

HIMALAYAN DRAMA

- Bhajagovinda Ghosh

In this paper an attempt has been made to give a brief review of principal dramatic literature. However, before we discuss the main theme, we propose to give an outline of Lamaist Pantheon.

It is well known fact, that canonical literature are faithful translation from the Sanskrit originals. The verbal accuracy of these translations has been testified by scholars like Max Muller, Rhys Davis, Cowell, Tucci, Sarat Chandra Das, Rahul Sankrityayana and so on. A few translations were made from Pali eg. Vol. 30 of Suttas (Rockhill: udanavarga, X), many original Sanskrit texts are lost from India. In the mediaeval time Indian and Tibetan monks brought them and preserved in old Tibetan monasteries of Samye, Sankyia, Nar Thang and Phun Tsho ling etc..

The lamaist literature embodying the 'Buddha vacana' form the second objects or refuge - "Triple gem." Tibetan Buddhist canon consist of two sets of collection - Buddha Vacana and Tika - popularly known as Kanjur and Tanjur respectively. The two collection were briefly analysed by illustrious Hungarian (Bodhisattva) Tibetologist Csoma de Koros in Vol. 20 Asiatic Researches, Calcutta (Vol. XX-41 1820s).

The Kanjur is divided in three great sections :- Tripitaks (Tib. sde-snod-gsum).

(i) The Vinaya Pitaka (Tib. 'Dul-wa) or Discipline

(ii) The Sutra Pitaka (Tib. MDo) sermon of the Buddha inclusive Tantra.

(iii) The Abhidharma (Tib. chos-mngon-pa) or Metaphysics, Prajna Paramita (She-rab-Kyi-pha-Rol-tu phyin pa) or transcendental wisdom. Collection of Tanjur generally known as commentaries - is a encyclopaedic compilation of literary works, originally written mostly by Indian saints and scholars in Sanskrit and translated into Tibetan by Indian Pandits and Tibetan Lotsawa (Interpreter of Scriptures) in first few centuries commencing from 7th century A. D. Tanjur consist of 225 vols. Classified into several sections ; (i) Tantra (Tib. rgyud) mostly on Tantra rituals, Sadhanas and commentaries in eighty seven vols. (ii) Sutra Tika (MDo) one Hundred and Thirty six vols. (iii) one volume contains Hymns to Buddhist deities, saints and Jataka ; (iv) several vols. Modhyamika, yogacara and other Philosophy of Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu and other Buddhist scholars. (v) one vol. containing Tibetan-Sanskrit lexicon of Buddhist philosophical terms-Mahayutpatti. In Tanjur there is also a separate section on Dipankara Shrijnana Atishas works, which includes his famous work Bodhipatha Pradipa (Byam-chub-Lam-sgron). Tanjur contents also include poetic alamkara like Kavyadarsha of Dandin, Chhanda ratnakara of Ratnakarashanti (rhetoric) Kalidas's Meghaduta, Panini, Kalapa and Sarasvata grammars, Ayurveda-Astangahridya samhita and its commentary Padarthachandrika by Kashmirian Pandit Candranandana and so on.

Tibetan literature also abound in secular works like drama (Dogar), biography (Namthar), historical works on Buddhism in India, Mongolia and China (Chosjung), popular tales (Sgrungs) of Gesar Saga mighty mythical war like king of Northern Asia, Avandana, legendary story of Buddhas (rtogs-brjod). Enormous collection of

Tibetan religious and secular works are preserved in St. Petersburg, Toyo Bunko. (Oriental Library, Japan and Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok). Besides the substantial collection of Tibetan works are available in Asiatic Society, Calcutta ; Visvabharati and Library of Tibetan works and archives, Dharamsala, Himachal Pradesh, Bihar Research Society, Patna.

Two famous Buddhist sanskrit Dramas, Naganande Nataka (Klu-kun-Tu-dga'ba) and Lokananda 'Jig-rten-Kun-Tu-dga'-ba) were translated in Tibetan. The first in sanskrit and Tibetan by M. M. Vidhushekhara-Bhattacharya, Pub. Asiatic Society, Calcutta, the other also translated into English by Miss Ratna Basu. gser-brang-gyu-brang by Patul Rimpoche.

The Tibetan scholars were aware of other Indian works on rhetoric and epics, we find references to them in the commentaries of Kavyadarsa in Tibetan by Dandin. They were inspired to compose the indigenous dramas after studying the aforesaid Sanskrit dramas. Some popular dramas are, staged by Tibetan refugees in exile in India and abroad. There are several 'Dogar Tshog pas' (dramatic schools) in Dharamsala and other Tibetan settlements in India and abroad. In Sikkim monasteries and shedas on some festival days lamas and laymen stage legendary and historical drama is in local Tibetan sacred Dramas are based upon the former births stories of Buddha (Jatka/skye-rab), are widely staged in Himalyan region Sikkim, Ladakh, Spiti, Lahul and Bhutan. They are performed by professional lay actors and actresses. Generally known as A-Lche-lha-mo or sister goddess is strictly applicable only to the actresses who take part as the goddesses or their incarnation.

Some of the dramas have been written by great spiritual leader Fifth The great "Dalai lama" (Ngag-Dbang Blo-Bzang Rgya-mtsho, 1617-1682 A. D) in 17th century and Mingyur Dorjee. In Tibet the plays were usually performed at fresco without a stage frame to the picture. Now with the change of time and circumstances principal scenery of the plays are painted on the screen which are hung in the back of stage. The plot is presented in the form of chanted narrative comparable to the chorus of Greek plays.

In the course of which the participants in leading character dressed in traditional colourful costumes come to stage and speak for themselves some buffonery is given as a prelude and to also fill up the intervals between the acts. They are known as hunters (rngon-pa) with blue mask adorned with cowries. According to Waddell sometimes, as in the Hindu drama, the buffons are Brahman ; This fact stated by Waddell will have to be testified by Tibetan scholars in India, (L. A. Waddell : Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism).

The performance has also religious significance. It gladdens the god of soil as this guarantees the crops. The god of drama is worshipped at the centre of the stage when an altar is erected, surrounded by trees. The god is said to be Nyingmapa saint Thang-tong Gyalpo,¹ portrayed as an elderly men with a white beard.

The most popular drama of Tibet as rather National drama of Himalaya is the Thi-me-kun-dan (Dri-med kun-ldan), based on viswantara (Pali : vessantara Jataka No. 547) or the last great birth of Buddha. Indigenous drama Nang-sa or the Brilliant Light, "Chogyal Norzang (Chos-rgyal-Nor -bzang) based on Sudhana Jataka (Pali)",

rgyal-Za Bal-za, commemorates the marriage of mighty king Song-Tsan-Gampo-po', rgyal-po-Don-Dup the Indian king Amoghasiddha, Do-wa-znang mo ('gro-ba-bzang-mo) the consort of Kalesvara (Kala Wang-po).

The text of the story of vessantara as found in Tibetan canon, Thime Kundan (translated by Scheifner and English translation by Ralston in his Tibetan tales. Another translation by Rose, preserved in B.C. Low collection of Asiatic society, Calcutta; agree generally with pali and Burmese account - The story of we-than-Da-ya (Waddell).

We give hereunder abstract of vessantara Jataka from Pali canon. This story was told by Buddha while dwelling near Kapilavastu in the Banyan grove. This is the story of Buddhas last birth before attaining Buddhahood.

The story is that, when he was performing the duties of Bodhisattva, being in an existence corresponding to vessantara an existence, he dwelt with his wife and children on a mountain called vanka, one day a demon named Kharadathika (Sharp-fanged) hearing of Bodhisattva's inclination to giving in charity, approached him in the guise of a Brahmin, and asked the Bodhisattva for his two children, the king cheerfully and joyfully gave-up the children, thereby causing the ocean and earth to quake. The demon standing by the bench at the end of the cloistered walk, while the Bodhisattva looked on, devoured the children like a bunch of roots. Not a particle of sorrow arose in the Bodhisattva as he looked on the demon and saw his mouth as soon as he opened it is gorging streams of blood like flame of fire, nay, a great joy and satisfaction welled within him as he thought "my gift was well given." And he put up vow "by the merit of this deed may rays of light one day issue from me in this very way" - In consequence of this prayer of his it was that the rays emitted from his body when he became Buddha filled so vast a space.

Tibetan drama "Thime Kundan" or the Omnipotent pure one" is of exceptional interest to students of Buddhism. It recounts the story of one of the incarnations of the saint who was to be later as Sakya Muni. It takes us through a landscape of the most harrowing trials.

The scene is laid by Betha, is believed by Tibetans to be the ancient videha which they identify with the modern "Bethiah" in Northern Bengal, but according to scholars it was evidently in Northern India, one may be remote Nepal.

The young prince "Thime Kundan" in his instinct for charity by his father, who opens the Royal Coffers to his son so that he can dispense largesse. He is prompted too by chief minister who is also of a large and benevolent disposition. But there is a minister who is devoted to Evil. Between these two advisers the prince's lot is cast. The prince, in order to circumvent the good work of the Buddha, hurries him into a marriage with princess Mendezangmo. The lady is herself of virtuous quality, and instead hindering the activities of her husband, she supports them wholeheartedly.

In the possession of king is the famous cinta-mani gem (thought-granting gem) which grants all desires. One day a Brahmin appeared unannounced at the court. He has been sent by a king of the neighbouring country to inveigle from the king this treasure of his father's collection. The youth unable to resist any appeal for charity,

parts with the jewel. He and his wife are tried before hostile judge, they are condemned to wander forth to a destination called "The mountain of the Demons". Where they will be subjected to all sorts of trials. The exile is to be for twelve years.

The two set forth, hardly have they started or way, when they encounter three Brahmins who beg alms. "Thime Kundan" immediately parts with his three elephants which carry food for the journey. A little further away he gives away his horses and wagons. Further test follow when beggars demand of him his children, but he relinquishes this bond too. He hesitates a little when he is asked to surrender his wife but such is his possession for sacrifices that he consents even to this severance. But it is not required for him. Indra the Lord of Heaven had appeared in the habiliment of a mendicant in order to test his virtue. His wife was restored to him and husband and wife arrived together at the mountain of the Demons.

Here they took up some rest in separate huts and pass those time in Mystic meditation. The sorrows of life gradually take on a relevance and a meaning. In the silence of the hills a deep philosophy is born, they are strengthened in their determination to keep up their spirits to the end.

A short time after they have turned their steps towards home, the prince comes across a beggar and asks of him the gift of his eyes, Prince complies with the request and continues his journey blinded.

The beggar goes before them and announced to the king the marvellous bounty of his son. The monarch, heavy with remorse, comes to meet his child who, by a divine miracle, has had his sight restored.

All ends happily. The "Cintamani" jewel is restored to the original owner, all parties are reconciled. The Buddha freed by his love and detachment from the chain of existence, is transported to the heaven in the form of Lotus.

This legend in its dramatic form the most frequently performed of all Tibetan plays, has its counterpart in all Asiatic tongues. The Tibetan public never tire of its profound pathos and picture of lofty morality which it portrays.

It may interest the reader to quote a few examples of the lovely verse which carries the play along. The following extract describes the birth of the Buddha :-

"As soon as he was born, before any other word he said,
'Om mani Peme Hum'

Then, having said these words, he wept - He showed all beings a mercy like to the love of a mother for an only son",

I think it would be relevant to mention here that Vessantara Jataka is depicted in the central Asian fragment. In the Stein collection of Central Asian Antiquities in the National Museum, New Delhi, there is an interesting fragment of wall painting from Miran. Which was not identified as late as 1974. Dr. P. Banerjee, then Assistant Director, National Museum, in an article entitled "The Vessantara Jataka from Central Asia" (Bulletin of Tibetology, Vol. X, No.2, 1974), has observed "According to Stein and Andrews the main or central figure of the panel represent probably Gautama before his enlightenment and the figures at his feet, on the right, is an worshipper. I have studied the panel closely and find nothing in it to justify this probability, which invariably associated with the Buddha and Bodhisattva figure at central Asia. Again

in dress and appearance it bears no resemblance to any Buddha figure from miran or any other part of central Asia. In my opinion, the fragment depicts a part of the vessantara Jakata i.e., vessantara meeting his father before going to exile".

In my view even the central Asian Buddhist like Tibetan might have performed the drama of Thime Kundan.

Another popular play is Rgyal po Norzang "The king immaculate Jewel" an adaptation of the Sudhana Jataka (also known as Manibhadra) where a hunter (rñgon-pa) or rather fisherman, an incarnation of Vajrapani, is given a Jewel by a Nagi as capture a celestial fairy. The author of the play "Norzang" in the colophone, as stated by R. A. Stein, calls himself Tshering Wangdu, the mad man of Disgchen. And he added that he has merely altered the senseless words and jokes.

The plot is as follow :- A serpent - Charmer endeavours by incantation to capture the Naga which confers prosperity on a country. The Naga, alarmed at the potency of the sorcerer's spell, appeals to the hunter, who kills the sorcerer and is presented with a magic noose as a reward for his services. This noose he bequeathed to his son, Utpala or Phalaka. who one day in the forest of Valkalayana's hermitage at Hastinapur, hearing a celestial song sung by a marvelously beautiful Kinnari fairy, he captured the fairy with his Nagis noose. The Kinnari to regain her liberty offered him her jewelled crown. Which conferred the power of traversing the universe, meanwhile a young prince of Hastinapura named Sudhana or Manibhadra, engaged an hunting expedition, appears upon the scene. He gets the jewel, marries the Kinnari, and gives her his entire affection. His other wives, mad with jealousy, endeavour to kill her during his absence but she escapes to her celestial country, leaving, however, with the hermit a charmed ring for the Prince, should be seek to follow her to her supernatural home.

The Prince prusue her overcoming innumerable obstacles, and finally gains her and also obtains her father's consort to their marriage, and to return to the earth, when they live happy every after.

This comedian drama has a beautiful theme of harmonious reunion of two characters a mundane and the other supermundane.

Nang-Sa or "The Brilliant light". This drama is one of the most popular plays in Tibet, and its popularity is doubtness owing, not a little to is local colour being mainly Tibetan. Like most of the other plays, it is moulded on the model of the Buddhist Jatakas. Nang Sa is held to be an incarnation of Buddhist goddess Tara.

Its chief scene is laid at Rinang, a few miles to the south east of Gyantse a fortified town between Tashilhunpo and Lhasa where the several sites of the story are still pointed out, and an annual fair held in honour of Nang Sa's memory. It also well illustrates the current mode of marriage in Tibet by planting an arrow on the girl's back, so clearly a survival of the primitive form of marriage. This is 3 acts play.

Other plays based on a kind of Lamaistic Jatakas relating to the former lives of certain great Lamas. One such popular play is the rGyal-bza Bal-bza's commemorates Srong-tsan sGampo's marriage to the Chinese and Nepalese princess, taking the plot from an identically named romance found in Manikabum

(Ma-ni bka' - 'bum), nothing whatsoever is known about their authors and dates of compilation.

As a customary every sanskrit play begins with a prologue or introduction, which regularly opens with a prayer of benediction, (Nandi) invoking the national deity in favour of the audience. Then generally follows a dialogue between the stage-manager. (Sutradhara) and one or two actors. So the Tibetan play also following the sanskrit play tradition as a prologue invoke the blessing of Triratna (Tripple-gem). In the particular drama on the marriage of king srong Tsan Sgampo according to specialist Lamas and scholars, begin with invoking blessing of Tibet saints and scholars Thonmi-Sambhota recollecting his invention of sacred character "Ali" vowel and "Kali" consonant which he derived from the 7th century Brahmi (Nagari) script. He gave the Tibetan exact orthography carefully expounded in two of his writings. Sum-cupa and Rtags - 'jug which down to modern times have been basis of indigeneous grammatical instruction and comment. The Tibetan commentator on the two above stated orthography opines expression about Thonmis invention of Tibetan script form the land of Enlightenment. I quote here an introductory verse in praise of Thonmi and also invoking blessing of succession of saintly scholar who unfolded meritorious path for the Tibetan :

Skye-rGu-bsad-nams-mkh'a-la-'Dren-mDzad-pa'i/
skrul-Pa'i-chos-rGyal-Lo-Pan-Rim-byon-Dang/
Khyed-par-lugs'ti-srol-Byed-mchog-la-gus/
Thu-mi'i-legs-bshad-padma'i-dGa'-tsha-las//

Thonmi has been immortalised in this drama not only because of his invention of Tibetan script but by his act he has finally given the verdict to the Tibetan people for the acceptance of phraseology for interpretation of sacred Dharma.

An episode from Tibetan great yogi Mila Raspa's life - the conversion of the hunter kira Gompo Dorje or skits on theological disputation may be staged.

Beside the above dramas, even recent times plays on the life of Maha Guru Padmasambhava are very popular in Bhutan, Sikkim and other Tibetan settlement in India. One such play on the first propagation of Buddhism in Tibet is occasionally staged known as "Khenlop Chosum". The Principal character in the play are Guru Padmasambhava, Chogyal Trisong De'utsan, Santarakshita and Kamalasila.

The Episode of Sikkimese Hero Khyebum-sa and Gyad-bum sag Naljor chedzi kye chung pesong also dramatised in Sikkim.

Concerning the history of dharma, all we know is that New-year's plays were already being enacted at the court of seventh Karmapa hierarch (1454-1506). They included performance of Jataka of Buddha, stories of great siddhas, universal king (Cakravartin), rulers of great countries China, Tibet or the fight between the Devas and Asuras, and Indra with garudian gods of four direction - The Lokapalas.

If these dramas are popularised in India through rendering in different Indian language and dramatised, this will have harmonising potency and better understanding between the people of Himalayas and the people of plains. The dramas of all countries of world have an effect of universalization of individual

consciousness (Sadharanikriti) and uplift the mundane individuality to lofty supramundane harmonious state.

Brief Life sketch of THANG STONG RGYAL PO

1. The sage Thang stong Rgyal Po was born at Oka in Lha Tse (Lha-rtse) district of South-east Tibet in sixth Rabjung (sexegenary cycle) during Wood-Ox year corresponding to CA 1500 A.D. He was an ordained monk of Shang-Pa Kagyud order. He was widely famed as an extraordinary Siddha. He accomplished benevolent activities and welfare of being in six countries, i.e. India, China, Central Tibet "U" and "Tsang" and Upper and Lower Tibet (Kham) etc. He composed dramatic literature on the stories of Tibetan kings. These exquisite historical plays were staged by the dramatists in open stage. These dramatists are renowned nowadays as Atsa-Lhamo (A-stag Lha-Mo). He passed away at Zung-ri bo-che (Gzung-ri bo-che) during Earth-Female Snake year corresponding to sixth Rabjung at the age of 125.