

## **Preservation of Tibetan Culture in India with special reference to Education**

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### **Tibet at a Glance**

The term TIBET denotes three regions: U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo covering 2.5 million square kilometres. Tibet Autonomous Region “TAR”, consisting of U-Tsang and a small portion of Kham, consists of 1.2 million square kilometres. The bulk of Tibet lies outside the “TAR”. Tibet is an occupied country without United Nations’ representation. Its average altitude is 4,000 metres or 13,000 feet above sea level.

### **Tibetan Culture**

Tibetan culture developed under the influence of a number of factors:

1. Tibet’s specific geographic and climactic conditions such as its altitude, short growing-season, and cold weather, have encouraged reliance on pastoralism.
2. Contacts with neighboring countries and cultures including India, China, and Mongolia have influenced the development of Tibetan culture. But the Himalayan region’s remoteness and inaccessibility have preserved distinctive local influences too.
3. The third major and most important factor is Buddhism. It has exerted a particularly strong influence on Tibetan culture since its introduction in the 7th Century. Art, literature, and music all contain elements of Buddhist religion. Buddhism itself has adopted a unique form in Tibet, influenced by the native Bon tradition and other local beliefs.

### **Tibet’s Contacts with India**

Historical evidence tells us that the young prince of Tibet Srong-btsan sgam-po (? - 650 A.D.), one of the greatest kings of Tibet, got attracted towards Buddhism because of his

wives: the daughter of king Amshuvarman of Nepal and the daughter of the Chinese emperor Tai-tsung. Both these princesses brought with them the images of Aksobhya, Maitreya and Shakyamuni as gifts from their maternal home. The king sent his minister Thon-mi Sambhota (632 - 650 A.D.) along with sixteen assistants to India to know more about Buddhism and bring Buddhist scriptures to Tibet. As the Tibetan language did not have an alphabetic script and a systematic grammar, the king also expected Thon-mi Sambhota to study Indian scripts, phonetics and grammar. Thon-mi Sambhota came to India, learned Sanskrit, and also devised the Tibetan script based on some Indian script. He translated some Buddhist Sanskrit texts into Tibetan. Thus, Thon-mi Sambhota laid the foundation for the literary activity in Tibet. However, Buddhism did not get established in the reign of king Srong-btsan sgam-po. The credit goes to king Khri-srong-lde-btsan (755 -797 A.D.), the fifth successor of king Srong-btsan. He invited a notable Buddhist monk Shantarakshita of the Nalanda University to Tibet. But Shantarakshita failed to convert Tibetans to Buddhism. He advised the king to invite Padmasambhava in order to convert Tibetans to Buddhism. Padmasambhava, a tantric master, succeeded in his mission and with the establishment of the first Tibetan monastery at Samye in 775 A.D. Buddhism was accepted as the State religion.

### **Translation Activity in Tibet**

With the acceptance of Buddhism as the state religion, the translation activity was fully set in motion and it continued till about the end of the 12th century A.D. Texts written in Indian classical languages such as Sanskrit and Pali belonging to were translated into Tibetan. This used to be a joint venture by a Tibetan scholar and an Indian scholar. Such collaboration resulted in the translation of 4569 texts that is preserved in the Tibetan Buddhist Canon.

It should be noted, however, that not all the translated texts belonged to Buddhism. Rather, they include a wide range of subjects, from the Buddhist philosophical texts and the commentarial literature thereupon, to medicine, Sanskrit grammar and lexicography, astronomy, arts and crafts, works on polity and ethic etc. Thus, the spread of Buddhism in Tibet transformed people's life in Tibet in a totality of Indian Buddhist culture.

Tibetans had never confined themselves only to translating Sanskrit and/or Pali texts. They had also composed indigenous commentaries and sub-commentaries on the texts already translated into Tibetan. As a result, even in the absence of scholars knowing Sanskrit, they could continue to study Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian doctrines. Thus, even when Buddhism disappeared from its homeland, Tibet continued to preserve and enrich the heritage she received from India.

The accuracy in these Tibetan translations and their faithfulness to the original is difficult to find anywhere in the world. This, in turn, has done a great favour to scholars. Thousands of Buddhist/non-Buddhist works are preserved only in their Tibetan translations. Their Sanskrit originals are lost during the course of time. Due to the accuracy in translation, we are now in a position to understand their contents and also to restore these texts into Sanskrit.

### **Tibetans in Exile**

This glorious tale could not continue forever. In 1949-50, Tibet was invaded by China. Apart from the direct loss of life, Tibet suffered a heavy loss of universal freedom as a result of the Communist ideology and its programs such as the Cultural Revolution (1966 - 1976). The fate of Tibet's unique national, cultural and religious identity was thus seriously threatened and manipulated by the Chinese. China's policy of occupation and oppression resulted in the destruction of Tibet's national independence, culture and religion, environment, and the universal human rights of its people. Thus, there was an urgent need to preserve the Tibetan culture with all its aspects.

Failure of the dialogue with the Chinese resulted in plight of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama, Tibet's spiritual and administrative head to India in 1959. He was followed by millions of Tibetan refugees. Indian government established several settlements for these refugees and also gave them a piece of land and some monetary help to start a new life in India.

Towards preserving the Tibetan culture which in a way was an extension of the Indian culture which India had lost irrevocably, Ministry of Culture, Government of India launched a scheme for "Development of Buddhist/Tibetan Culture and Art" under its policy of Promotion of the institutions and organizations of Buddhist and Tibetan Studies. The objective of this scheme is to give financial assistance to the voluntary Buddhist/Tibetan organizations including monasteries engaged in the propagation and scientific development of Buddhist/Tibetan culture and research in related fields.

### **Relocating Important Tibetan Monasteries in India**

In an attempt to preserve the traditional way of teaching Buddhist philosophy, following ancient Tibetan monasteries were relocated in India:

1. The Sakya tradition has relocated its seat (founded in 1073) to Dehradun, India,

where Sakya College continues the traditional Sakya curriculum, with courses of study lasting up to 13 years.

2. Rumtek monastery in Sikkim was founded in the early 1960s and offers training in the Karma Kagyü lineage.
3. Both the Nyingma and Gelug traditions have rebuilt their universities in South India. In Bylakuppe, the Nyingma scholastic center of Payül (one of the Six Great Nyingma Universities) has been rebuilt as Namdröling, and is today home to more than 2,000 monks. Furthermore, at the beginning of the 1970s, Penor Rinpoche founded a commentarial school (dshad brwa) within Namdröling, which now trains 400 students. The great Nyingma monastery of Mindröling was also rebuilt in Dehradun, beginning in 1965.

Realizing the importance of Tibetan Buddhist culture found in the Himalayan region and its contribution to the Indian culture, Ministry of Culture, Govt. of India launched a scheme for “Preservation and Development of Cultural Heritage of the Himalayas”. The objective of this scheme is to promote, protect and preserve the cultural heritage of the Himalayas for which financial assistance is provided to institutions and voluntary organizations. With the same view, Govt. of India also established two educational institutions in India. These are:

### **1. Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology**

Since its establishment in 1958, the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology (previously Namgyal Institute of Tibetology) has sponsored and promoted research on the religion, history, language, art and culture of the people of the Tibetan cultural area, which includes Sikkim.

Among its new research programs, the NIT’s Research Officers have undertaken a project to document the social history of Sikkim’s 60-odd monasteries and digitize their textual holdings. Another project viz. the Visual Sikkim project was undertaken to locate, digitalize and document old and rare photographs of Sikkim, both in India and abroad. It has created a digital image bank and realizes photographic exhibitions at the NIT. The Institute has also established a visual anthropology project in order to produce an enduring digital record of Sikkim’s vanishing indigenous and Buddhist cultures.

### **2. Central Institute of Buddhist Studies**

The Central Institute of Buddhist Studies, Leh came into being in 1959. It was established

in order to satisfy inquisitive needs of the local community about Buddhism and Buddhist studies. It came as a landmark in the scenario of Indian education and touched hitherto unresearched subjects. The main objectives of CIBS are:

1. Study of Buddhism in all its totality, including its history, and philosophy
2. Study of languages connected with Buddhism, such as Pali, Tibetan, Sanskrit and English
3. Study of modern subjects such as General Science, Social Studies and Comparative Philosophy, History, Political Science, Arithmetic, Economics
4. Translation of Buddhist manuscripts into Indian languages like Hindi, Sanskrit and into English
5. Collecting, preserving and publishing rare manuscripts
6. Researching on topics related to Buddhism
7. Collecting and preserving historical artifacts
8. Study of Amchi ( Bodhi Medical Science), Thankas ( Buddhist Paintings), Scripts, religious carvings on wood, and other sculptures related to Buddhism
9. Arranging Seminars on Buddhism and organizing exhibitions of Buddhist artifacts for popularizing Buddhism
10. Conducting Mass Literacy Programs

Before the establishment of these two institutions, the youth belonging to the Himalayan region used to go to Tibet for their education.

With a view to provide education to Tibetan refugees residing in India and also to those from the Himalayan region who have lost the opportunity to study in the Tibetan monasteries due to the Chinese invasion, the Govt. of India in 1967 established the Central University of Tibetan Studies (formerly Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies).

This Institute was established as a result of the active consideration of His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama and India's first Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. A more important reason for the establishment of this Institute was to breathe new life into the past glory which lies established in the precious Buddhist scriptures on religion and philosophy, art and architecture and science and technology including astronomy and medicine, a substantial volume of which is preserved by the Tibetan exiles despite their sudden and terrific calamity.

Here it should be borne in mind that though Govt. of India had already established the Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology (1958) and the Central Institute of Buddhist Studies,

Leh (1959), they were not established for the Tibetan students. Moreover, their medium of instruction is not Tibetan.

### **Location**

The Central University of Tibetan Studies (CUTS) is located in Sarnath, approximately 10 km from the city of Varanasi (Benares) in the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. Sarnath is the location of the Buddha's first teaching after gaining enlightenment. It contains important sacred and archeological sites and an excellent archaeological museum as well as Buddhist temples representing many Buddhist traditions.

### **Layout and Area Covered**

At CUTS, preservation of Tibetan culture begins right from the lay-out and the architecture of the University as it strictly adheres to the ancient Indian Buddhist architectural and planning systems, as preserved in Tibet. This creates a very congenial atmosphere for Indo-Tibetan studies.

### **CUTS at an Earlier Stage**

CUTS initially functioned as a special constituent wing of the Sampurnananda Sanskrit University, Varanasi. From 1977 onwards it started functioning as an autonomous body under the Department of Culture, Ministry of Education, Govt. of India with 100% financial support from the Govt. of India. In 1988, it was declared to be a University. The University provides a platform for interaction between Buddhist and non-Buddhist Indian philosophical schools; between Buddhist and Western Philosophers; and between Buddhist scholars and scientists.

### **Objectives**

The main objectives of the University are:

To preserve the Tibetan culture and tradition;

To preserve ancient Indian sciences and literature preserved in the Tibetan language, but lost in the original;

To offer an alternate educational facility to students of Indian border areas who

formerly availed the opportunity of receiving higher education in Tibet; and

To accomplish gains of teaching and scope of research in traditional subjects in a framework of the modern University system of education with the provision for award of degrees in Tibetan studies

These objectives of the Institute themselves dictated a radically different character to it from other Indian Universities. The difference starts from the courses offered by the University.

### **Courses Offered**

As is mentioned before, the University was primarily established with an ethos to educate the immigrated youths of Tibet and the students of the Indian Himalayan belt who had lost the opportunity of going to Tibet for advanced studies and religious discourses in Buddhism. Thus, the student body almost entirely consists of students from these areas and the admission procedure is structured for such students. However, the Institute also receives foreign students as non-degree casual researchers.

Taking into consideration the vast domain of Tibetan Buddhism, teaching at graduate and post-graduate levels alone did not seem suffice. Therefore, a four years' course at the per-university level was found indispensable. Thus, an integrated course of nine years duration right from Class IX up to the post-graduate level was prepared. The medium of instruction is mainly Tibetan. However, Hindi and/or English are also used by non-Tibetan teachers as per the needs of students.

In philosophy, students have to study the basic texts translated from the Indian Canon and the commentaries on these, written by Tibetan masters. Thus, this University is the only Institute providing education in all the four major branches of Tibetan Buddhism along with that in the native Bon tradition.

In accordance with the traditional Tibetan educational system, each person should possess the basic knowledge of all the five great branches of knowledge such as the science of grammar, the science of medicine, the science of logic, the inner science and the science of art and crafts. One may specialise in any selective field after that. In accordance with this traditional system, all the five branches are included in the University's curricula.

In keeping with the traditional method of instruction, the students have to commit to memory

certain amount of root-texts every year. The tradition of Debate is maintained as an integral and viable part of learning and students have to face Viva Voce/Debate at the post-graduate level as an integral part of the examination.

Like any other Educational Board, which imparts knowledge of its national language, this University provides training in the Tibetan language. Thus, a student is not detached from the roots of his / her language while living in a multi-linguistic country such as India. At the same time, recognising the special place of Sanskrit in Tibet, students have to learn Sanskrit as a compulsory subject till the graduate level. In addition to these two, students have to choose either Hindi, India's national language or English.

In addition to these, the students have a choice to select any one of the modern subjects such as Asian History, Archaeology and Culture, Tibetan History, Political Science, Economics, Pali, and Optional Sanskrit.

A master's course is specially designed in the field of Tibetan medicine. This not only helps students to start practising in the Tibetan settlements, but most importantly it helps to keep the tradition of Tibetan medicine alive and develop. Similarly, a master's course is designed in Tibetan wood craft helping students to earn their livelihood thereby keeping the tradition of woodblock painting, thangka painting alive.

Thus, the University has taken utmost care to design its courses in accordance with its objectives.

In order to preserve ancient Indian sciences and literature preserved in the Tibetan language, but lost in the original, the University established first of its research unit, viz. the Restoration Unit in 1980. This unit is engaged in restoring lost Sanskrit texts on the basis of their Tibetan translations. This is an achievement in itself since now these important works can be studied and analysed by those scholars who do not have an access to Tibetan. The Unit is thus proved of great importance from the Indian point of view as we could regain some part of our lost intangible heritage.

But, common people do not possess sufficient knowledge of intricacies of either Sanskrit or Tibetan. Thus, restoring texts in Sanskrit is not sufficient for the masses. To make knowledge embedded in these classical languages available to masses, the University established second of its research unit, viz. the Translation Unit in 1987. This unit is engaged in translating Sanskrit/Tibetan texts into Hindi and/or English.

Tibet had an honour to create the first bilingual dictionary in Sanskrit and Tibetan as a necessary tool for its translation activity. In 1980s a similar need was felt to compile a Tibetan Sanskrit dictionary that would be helpful in restoring lost Sanskrit texts from their Tibetan translations. The work of compiling this Encyclopedic Dictionary was taken up by the University in 1981 though the Dictionary Unit was formally established in 1986. The dictionary was successfully completed in 2005 in 16 volumes. Work of compiling other such dictionaries of high research value is going on.

At the same time, fourth research unit viz. the Rare Buddhist Texts Research Unit was established. This unit is engaged in bringing out the critical editions of a number of Buddhist Tantric texts in Sanskrit as well as in Tibetan. The bi-annual Journal “Dhik” of the same Unit supplies valuable information on rare Buddhist texts.

Besides these, the University has a library having a rich collection of books, manuscripts, micro-documents as well as audio-visual material pertaining to Tibetan and Buddhist studies. It also has its own wing of publication.

All this has gained the University the reputation as an International organization devoted to the re-vitalization of Tibetan Buddhism and culture. Thus, the Central University of Tibetan Studies stands firm in fulfilling the dream of Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of preserving Tibetan educational system for Tibetans and those belonging to the Himalayan region.

To conclude, when in 12th century, India was in a dire need of preserving Buddhist culture, a predominant part of Indian culture in totality, it chose Tibet for the same. Tibet not only preserved this tradition, it also nourished and cherished the Buddhist tradition. In 1950s, history repeated itself. This time, Tibet was in a need to preserve its own culture, blended beautifully with Indian culture. For this, its natural choice was India, the Land of Nobles (Aryabhumi), from where Tibet received not only its script but also Buddhism. It could have been the vision of only such great visionaries as Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru and His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama to establish such Institutes imparting knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism and thereby preserving Tibetan culture at large and thus restoring lost heritage of India.