SANSKRIT ACROSS THE HIMALAYAS

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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-recent 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, Greek or Vavarna. The response to Yavana or Kālidāsa or distant foreigner from Plato and Pradinas 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 neighbors is often overlooked. Countries across the Himalayas happened to be most important acquirers 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, Saṅgha 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 Bhotia collaborators is an edifying chapter in the history of Asia.

The history of Asia is a sort of triangular complex composed of Indian, Sanskritic and Sino 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 śramaṇa; and strange are the ways of the dharmas. The encounter between Sanskrit and other traditions had thus no fixed norm in history. It is now well known that in the confines of the sub-continent Sanskrit yielded, in different ways, to trans-Persian and Sino-Mongoloid encroachments while in the highlands of Trans-Himalayas Sanskrit most successfully encountered Indian and Sino traditions, both in linguistic form and literar}y expression.

Yet the Sanskrit which accomplished this Dhyāna, from Kashmir to Kokonor or from Bactria to Raskaka, had no title to high caste; this Sanskrit hardly conforming to the grammar or thence of what is called Vedic or Classical form. Buddhism aṣamanta 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 Brahminas and the Kṛṣṇas. 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 Perfect Wisdom or Transcendental Learning. Thus the tests of Prabhupadaśād and the communities and dissensions of the saints and scholars from Nikāṇaras (c. 150) to Atilla (c. 980-1054) happened to be in


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Sanskrit which Brahmanical and Hindu scholars described as bad or impure Sanskrit. Recently, some western scholars have started calling this medium Hybrid Sanskrit. Nepali scholars and Vajrācārya 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 Buddhism 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 steps 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 Bhaṭṭaṇātha who took the stream to the arid north was in the grateful imagination of Northern Buddhists, come from Vārānasi, where Buddhā Sūktayāmuni had turned the Wheel of Law. In trans-Himalayan legend the Sacred Lotus after it withered away in Vārānasi bloomed in Lhasa, and the Master's "body, speech and mind" made a re-appearance in the Trans-Himalayan higlham. 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 Lamamist have been such that a Nepali Vajrācārya 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 Sākya, Tašihumpo, Drepeg, Derge, Kumbum and Urga.

Why the legendary author of Tibetan alphabet, Thumi 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 half-mark 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 truth of the matter is that the Tibetan speech is not so 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 praised by some Sinologists, an idiosyncrasy 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 Thub-chen-po and Deq-ug I made queries as to why the pictograph was found unsuitable for transcription of Tibetan speech and how did Thomi Samtshé and his colleagues adjudicate the claims of different Indo-Iranian and Mediterranean scripts. I had in mind that the Brahmi script was possibly an import from the west of Sino-Tibetan and that in the last half of the seventh century Khonsum and several other scripts were prevalent in the regions west and northwest of Tibet. The answer 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 Thomi and his friends. The need for a script had arisen out of the need for transcribing Buddhist texts in Tibetan language. It was thus a good act or "a natural process", interdependent on the other processes of Dharma as is Prajñāpāramitā. Thus the script had to be looked for in the same region from where come the Sacred Books. The process did not end with the Śrīra Vipra-bhrājanī of Sanskrit or the horizontal Īra from left to right. The Tibetan book, though made of paper, did not follow the format of Chinese script but adopted the palm-leaf format of India. An honorific designation for a Tibetan house-book is Pedi derived from Sanskrit Pānti-Pudiśka. Inde to Sanskritic sentiments for books and learning have influenced Tibetan mind ever since.

To start with, the invention of alphabet was termed as a divine gift as in Sanskrit tradition; Brahmi was reputed to have come from the mouth of Brahma. It is not certain whether the early scribes, the founders of an alphabet, devolved his set of thirty letters from the archeic Nāgarī (Rajasthān, Andhra) or from Ṛṣadhī (Gikāla) characters. What is certain and indisputable, both among Tibetan believers and modern scholars, is that the Tibetan alphabet was of Brahmi origin. It is curious that while the words Brahmi and Nāgarī were obsolete in the ninth or tenth century, by the beginning of the nineteenth century, these words were current among the Lamas and other learned people all over the Tibetan-speaking world. A Sanskrit-Tibetan Thesaurus of 1771 from Kham eters the word Brahmi with its Tibetan equivalent as the first item under the head "speech". This was undoubtedly following the ancient Sanskrit tradition. For instance, the Lakṣaśīlā list of sixty-four kinds of writing begins with Brahmi. It is relevant to point out that in India the term Brahmi was a rediscovery towards the end of the nineteenth century, thanks to archeologists and etymologists. In Tibet terms like Awng-Sungh, Gāk or Gāmrā came to be inscribed exactly as in India and each term was most conclusively translated to convey the different meaning under different contexts. The connotation for Akṣara as in traditional India was fully reflected in Tibet in handling of books as if they were icons. I was surprised to observe 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 Impeccable Object, as the Sacred Letter or Akṣara is the heart of the matter. Much later in Sikkim I had another experience. A sieveboard warning the visitors to take off their shoes while entering the temple was fixed right on the floor. The sieveboard 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 sieveboard left as it was. An ordinary man, who was not a monk or priest, protested that Nagāri script being the matrix was more sacred than even the Tibetan. The sieveboard had to be raised a few inches from the floor but still today in Tibetan or Sikkimese would keep his shoes near that trilingual inscription. The Tibetan veneration for Nagāri as the kin of Brahmā 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 Nagāri as internationally less honourable than Roman. I am not a linguist nor by any means are 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 Baidaks has been the most ubiquitous presence of the Six Mystic Syllables O-M-A-N-I-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 Ani and Kali, the two mystic emblems used in Tantric but can be traced back to the Vedas. The learned Tibetan unhesitatingly affirms that Akṣara goes back to pre-Buddhist times in Kajje, that is the Vedas. The adoration of Vak and Akṣara, Brahma 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 Brahma, Indra or Ganeṣa were incorporated into Mahāyāna pantheon simply as accessory deities aiding and serving Buddha Śākapunyatāma or other Buddhas and while even some Hindu deities were depicted under the feet of a Buddha or held in utmost ridicule, Sarasvati was admired as a goddess on her own right. The Mahāyāna veneration for Sarasvati progressed across the Himalayas, and as Yang-chen in Tibet and Mongol, Sarasvati is the deity for scholars and laymen alike irrespective of any sectarian considerations. The Tibetan literature from Thonmi Sanāthaka down to the twentieth century abound with utterances and remarks about the significance and sanctity of Śabda Brahma.

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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 Red-yul (Tibet) running through four centuries may be best described in ecstatic dictation as the union of Prajñā (Wisdom) of India and Ugya-kholodgyi (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 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 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 imitation 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 Buddhas and other sites in the north and north-west of Tibet. In the later or revised translations magery and idiom of Sanskrit underwent welcome Tibetanization along with histrionic acceptance of native idiom imagery.

No effort was spared to probe into the etymology of a Subda or to unravel the aphorisms of Vyalakar. Plani and later Sàsara Vyalakar were studied with the same zeal as in the Tolis 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 Sañjña uniform sets of equivalents were fixed by a central council of translators. The result of the translations from the time of Thomya (c. 650) till the propagation by Atiša (c. 1050) were later incorporated into two encyclopaedic collections called Kanjur and Tanjur. Kanjur stands for Buddha-vacana and Tanjur for Sāstra. Thus Aññàyamati, Pratyāhāramadhyam and Viśayu, the treatises of Nāgārjuna, Asanga and Dignaga 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 reiterate the great Mahāyāna works recovered by Brian Hodgson and Rahula Sanisritaya or refer to the Gilgit Manuscripts read by McNabakha Dutt. I would however remind that Nāgārjuna’s Saññyāsa or Dignaga’s Pramāṇavacana 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 logic, and historiography. Buddhist logic with Indian art of demons and Indian logician’s mannerisms flourished in refuge in Sakya, Drepung and Urga. For models of rhetoric and prosody, men of letters in Tibet and Mongolia invariably referred back to Kāśyapa and such works from India. Dialectics or poetics were however, not much developed in Tibet before the advent of Dharma; therefore such inwce elements in Tibetan literature
were more in the nature of innovations than revolutions. For a true revolu-
tion 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
further 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
scholars, referred 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
Dharma, its origin in India and its growth in the Trans-Himalayas. The
Dharma was eternal and everything else was transitory; therefore the story of
Dharma is history per excellence. The ideal history was no longer the
Records (Yig-thang) or the Line of Kings (Rgyal-nba) but the Dharmanakshatram
(Chou-byung). The lives and thoughts of the saints and scholars, the doc-
trinal 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 Buddhists" abounds with legends and myths but provides some
unspeakable evidence where Indian literary sources are silent.

A measure of Sanskrit impact on Tibetan and Mongol languages is pro-
vided 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 many proper names like Aćśāk and Vaiśālī were ren-
dered into Tibetan, for academice as well as sentimental grounds the Sanskrit
forms of certain words were preferred. Thus while Buddha, Dharma and
Sangha or Veda and Vîjiśa were always expressed in Tibetan forms, terms
like Gūra and Māni or Sākyamuni and Padmā 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, Māni, Padma, Vārañca, Nalanda, Taksāti. Some Sanskrit
words underwent sea-change in spelling and pronunciation. Five such loan-
words common to Tibetan and Mongol would be - Aśvā Dharma, Pratīta,
Ratna, Vajra. In Mongol there was a greater zeal to have as many Sanskrit
words as possible for the Mongol translation, rightly found that in the term
of Dharma from Sanskrit to Mongol the original would be more obscure. A thirteenth century Mongol version of Lalevariastakam
is completely punctuated with Sanskrit words. I call here some as per
transcription of Professor Nicholas Poppe with regular Sanskrit form in
brackets. Dvārāj (Dvēra), Lokā (Lakṣaṇa), Rōdi (Bodhī), Dibhangkara
(Dipamkara), Ėrōta (Ratna), Arū (Rūpa), Dīyan (Dhyāna), Eriṣu (Iṣyā),
Kadālī (Kadāli), Trūd (Tūṭā), Mangalī (Mudgālī), Saratī (Sārātī), Vini
(Viniya), Yeṣodārī (Yeṣódhārī), Sīdī (Śidhi), Dārn-ascari (Dârmancari),
Kumuda (Kumūda), Vīr (Vajra), Maṇḍraṇa (Mahārājā), Maṇḍya (Māṇḍya,
Sarvārāṇḍi (Sarvārāṇḍi), Aśā (Āśā), Chitra (Cīrā), Umet (Uṣṭā),
Vīra Kālī (Vīrā Kālī), Budārī (Parā), Badmi (Padma), Samudh

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(Samādiḥ). Maqamayi (Mahāmāyā), Siramani (Ṣamana), Vayūdīru (Vaiḍūrya), Gūnasmā (Gūnasmā), Rasesagarci (Rāṣesagarci), Rādi (Rādhi). 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 Baikal regions to hear the Buriat Mongols uttering the words like Adiṣa (Atisa), Bandita (Bandita) and Ertens (Ertans) without any efforts in their prayers in Mongol and these talks 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, Dāṇḍa, Pandita and Bāvla 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 layman, a scholar or a muleteer. I had on several occasions told Lāmās that in modern Indian opinion Buddha Sākyamuni would be traced to Tibet-Mongolid 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 Aryabhumi (Phag-yul is Tibetan) and Buddha Sākyamuni 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 : Bhagavatāśā (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 Friedrich Welle (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 Rakhapba : Tibet (New Haven 1963), Appendix.)