am constrained to make the above statement from hard fact that the migration and settlement of refugee Lamas with their literary treasures into India have drawn very large numbers of foreign scholars as against very small numbers from Indian Universities through two decades.

For information of general readers as also for young Indian scholars, I preface a review of this Catalogue with some observations on the value of Tibetan historical works, and on the difficulty of locating or procuring Tibetan books even in pre-1950 years.

\*Tibetan words are transliterated thus : Lama (for Bla-ma), Puton (for Bu-ston), or Chojung (for Chos-hbyung).

Tibetan historical compositions originating before the 9th Century A.D. and continuing till the 20th century are not free from legends and apocryphal narratives. Nevertheless, these annals and chronicles provide authentic information about events in Tibet and surrounding countries; much of this information is not available in historical writings or source materials of the surrounding countries.

In India, till Kalhana wrote *Rajatarangini* (1148-50) there was no deliberate attempt to write any regular history. The gaps in records of our past are serious. To be relevant for Mauryas, Kushanas and Palas we draw valuable data from Tibetan chronicles.

The Indian tradition with its indifference to mundane happenings and their chronological sequence was the antithesis of the Chinese tradition. The Chinese historiography can be dated back to centuries before the Christian era. The Chinese court appointed learned scribes to record events, reign by reign, dynasty by dynasty, in chronological sequence with dates clearly stated. The glorification of the Celestial Empire with expressions like Tribute Mission or Barbarian Religion was the grand theme of these **Annals**. A defeat suffered at the hands of any Barbarian people or a Barbarian rebellion would be omitted in Chinese records. Thus Tibetan inroads upto Chang-an (Sian) in 7th Century and Mongol rebellions in 17th Century are blacked out in these **Annals**. Even the triumph of Buddhism in Tibet, due to Indian preachers Santarakshita and Padmasambhava, is not noticed though the then Han Emperor was Buddhist.

Long before they developed a script the Tibetans had folk poems and epics orally handed down and enlarged from generation to generation. Scholars and aristocrats of Tibet had fair acquaintance with foreign scripts like Chinese pictograph and Iranian phonetic, prior to introduction of Dharma and Akshara from India. In this period the Chinese Shi-chi (the Records of the Scribe) made much impression on Tibetan scholars who felt that the glories of their ancient heroes and their warrior kings should be recorded in proper sequence with dates.

With the advent of alphabet and script, historical accounts called Yig Tshang (Records), Deb-ther (Annals) and Gyal-rap (Genealogy of Kings) came to be composed. The Han model had however to be modified with the firm establishment of Buddhism. The glories of Tibetan kings were no longer

earned in wars abroad : their glories were in peaceful fields of education and enlightenment. Emphasis in historical compositions was henceforth on the origins of Dharma in India and its spread in the Trans-Himalayas.

The Chinese practice of recording events in a sequence and dating the events was continued. But the events recorded were about royal patronage of Dharma, construction of temples and monasteries and lives of monks, scholars and saints. History was henceforth history of religion and thus designated Chojung (Origin & Spread of Religion). This style reached consummation with Puton's history composed in 1323. The Tibetan tradition thus liberated historians from the deeds (and misdeeds) of kings, queens and courtiers to narrate the pursuits of civilization and enlightenment by the entire people. Tibetan Chojung, in my knowledge, is the pioneer endeavour to present the history of a people.

Chojung in a way may be called history of all mankind and not the history of the people of Tibet only. Cho (Dharma) being the theme, not only the country where Cho originated, that is India, and the country where Cho became the national religion, that is Tibet, but also the countries where Tibetan monks propagated Cho were covered in Chojung. Thus Tanguts and Tokhars, Mongols and Buriats featured in many Tibetan chronicles. Besides, being the language of propagation Tibetan became the lingua franca in the eastern half of the highlands of Inner Asia; and Mongol, Tangut and other non-Tibetan scholars therefore wrote the histories of their own countries in Tibetan. The corpus of Tibetan historical literature thus became an important and indispensable source for the history of so many peoples of Asia. Authenticity or veracity of the events and facts, other than legends and myths, recorded in Tibetan historical works is now admitted by scholars who delve deep into ancient as well as modern history of Inner Asia and China too.

### III

As of other branches of Tibetan literature, any inventory of historical works is lacking. Principal reasons are two.

In ancient times books were written on nature's gift like palm leaf or papyrus. The Chinese invented paper earliest and thier paper was much superior to that of the Greeks and Arabs. Chinese also invented the process of printing from wood carved blocks earlier than 3rd century AD. Tibetans

claim to have knowledge of such printing before they had invented their script and would make use of block printing for illustrations. Tibetan script was invented in 7th century; Buddhist Canon was translated from that time and this translation was completed by about 1350; and block printing of the entire Canon (Kanjur & Tanjur) was made in 1411 in Peking. Tibetans however say that, though not much regular, xylographs of items from the Canon and from Tibetan commentaries were made in Kham during the dark days of Cho (c. 825-1042), that is, before Dipankara Atisa's coming to Tibet. Full evidence to support Tibetan claims is however lacking.

The point of interest here is to note that blockprints whenever begun in Tibet were made mostly for religious literature. Authenticated versions of Kanjur and Tanjur, Sung-bum, Gyud-bum, Nam-thar and works of mystics and saint scholars were regularly xylographed from 1400 onwards. Some books on medicine, astrology and art were also xylographed. Otherwise books remained in manuscript form and were copied or calligraphed as and when needed. A rough estimate around 1950 was that less than forty percent of Tibetan literature was available in blockprints. And no monastic centre of learning or no scholarly house would claim to have a good knowledge of the vast handwritten quantum of books produced in Tibet and Tibetan speaking regions.

If we add to this the custom that books of one sect were stored in a monastery belonging to the sect, we can realize why a catalogue catalogarum of Tibetan literature was never made, though catalogues and indexes of collections in repositories of different sects were compiled. Historical compositions under such conditions were never collected for such purpose.

#### IV

Thus this review begins with an observation that no comprehensive, not to say exhaustive, catalogue of historical compositions, a few in xylograph and most in manuscript, authored by scholars belonging to different sects, was to be found anywhere in Tibet when the People's Republic of China extended their jurisdiction over Tibet in 1950-51. The years till 1959 when The Dalai Lama left Tibet, were certainly not conducive for such academic project like cataloguing. The Lamas and scholars who came in the trail could bring only a part of their literary treasures but brought in a full measure their

**competence and devotion. The Dalai Lama resolved to preserve for posterity the literary texts and documents of Tibet with such competent and devoted refugee scholars and set up near his seat at Dharamsala, the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives (LTWA).**

**Inventory of Tibetan literature is most important assignement for LTWA** which starts work with the Tibetan texts and documents collected at LTWA. First volume of LTWA catalogue is about Historical Works.

Toyo Bunko, the famous Oriental Library of Tokyo, published in 1970 **Catalogue of the Toyo Bunko Collection of Tibetan Works on History.** Japanese collections of Tibetan xylographs as well as manuscripts began sixty years earlier with Ekai Kawaguchi and Tokan Tada, that is, before the First World War and attained their present dimensions before the end of the Second World War. Japanese monks and scholars began systematic modern cataloguing of all Tibetan literature before the Second World War, and catalogues of the Tibetan Canonical and Exegetical works were under print immediately after the War. These Catalogues from Tohoku were superior to the previous such attempts by Western scholars. The Toyo Bunko Catalogue of non-canonical books like those on history is another testimony to Japanese workmanship. The LTWA Catalogue from Dharamsala published under many difficulties is on inferior paper and its production is not too good, obviously because of too high costs these years.

Despite the defects of production, LTWA Catalogue deserves attention of all interested in Tibetan literature or history of Inner Asia. Its first claim is that LTWA collection is built by the people concerned and here every accession - manuscript, xylograph or modern print - is made after scrutiny by Tibetan scholars. My point may be made clear by a famous utterance of the late Sir John Marshall, Director General of Archaeological Survey of India. A year before his retirement, Marshall said : "For reading and evaluating a Sanskrit inscription or manuscript I prefer a Hindu Pandit to any internationally renowned Sanskritist of Europe." I have my own experience of Tibetan scholars detecting without much labour forgery or interpolations. I have also known two non-Tibetan scholars doing research with "Tibetan books" in traditional format on handmade paper smeared with dust.

LTWA Catalogue notices in many cases incompleteness, uncertainty or other defect. Items are described in details; contents of a treatise are broken under broad heads (even 20 or more) and many minor heads. Hints about antiquity and authenticity of any treatise or tract are there to inform

interested scholars that LTWA is not a storehouse of antiques and curios. Hints about the contents of any title are fairly sufficient for the enquirer.

The second merit of this Catalogue is that Tibetan historical compositions counting 492 are classified. The classes are : History; Religious History; Record of Teachings Received (by historic figures, Lamas and scholars); Catalogues, Guide Books, Descriptions of Holy places and Ancient Images; Biographies (of saints, saint scholars and hierarchs). It may be noted that much needed data for historic events and their dates are found in such Catalogues and Guide Books. For easy reference there are three indexes: **Title Index, Author Index and Subject Index.**

The highest merit of the Catalogue is that it notices books of all sects and even some Bon works. As is wellknown His Holiness The Dalai Lama is as learned as liberal. He has among his team of scholars and Lamas, spread over different places in India, members of all the four sects. It cannot be denied that Yellow Sect Lamas are not quite friendly with monks and scholars of the three so-called Red Sects. I say from my experience that by and large Yellow Lamas are indifferent to Red Sects, and hostile to Bon believers. LTWA, built by the Supreme Head of Yellow Sect, possesses the imagination and catholicity needed for the great project.

I feel awkward to point out any errors or omissions in this timely and valuable publication in two scripts: English and Tibetan, and therefore refrain from presenting a number of printing mistakes mostly in English.

I however feel obliged to say that the expression **Manuscript Section** within brackets on the title page is misleading. The books in the Catalogue are of three types: manuscript, xylograph and modern print. The type and provenance of an item is clear, except in a few cases, from data under the entry. By no means all the 492 titles can be described as **Manuscript.**

I fail to understand why reference to US Library of Congress Card Number is made in any case where the US Library have in their Tibetan Collection the particular title. Such references are not many for the simple reason that US Tibetan Collection is not that big as such reference would warrant. The biggest Tibetan Collections are in the Institute of the Peoples of Asia (Leningrad, Moscow & Ulan Ude) though their Index cards may not be complete. The second big collection is that of Toyo Bunko; in their Catalogue of Historical Works they refer to same/similar items in Bibliotheque Nationale, British Museum or even Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology

(SRIT). SRIT Hand Lists and Index Cards are however not complete for printing.

I may be permitted to add that SRIT collection is also second only to that of Institute of Peoples of Asia. In fact SRIT collections are more comprehensive as books of all four Sects are preserved here without any discrimination while Institute of Peoples of Asia and Toyo Bunko are predominantly Yellow Sect. When laying the foundation stone of SRIT during the Buddha Jayanti (Feb. 1957) The Dalai Lama had blessed SRIT project to preserve books of all Sects. When on 1 October 1958 Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru inaugurated the SRIT he was shown Rinchen Terzod as also Gelug Sung Bum (including Phabong Kha) among the prized collections made by that date. No two sets of sectarian literature could be more antagonistic to each other. Rinchen Terzod is the most sacred for the Red Sects while Gelug Sung Bum is all critical of the former.

Any criticism of LTWA Catalogue that I make here does not detract from the great merits of the volume. Warm felicitations are due to Ven. Jampa Samten Shastri and Kungo Gyatso Tshering for giving us this key to the treasures of Tibetan literature.