



## CHALLENGE OF TIBETAN BUDDHIST LITERATURE IN BHUTAN

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**Abstract:** A new era took birth with the first sermon of Gautama Buddha to the Panch Vergiya Bikshu at Sarnath, Varanasi. His Dharma that propelled through Sri Lanka, Thailand, Burma in a form of conventional Pali medium are termed Theravadas and those countries like China and Tibet etc where all teaching were translated from both Pali and Sanskrit languages into their own language claim themselves Mahayana. From 7<sup>th</sup> Century till now, more than 5000 volumes of Sanskrit Buddhist texts have been translated into Tibetan language. Buddhism has been most influential and had prominent role in the development of Tibetan literature which has now spread around all Himalaya regions of South Asia including Nepal, Bhutan and Mongolia. In most of the Temples and Libraries of Bhutan, we can easily find those 5000 volumes of Tibetan translated texts. And though the most monks can easily read those texts, yet hardly only few could understand it's the literary mean. Hence, there is a huge gap between spoken and written language. Monks are thus to join higher Buddhist studies in order to understand those texts. This higher study consists of duration of five years and is considered as a big challenge. The main reason behind such gap between spoken and written Tibetan is that though the spoken Tibetan has changed with addition of new terms and its usage in due course of time, yet we couldn't update the written Tibetan accordingly and has remained as it was a thousand years ago. Bhutan's National language 'Zongkha' and Tibetan language are very similar to each other. Having good knowledge of both languages can help us to lessen this gap and understand the meaning of those texts.

**Key words:** Tibetan Buddhist, Tibetan Buddhist Literature.

### Introduction:

Impermanence is the nature of all existing phenomenon where rise and downfall has been evident since the existence of the whole universe. Capacity of human intelligence has given the human civilization great gifts in form of inventions, arts and sciences. However, these gifts too are facing decline when they pass through different phases of time and challenges. Similarly, Tibetan literature mostly of Buddhist Literatures; is one the richest literatures of the world which too is going through various challenges affecting its community as well as other related Himalayan Buddhist nations and states such as; Bhutan etc.

At first, I would like to throw some light on the origin of literatures belonging to main sciences in Tibet and how these sciences and their literatures came to Bhutan.

Existence of Buddhist literature is first recorded in the reign of King *lha tho thori* in 374 AD. It is said that three Buddhist scriptures known as *mdo sde za ma tog*, *nying po yi ge drug ma* and *spa kong phyag rgya ma* had landed upon his fort where some recent scholars claim they were offered by two monks from India.

In 6<sup>th</sup> century, minister *thon mi* went to India and learned various scripts from *legs shying kara* and invented Tibetan scripts and its grammar. Thereafter, he is said to have translated 21 tantras of Avaloketeshwar and others initiating the translation of Buddhist works in Tibetan.<sup>1</sup>

In 8<sup>th</sup> century during the reign of King *kbri srong lde btsan*, huge translation of Buddhist scriptures were carried with collaboration of Tibetan translators chiefly *ska ba dpal brtseg* etc and Indian Panditas. The translation works were carried on for two more reigns until the king *glang dar ma*.

In around 11<sup>th</sup> century, great translator *rin chen bzang po* revised the entire Tripitikas and many Shastras for their authentication. There were many prominent scholars who contributed in the translation of Buddhist scriptures in Tibetan. We can now find almost 5000 translated Buddhist scriptures in Tibetan language and are functioning at their potential.

**The cataloguing of the scriptures:**

The cataloguing of the scriptures was carried in 8<sup>th</sup> century at *'pang thang ka med* monastery. They were conducted as per the count of inter syllabic points (') called *tsheg dbar*. Every count of 8 *tsheg dbar* is equal to 1 line sentence. 4 of such lines would be counted as 1 verse. And 300 of such verse would be counted as 1 *bam po*.

Thus, while cataloguing, each scripture would be acknowledged with number of verses and *bam pos*. Thus in this way the first ever catalogue of Tibetan Buddhist scriptures known as "*dkarchag 'phangthang ma*" was made.

Likewise, translator *ska ba dpal brtseg* and others arranged another catalogue of entire Buddhist scriptures of that time called "*dkar chag mchim phu ma*" at *mchim phu* palace.

Similarly, another well known catalogue was created by *bcom ldan rig ral* in early 12<sup>th</sup> century called "*bstan pa rgyas pa rgyangyi 'od*". His disciple named *dbu pa blo gsal* started printing of the entire *bka' gyur* and *bstan gyur* or translation of Sutras and tantras found in *snar thang* monastery of Kham province and thus, the texts spread all around Tibet. He became one of the pioneers of *bka-bstan* publisher. This publication was known as *snarthang* publication. There are other publications that also became very popular such as *sde dge* publication and *lha sa* publication etc.<sup>2</sup>

**Development of Sowa rig pa or Ayurveda in Tibet:**

There are many historical evidences that claim of having standard ancient medical practices in Tibet around 3<sup>rd</sup> century though a standard medical text may not have introduced. During the time of King *stag ri rnyan gzig*s, a traditional doctor was summoned to cure his blind eye. Later, during his

son *gnam ri srong btsan*, astrology and medical practices were brought to Tibet from China for the first time which gradually became very popular.

The actual standard medicine texts and its academic teachings were introduced in Tibet in 6<sup>th</sup> century. It further propelled in 7<sup>th</sup> century, with composing of text named "*rgyud bzhi*" by Tibetan scholar *gyu thog rnying ma yon tan mgon po* which is considered as root text of Tibetan medicine. Later, more texts and traditions were introduced by various later scholars such as latter *gyu thog yon tan gonpo*, nine scholars of Tibet, the two *byang zur* scholars, the great fifth Dalai Lama and his minister *sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho* etc.

**Name of few popular medical texts in Tibetan:**

1. *Rgyud bzhi yan lag bryad pa*
2. *Gnas bcu gcig*
3. *Skabs bco lnga*
4. *Mdo bzhi*
5. *le'u bryad dang bcu drug* etc.

**Astrology**

Astrology is one of the important parts of ten sciences. The existence of astrology in Tibet can be dated back to more than 2000 years. Tibetan astrology can be categorised into four traditions. They are:

- |                     |                                     |
|---------------------|-------------------------------------|
| 1. <i>myonrtsis</i> | 2. <i>'byungrtsis</i>               |
| 3. <i>skarrtsis</i> | 4. <i>dbyngs 'char</i> <sup>3</sup> |

1. *myon rtsis* tradition is very old practice of performing astrological calculations. Here calculations are performed by the elders by inspecting the movements of sun, moon, stars, clouds and wind directions. By looking at the signs and changes upon the land, volume of water in lakes and humidity, elders would predict the rainfall, wind change and the most important of all; the suitable month for cultivation. There are still many villagers who can confirm the possibility of rain more accurate than our weather forecast on television.

2. *'byung rtsis* astrology is said to have introduced in Tibet around 636 AD. during the reign of King *srong btsan sgam po* when Princess Kongjo was invited to Tibet. With her came the second tradition. They were then translated into Tibetan.

3. *skar rtsis* tradition is calculation made by referring the five elements i.e. wood, fire, earth, metal and water. This calculation also consists of 12 astrological symbols (little different than our horoscopes), 8 trigrams or *spar kha bryad* and 9 *smre ba*. The end result can predict your health, lifespan, fortune and other good and bad possibilities of one's life and advises remedy to stop the bad omens.

4. *dbyngs 'char* tradition is derived from Hindu astrology from India.

#### Propagation of Buddhist Literature in Bhutan:

Few history texts have claimed that the entrance of Buddhism in Bhutan is said to have dated before 6<sup>th</sup> century AD. However, we find no evidence of academic teaching being introduced during that time. In general, it was during the 6<sup>th</sup> century when king *srong btsan sgam po* built the famous *skyid chu* temple in Paro and *'jam dpal* temple in Bhumthang meant to nail down a female demon. Thereafter during the reign of Bhutanese ruler of Bhumthang named *chin du ra dza* (probably Sindu Raja) who invited Guru Padmasambhava to subdue a demon and bless the land. Bhutan is now known as one of the most sacred hidden land and safe haven for Vajrayana practitioners. Many of the Hidden texts known as *gter ma* or Terma are said to have revealed from this land.

Bhutan has witnessed arrival of many reverend Tibetan Buddhist scholars since 11<sup>th</sup> century.

1. *Lama rgyal ba lha nang pa* (1164-1224)
2. *Pha 'jo 'gro sgom shig po* (1208-1276)
3. *Zhabs drung ngag dbang nam rgyal* (1594-1651)
4. *Lama lha sa* (17<sup>th</sup> century) and many other reverend Buddhist scholars visited and propagated Buddha's teaching in Bhutan.

Specially, *Zhabs drung ngag dbang nam rgyal* (1594-1651) had prominent role in uniting and establishing a Buddhist nation which he named *'brug* or Druk which means Land of *'brug pa* Kagyud lineage. He composed many Buddhist compositions, Lama dances and religious songs for the new Kingdom. He reigned till he was 70 years old.

The religious authorities are governed by a supreme ranked monk termed as *rje mkhan po* or Je

Khenpo. They are appointed as per their qualification and many of the Je Khenpos have played important role in propagation of Buddhist studies in Bhutan. For an example, the 69<sup>th</sup> Je Khenpo is said to have composed as many as about 10 volumes regarding with history, grammar, lexicon, commentaries on Sutras and Tantras.<sup>4</sup>

With the blessing of such masters, the Buddhism is still flourishing in a very healthy rate till now.

Statistic report of academic institutions or *bshad gra wa* till 1946 AD is recorded only one which is *Nyi ma Lung* institute in Bhumthang. In 1958, a new institution was built in Pung Thang followed by numerous academic institutions thereafter. In 2016, the numbers of higher Buddhist studies have increased up to almost 30. First modern education school was built in 1950. Total number of average student per school was 400 in 1961.

According to Annual Education Statistics 2016<sup>5</sup> reports:

1) Primary School	321
2) Lower Secondary School	69
3) Middle Secondary School	73
4) Higher Secondary School	59

In the general education system, there are **522** schools, which consist of 486 public schools including 51 central schools, and 36 private schools. Additionally, there are 96 Extended Classrooms (ECRs). The total enrolment from Pre-primary (PP) through to Class XII within the country for the current year is **169,560** with a total of 9,081 teachers.<sup>6</sup>

5) Monastic Education (Lobdra, Shedra etc.) = **200**

It is generally provided by two types of monastic institutions and the government supported monastic schools that fall under the Central Monastic Body (*Zhung Dratsbang*), and private monastic institutes that are established and managed by other religious leaders. The courses include language, arts, literature, philosophy, and meditation among others and provide qualification equivalent to bachelors and masters' programme.

The monastic institutes under the Central Monastic Body receive annual budgets from the

government whereas the private monastic institutes depend on donations. Education is provided free in both public and private monastic schools.

As per the administrative records maintained by the *Dratsbang Lbentshog* (Council of Religious Affairs), there are 7,240 monastic novices in 200 monastic schools and 3 nunneries across the country as of 2016. This does not include those monasteries not administered by the central monastic body and those studying abroad.<sup>7</sup>

Data on private monastic schools is not available.

The reason behind all this statistics is that Government of Bhutan recognised *rdzong kha* or Dzong kha as the state language of Bhutan and has been made compulsory to all till grade 10. It brought huge impact in the upliftment of Buddhist studies as Dzong Kha is very familiar with Tibetan language. It equipped lay people to be able to read and understand these Buddhist literatures as well as provided job scope to those who had good knowledge over those literatures.

### Conclusion:

Situation in this modern materialistic world is that bigger nations with military and financial strength are taking over the smaller nation influencing their language and culture. People tend to learn languages that can give us job and do business with. Thus, in pursue of better financial status, we unknowingly tends to neglect use of our own language. Thus, with lack of usage of language, giving less preference and new hybrid language that is mixture of languages has deteriorate the standard of our language in such a pace that it with few decades we may not be able to read our 1000 year old literatures.

Hence, it is duty for the government to give emphasis on our own language. Country like China and Japan has made government policies in such a way that promotes the need of learning one's own language. For an example, having knowledge of one's own language will have more possibilities of jobs. Implementing such similar steps can help really benefit and preserve one's language in this world of huge financial competition.

### Endnote:

1. Thrinly Dorjee and Jampa Wangdue, *Tibetan History Book of Mount Kailash High-School*, Kathmandu: Mount Kailash School School, 2009. pg. 16 to 22
2. Josey Tashi Tshering, *Buddhist Himalaya Studies in Religion History and Culture* (vol 3), Sikkim: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, 2008. pg. 41 to 45
3. Thrinly Dorjee and Jampa Wangdue, *Tibetan History Book of Mount Kailash High-School*, Kathmandu: Mount Kailash School, 2009. pg. 108 to 112
4. Zigar Khenchen Thirinly Dorjee, *Biography of Saint Scholars of the Drukpa Lineage* (vol 1), Nepal: Khenpo Shedup Tenzin, 2013. pg 376
5. Data of the Annual Education Statistics are collected through web-based Education Management Information System (EMIS) by Policy and Planning Division, Ministry of Education, Thimphu, Bhutan© 2016
6. <http://www.education.gov.bt/.../8dc6828d-4de3-4e57-bc8c-0f6e9...> pg 1
7. Karma Ura, *Journal of Bhutan Studies* (vol 5), Thimphu: The Center for Bhutan Studies, 2001.Pg 84 to 92