



Developments of Mahayana Buddhism through 'great translators' in Ladakh and Baltistan

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Abstract

Ladakh is known for aged old Buddhist monasteries and meditative landscapes. Even today here Buddhist monastic institutions are maintaining the legacy that had been shaped by the literary works of many translators and Tantric masters. Each monastic institution holds a legacy of their founder and great disciples. Their works have been orally transmitted and preserved in [such] suited high mountain cold-desert arid geographic environment since 2000 years. The path and practices of these monastic institutions that had travelled this far were guided and assimilated under the events in the history of spread of Buddhism in Central Asia, Tibet, Bhutan, Nepal, Ladakh and Gilgit-Baltistan. Here, the article represents how Tibet, Ladakh, Baltistan, Buddhism and pre-Buddhist Tantric belief system were systematised through the ointment of Buddhist Mahayana schools of Philosophy that had been transmitted and translated in these lands. The main focus of the article is how Tibet had been great center of Buddhist learning for Ladakh and Baltistan students and how Tibet at times when Buddhism collapsed had to invite Vice Chancellor of Vikramashila University in [of] Bihar to revive it. It simply conveys how sects under the banner of Mahayana Buddhism had been constructed by the great teachers who had borne in Ladakh and Baltistan.

Keywords: Ladakh and Baltistan, Buddhism, geographic environment

Introduction

Ladakh as in many other parts of 'Himalayan-Trans-Himlayan Kingdom' Tibetain language script and school of Mahayana-Buddhism is still practicing today. The present form of Buddhist Tibetain practices and rituals had developed in past one thousand years. The important events that had shaped the methods of Buddhist practices and rituals in Ladakh have to do with spread of Buddhism into (western) Tibet. During the second half of first millennium A.D. the most important 'event' was invention of the script (*yege*) to the available (in Tibetain territorial) dialects by scholar Thonmi Sam Bhota in 6th century A.D. He was sent to Kashmir during the reign of Tibetain pious king Songtsen Gampo (617-649/650) ^[1] to prepare a script for dialects of his kingdom. The first-introduction of Buddhism in Tibet had happened with the translation of Buddhist Sanskrit texts into Tibetain language script; made it with the help of Indian masters called 'early translation' period in the history of Tibet ^[2]. There had been two occasions when Buddhism penetrated and practiced in Tibet. First one is called 'early spread of the teachings', it was before the dismantled Buddhist monastic order and discipline by a king named Lang dharma (838-842) ^[3]. The second was called 'later spread of the teaching' or the age of 'new translation', this was when abbot of Nalanda Dipankara Siri gyana Jobo Atisha was invited (by Nag.tsho lo.tsa.ba,

entrusted to him by king Od.lde) to reform and revive correct order of the (existed) teachings (in Tibet). He was contemporary to another great translator called Rin-chen-bzang-po of Guge in western Tibet.

The first Buddhist great master who is regarded as second Buddha was Guru Padmasambhava. He was believed to have had born in Swat valley of present Pakistan formerly known as Udegrama and now (locally) Udayana. He had first stayed five years in Kashmir than visited Baltistan and Ladakh. The local Ladakh historian writes that Guru Padmasambhava planted apricot plants in Baltistan and Ladakh and there is a folk song (sung) in Ladakh attributing to it. In Ladakh, Guru Padmasambhava visited Phokar, Zong, Zangskar, Nimo and Tak-thok villages. The Tak-thok monastery in Sakti village of upper-Ladakh has cave with his imprints, and it is the only monastery in Ladakh of Nyingma sects; which was blessed by him. A Nyingma sect is the oldest sects among the other three major sects of Tibetain Buddhist theology. He had also visited Bhutan and Nepal than to Tibet. During the reign of King Trhi Songdetsen (755/756-797 A.D.), Guru Padmasambhava was invited to Tibet to help the king and teacher Shantarakhshita to consecrate the first monastery in Tibet called Samye. In the words of Mathew T. Kapstein, "if there is a figure in the Tibetain pantheon whose popularity rivals the ubiquitous cult of Avalokits'vara, surely it is Padmasambhava, the Lotus-Born Precious Gruru Rinpoche". It is said that Guru Padmasambhava was burned in the fire at Riwalsar in Mandi in upper-Himachal Pradesh by Zahor king of Mandi. Today, it is sacred Buddhist place for various Buddhist pilgrims of Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, Ladakh and Himachal Pradesh. Swat – Udegrama and Gilgit-Bruzha had been important areas of ancient Bon and Nyingma practisers, in the words of

¹ Matthew T Kasptein, *The Tibetain Assimilation of Buddhism Conversation, Contestation, and Memory*, Oxford University Press, 2000, P. 17.

² Tashi Rabgyes, *Ladakh, Tradition and Change*, April 2004. "Afterwards, Bimalamitra, the master of Dzogschen Atiyoga also came to Tibet. A department of Translation was set up at Samyas and thousands of Sanskrit texts were translated into Tibetan", p.102.

³ Ibid. P.18.

D.L.Snellgrove, “An important collection of the extra-canonical tantras is represented by The Hundred Thousand tantras of the old Sect (rnyingma'i gryud'bum), a work which seems to be rare, even in Tibet. These tantras are of great interest, for many of them originated in the Gilgit area (bruzha). Some early canonical tantras are translated from the Bruzha Language”^[4]. In the words of Roberto Vitali (p.119), “The jewel in the crown of ‘Dzam. glinjg, the supreme of all learned Masters, Dznya.shi.mi.tra, the great master A.ti.sha.shri.mi.tra and De.wa. Dznya and the great master of Kha.che. Ra.han. ta and the great master Gag.tra.ka, [and] many rGya.gar and kha.che pan.di.ta-s were invited. He (Zihi.ba.'od) gave to the great master A.ti.sha in particular a full bre of Gold (dust). As this bla.ma (Zhi.ba.'od) was the translator, they together translated dPal.mchog rtse,'grel; Bud.dha.tsa.ri cha,'grel; Tsad.ma; De.ko.na.nyid.bsdu.pa 'grel and tig[ti.ka]; Tshad.ma. rgyan' grel and tig.ka (ti.ka) [and] many major and minor esoteric and exoteric works. As he thought of translating rDo.rje'phreng.ba, which was a secret tantra (gsang.sngags) [only] transmitted orally (bshad,ryud) [in mNga'.ris.stod], he sent [someone] to search for it above Kha.che of India (Kha.che thod, i.e. somewhere in the mountainous area overlooking the vale) [but] it was not found. Later, he provided Man.triga.kala.sha with four hundred zho of gold. The latter was sent to search for [rDo.rje phreng.ba], [and] found it in the direction of dBu.rgyan”, (Swat-Valley).

After rnyingma'i gryud [old sects], the Bka-bryud –pa sects of Tibetan Buddhism, Naropa master (956-1040)^[5] visited Ladakh and blessed the Lamayuru and Rdzong –Khul (in Zangskar). His disciples Marpa (1012-1097) had been to Kashmir through Zangskar and established Stong-Bde monastery in Zangskar.

Then, another most important personality that had shaped the practices and form of Buddhist teachings prevailed in Ladakh and western Tibet was great Translator Lo-sta-va Rinchen bzang-po (958 A.D.)^[6] He had studied in Kashmir for 13/10 years and considered as greatest (religious) contributor to Ladakh^[7], Guge, Phurang, Lahul, spiti and Kinnur Buddhist cultural establishments. He had introduced different styles of Stupa's (chorten, a relic of worshipping), constructed and consecrated many rich cultural Buddhist temples like Alchi, Mangyu, Sumdha, Tholing, Khartse Gokhar, Nyarma, Kanam, Drankar, Tabo, and Lalung. Some of these are oldest surviving temples of Ladakh, Kinnur, Lahoul and Spiti that which connects its Buddhist architectural relationship with Kashmir Buddhism, wood carving and sculpturing. In the words of Dr. Mrs.Sharda Rani, “Among the poetic epitomes of Ksemendra, the Avadāna-Kalpalatā occupies a special place as it has been a source of inspiration to Tibetan and Mongolian Literary masters and it has moulded their Kāvya

diction. Ksemendra wrote the Avadāna-Kalpalatā in AD 1052 at the instance of his Buddhist friend Nakka, and with the cooperation of scholar Vīryabhadara. When the light of Buddhism and its artistic glories were flickering out in Kashmir”,^[8]. The great translator brought more than 30 (craftsmen) wooden architectural masters-carvers and introduced their style of technique into these temples. His life story had been epitome of Buddhist relationship with Kashmir with western Tibet. Scholars from Kashmir who had assisted him were Pandit Shradhakarvarma, Padmakargupta, Buddha Shristanta, Buddhapala and Kamalapala. In a sense Rinchen-Bzang-po can be considered as the father of Buddhist cultural founder of Western Tibet.

The contribution of blama –Ye-shes-od and Byang-chub-od were tremendous to revive Buddhism in central and western Tibet. The king of western Tibet, Byang-chub-od had dedicated his life in the process of inviting Nalanda abbot Atisha, which was fulfilled by his nephew blama- Yese-od. Works of Rinchen-Bzang-po were sponsored by the king Yeshe-od of Guge; the king had chosen him along with other youths to go Kashmir for studies to revive Buddhism in western Tibet. During the same period Bka-dams-pa (a sect initiated by Atisha and spread by Dromton) temples and famous meditative Nyilza Cave of Saspol and Spituk^[9] were also built.

Geshe Chanthangpa was famous teacher of Bkadamps sect of this time in Ladakh. The translator from Zangskar Phags-pa-Shes-rab (1021-1097 A.D.) translated portion of commentaries on teachings of Buddha called Bstan-gyur and founded two monasteries Karsha and Phugtal in Zangskar and did restoration works in Tibet for many temples. Another translator of same period from Zangskar was Gzhon-nu-tshul-khrims who had invited Pandit karma Vajara of India to Tibet. There had been Balti translators called Balti Lostawa Byanchub-tshul-Khrims who had founded a monastery nearby Lhasa called Skyo-mo-lung, this sbalti translator later had recognised as incarnation of Ngari Rinpoche. Gilgit had been always used by its ancient name in Tibetan literature called as Bru-za^[10].

The influence of Gilgit on (western) Tibet in terms of both Buddhism and ancient Bon religion had been cited by Professor Giuseppe Tucci, mentioned, both Laufer and Professor Chandra Das had worked on it as monograph. It was published in 1881 in the journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal of same year as titled ‘contributions on Tibet’, the priest of Bru-za as the systematiser of ancient Bon and Buddhism is mentioned in Tibetan text ‘Grub-mthah, S'elgyi me-lon’ as well as ‘Blue Annal’ Deb-ther Sñon-po, inform

⁴ Ibid. p.162.

⁵ S P Bireshwar, *Nāropā, His Life and Activities*, in JBRS, 53(1967), 117-129.

⁶ Giuseppe Tucci, *Rin-Bzan-Po and the Renaissance of Buddhism in Tibet Around the Millennium*, Indo-Tibetica II. Aditya Prakashan New Delhi.

⁷ Jenet Rizvi, *Ladakh Crossroads of High Asia*, Oxford University press, Delhi.Pp.58-59. “As far as the Kingdoms of western Tibet are concerned, he may be regarded as the single most influential agent of the second spreading; he is honoured with the title of Lotsawa, Translator, which gives a clear enough pointer to the nature of his achievement”.

⁸ *Buddhist tales of Kashmir in Tibetan woodcuts from Narthang series of the woodcuts of Ksemendra's Avadāna-Kalpalatā*, edited by Dr.Mrs R.Sharda (Mrs.Lokesh Chandra), and published by Tibet house, New Delhi, 2006, p.5.

⁹ Regarding building of dPe.thub and Brag.kung.kha.bo.che, see, (mNga'ris rgyal.rabs p.61 line 19, Bai.ser p.279 line 19-p.280 line 1) translated and interpreted in ‘*The Kingdom of Gu.ge Pu.hrang*’ by Roberto vitali,p.301.

¹⁰ Roberto Vitali, *The kingdom of Gu.ge Pu.hrang*, According to mNga'.ris Rgyal.rabs by Guge mkhan.chen Ngag.dbang grags.pa’, “it should not be forgotten that, according to mkhas.palDe'u gNubs Sangs.rgyas ye.shes nam.thar, Bru.zha appears to have been a major Buddhist centre, to which gNubs.chen and his Indian masters went for religious practice some decades after 836”,pp.166-167.

that Sañs-rgyas-ye-s'es^[11] had been to the land of Bur-s'a to learn from great translator of Bru-s'a Btsanskyes. The language and land of Bru-za therefore once had been the cradle of both Ancient Bon and Buddhist seat of learning (?). Chosrje Jigrtan Mgon-po (1143-1217)^[12] was the founder of Brigun sect, his patron were kings of k'r'ri-Bkra-s'is-lde-stsn of Guge, lha-c'hen dÑ-grub-mgon of Ladakh and bla-c'chen sTag-st'ak'ri-bar and gNam-mgon-lde of sPurang. He had propagated Brigun sect in kailasa-Manasarovar. Contemporary to him was Great meditator Gyalwa Rgodtshang pa Mgon-po-rdo-rje (1189-1258)^[13], had also come to Ladakh and lived in Igu village. He was believed to have had flown from Igu to Martselang and left behind meditated caves and imprints at Hemis, which are even today revered by local people. Hemis, Sakti, Igu and Matho villages have his legend still recounting. His disciple U-rgyan-pa (1230-1275) visited the country of Guru Padmasambhava, Swat valley, and wrote about the journey for which he was given a title called Grupthob, means accomplisher.

Gelugs, the yellow sect was founded by famous teacher Rgyal-wa Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1419) in Tibet. Out of his six famous disciples Shesrab Zangpo was born in Stagmo village above Thiksay (khrigse). He founded first yellow sect monastery in Ladakh in his own village. Stagmo Khang-tshan, hostel for students was established in Tshilunpo University in Tibet after Shesrab Zangpo's village name. Shesrab Zangpo had propagated Gelugs order in karsha and passed away at Phugtal monastery in Zangskar. His nephew Dpal-ldan-shesrab-grspa-pa founded the Thiksay Monastery. Later his nephew Jyam-dbyangs-blo-gros became the abbot of the monastery and during this the first Nunnery was founded in Thiksay at Nyarma.

The Saskya Master Blama Drungpa-dro-rje arrived in Ladakh and founded the Sa-skaya monastery at Matto village on the left hand side of the Indus. He also brought along with him two oracles called Lha Rong -bstan and Rong-bstan-khawa-dkar-po from Kham in Tibet. Both of these oracles had

become the guardian of the village. It is the only-important monastery of Saskya sects in Ladakh. This monastery is very famous for its oracle-demonstration during the annual monastery festival ceremony.

Another great Monk was born in Udmaru village in Nubra, became a regent to the founder and abbot of Tashi Lunpo monastery Pan-chen-Dge-'dun-grub (1391-1475) in Tibet. He was famously called Pan-chen Lha-btsun, in the later years; he came back to Nubra and died here. His bodily remains in Mummified form still exist in two parts; the head is in Gurgon monastery in Tangyar village and lower-parts in the Stupa at Charasa village in Nubra. It was in 1960 because of Bonpo priest who visited Nubra then, the abbot of Thiksay monastery had to open the Stupa and check 'wet-flesh dead' bodily remains of Pan-chen Lha-btsun. There are many other Stupas with installed mummified remains of Buddhist priests called 'Sku-sha Lon pa - body -flesh-wet', and statues some locals recounts that had once spoken, mainly manifestation of Mahākal called the Gonbo, a prime deity, protectors of Monasteries and the community.

During the reign of second dynasty of Ladakh, within the Mahayana Buddhist (Tibetan forms) sects appeared, 'revived', and took firm hold in Ladakh, which eventually went on to shape many political decisions in the Ladakh. They were/are Lho-dru[k]gpa, Dru[k]gpa and Gelugspa.

The fourth incarnation Padma kapo (1527-1592) was Drugchen Rinpoche, two persons were recognised as his incarnations, were Gyalwa Drukpa Pagsam Wangpo and Zhabdrung Nawang Namgyal. Nawang Namgyal was exceptional as religious teacher. He retreated from central Tibet due to rival circumstances and established Lho-Drukpa sub-sect based in Bhutan, in Ladakh its main centre is Stakna monastery. The founder of Stakna monastery in Ladakh was Chosje Moszin, who had visited Ladakh at the request of his teacher Zhabdrung Ngawang Namgyal and died at the same Monastery. Monks from Bhutan subsequently headed the monastery during the later years; through Lho-drukpa initiatives Ladakh had maintained close ties with Bhutan.

Another great teacher of Drukpa was sTag-ts'an-ras-pa Nāg-dbañ-rgya-mts'o (1574-1651)^[14]. He had founded famous Hemis, Chemde, Hanle monasteries. Hemis is the richest and Largest Drukpa monastery in Ladakh. Famous king of Ladakh Sengge rNam-Rgyal was the earnest patron of Lama Stag-ts'an-ras-pa. Together, they had established 'golden era' in the history of Ladakh in terms of both religious and political expansions.

Ladakh[i] kings had consulted to the advice of their religious teachers, in both religious and political affairs. Kings of Ladakh were guided in wars and diplomatic negotiations, in the matters of crimes, religious feuds, infrastructural allotments of lands, alliances, royal marriages etc. by their religious 'sectarian abbots'. In the chapter on 'political history of Ladakh, Baltistan and Tibet' some of the references are made regarding important religious sectarian 'abbots and leaders', playing vital role in war and diplomacy. Therefore, religious-ideals are part and parcel of dynastic bureaucracy of Ladakh, similar to early (and, today) 'Tibetan and Bhutanese heads of religion and politics of the state'. The institution of

¹¹ Ibid, *mkhas.pa lDe'u* (p.321 line 17-20): "De.nas rGya.gar Chos:skyong.ba'I rgyal.po Bru.shar gshegs.pa thosnas/ Bru.shar byon.pas yul.der chos.srid byed.pas dang mhal nas/ lo.tsa.ba Che.rtsan.skyes.kyi zhal mthong skad/ gsung yang thos.nas Bru.sha nas dGongs.'dus bsgyur.nas Bod du spyen.drangs", "Then, as he (Sangs.rgyas ye.shes) heard that rGya.gar Chos:skyong.ba'I rgyal.po had gone to Bru.sha, after going to Bru.sha, he met the chos.srid byed.pa ('the ruler of religion') in this locality. As it is said that he saw Che.rtsan.skyes [and] listened to his preaching, he translated dGongs.'dus from the Bru.sha [language] [and] brought it back to "Tibet": Padma 'phrin.las (gNubs Sangs.rgyas ye.shes rnam.thar in bKa'.ma mdo.dbang.gibla.ma rgyud.pa'I rnam.thar p.162 lines 4-5) says: "Dus nam.zhig.gi tshes mkhan.po Chos.rgyal.skyong Bru.sha'I yul du byon te/ Dhan.na.rakshi.ta'am Shakya seng.ge ste O.rgyan chen.po/ Dharma.bo.dhi gsum.la Bru.sha'I mkhan.po Che.bstan.bskyes.kyi lo.tsa.mdzad de Bru.sha'I khrom.du mDo 'gyur.mdzad.pa mos.chung ste ma.'gyur", "At that time, mkhan.po Chos.rgyal.skyong went to Bru.sha. Bru.sha mkhan.po Che.bstan.bskyes was the translator for Dha.na.rakshi.ta otherwise known as Shakya seng.ge, O.rgyan chen.po and Dharma.bo.dhi, these three. There was little accord at Bru.sha town concerning the translations of mDo, therefore they were not translated" and ibid. (p.162 line 6-p. 163 line 1): "De.yang Bru.sha'I mkhan.pos Dhan.na.rakshi.ta'l bka' dang sbyar te (p.163) slat.yang Bru.shar bsgyur.ba'I tshes bskyar te gsan", "He (Sangs.rgyas ye.shes) obtained [teachings] when Bru.sha mkhan.po was working again at the translations conforming to Dhana.rakshi.ta's order". "On gNubs.chen living in the 9th-10th century see addendum one", Pp. 167-168.

¹² Luciano Petech, *The kingdom of Ladakh*, p.19-20.

¹³ Ibid.p.20.

¹⁴ Petech, *Kingdom of Ladakh*, p.34.

Monastic set-up thus became paramount centre of cultural, social, religious, political and bilateral communication in the history. It was a context of 'consents and accords' between 'Tiger kings and Lion Monks'. The role of 'sectarian abbots' is therefore had been in the Political and Social activities of Ladakh, it was, inseparable from influences of religious figures inside political reigns; political and religious heads had both 'inter-changed' their views to support and rival on the accounts of taste and preferences opted by Kings, suiting their religious teacher.

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