

ENCOUNTER AND ENGAGEMENT: VIGNETTES OF THE TRANS-HIMALAYAN REGION

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores Russian and non-Russian trajectories within the Eurasian space and the ways in which those narratives can be situated within the broad perspective of transnational Buddhism. Growing interest in the resurgence of Buddhism in the post-Soviet period points to a Tibetan engagement revolving round the ideal of Buddhist enlightenment that connected people and spaces of Asiatic Russia and South Asia. The discussion is about diverse pathways of reform in colonial societies in the early decades of the 20th century as well as the multiple trans-Himalayan connections and experiences of Indian scholar travellers (like Mahapandita Rahul Sankrityayana) and surveyors in service of the East India Company (like Sarat Chandra Das). The attempt here is to focus on the experiences of these travelling minds, pointing to the orientalist networks between the Buddhological school of St. Petersburg and a diffused group of non-Russian orientalists on the India-Nepal border. The Tibetan journeys and Tibetan missions in which both South Asian and Russian orientalists participated reflect a series of regional processes that unfolded at the turn of the century. Such accounts point to the fascinating aspects of transnational Buddhism which impacted on the minds of visitors coming from various backgrounds. Such textual analysis also opens up a broad discursive space about interactive moments in regional histories of South Asia and Central Asia

Keywords: Agvan Dorjiev, Nepali-Tibetan borderland, Nicholas Roerich, Rahula Sankrityayana, Sarat Chandra Das, Shambhala, Trans-Himalayan space, Younghusband expedition.

INTRODUCTION

The region north of the Himalayas and the Karakorum Range that overlaps with the borderlands of Asiatic Russia and Chinese Turkestan has been commonly viewed as a strategic space that was explored by British and Russian colonial administrators and their envoys, agents and surveyors en route to their sacred destinations and frontier garrisons in Tibet or trading centres in the 'new dominions' of Chinese Turkestan. The spotlight was on the imperial extravaganza in these regions, narrated by men on mission some of whom were aggressive military strategists like Sir Francis Younghusband and others who as diplomatic envoys were, extremely cautious and perceptive in their dealings with local authorities in Tibet and Chinese Turkestan.

A completely different perspective of the region was by a section of visitors who came to the region under the generic category of 'explorers' of various hues and backgrounds who merged their geographical expertise with treasure-hunting skills (as in the case of Marc Aurel Stein) and those from the Indian side with artistic zeal or trading ambition (Rahul Sankrityayana, Nicholas Roerich and Sarat Chandra Das). Such accounts have received attention in contemporary writings where authors talk about a trans-Himalayan space featured by Buddhist art and tradition.¹

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Such impressions are very different from colonial literature that focus on men and their imperial missions, and also their envoys who have been deputed by their imperial masters to navigate the terrain for exploring trade routes and befriending local communities in order to outsmart other regional competitors. Quite inevitably, the attention was on Tibet and its protégé Nepal—which was the access route for all Tibet-related missions.

TIBETAN ENCOUNTERS: DIFFERENT STROKES

We get an idea of the imperial extravaganza which was flagged off by grand diplomatic missions like that of George Bogle in the 18th century² and was revived by military expeditions like that of Sir Francis Younghusband in 1904. On the other hand, there is a tendency to redeem the image of explorers like Sir Marc Aurel Stein who tracked the desert terrain of Eastern Turkestan and discovered some of the remarkable Silk Road sites of Buddhist art in Hami, Dunhuang and Kara Khoto—and who has faded into historical memory as a relic hunters.³ Less talked about are pursuits of private traders like Robert Shaw who befriended the *ambans* and *begs* of Chinese Turkestan in order to push British Indian tea into Chinese markets. Similarly, much less noticed are the survey missions of Bengal's interlocutors like Sarat Chandra Das who created a world of their own as men trained in Sanskrit and Tibetan language and easily mingled with Tibetan communities along the Nepal-Sikkim border. The purpose here is to weave together such a wide array of accounts in order to portray an image of the Eurasian ecumene centred on Tibetan engagements. These engagements reflected the monastic establishments as a storehouse of Buddhist manuscripts that were recovered by men of wisdom from India in general. It is these men's unusual journeys (often through the eastern sector), their ability to make an impression on the Tibetan mindset not due to diplomatic overtures but because of their charisma as scholar travellers and their visions of a pan-Buddhist Asia based on the Buddhist connections dating back to almost 2000 years.

Within the framework of Tibetology or Tibetan Studies, various facets about an Indo-Tibetan relationship have been explored. An interesting feature of this relationship is Tibetans' fixation about India. Tibetan travellers' understanding of India as a vast corpus of Indo-centric Buddhist literature revolves round the wisdom and compassion of Buddha Sakyamuni as well as the philosophy of his disciples Nagarjuna, Asanga, Vasubandhu, Dignaga and Dharmakirti. What the Indians have looked for in Tibet is something similar—i.e. nerve centres of Indian-inspired Buddhist schools and lineages. These units have been transformed into knowledge bases disseminating Buddhist knowledge through Indian Buddhist missionaries and their Tibetan converts. So, India as an object of Tibetan knowledge is as important as the centrality of Tibet in Tibetan engagements with India and the rest of Asia—be it Russia, Buryatia, Kalmykia or Mongolia. Research has yielded ideas about sacred geography about Buddhism, referring to sites in India that are associated with The Buddha and Buddhism. In the evolving discourses about The Holy Land, attention moves to the shifting terrain of the Buddha.⁴

There are clichés as well as realities about India's Tibetan engagements and vice versa. Taking into consideration the overall appeal of site-mapping, this paper tries to show how Indians as well as their counterparts in the rest of Asia became involved in pursuit and exchange of that knowledge in Himalayan territory—something which is very different from the colonial paradigms of contestation and control.

SOUTH ASIAN JOURNEYS

A. DIPLOMACY AND TRADE MISSIONS

Diplomacy was the forte of Indian intermediaries who were employed in the Company's service. With the intention of 'using Asiatics to conciliate Asiatics',⁵ the Company's Government in India were keen to depute Bengali Pundits who not only had the 'qualities of a European explorer' but also had the ability of befriending local Rajas and Tibetan teachers as well as spiritual masters (Rinpoches) of Tashilhunpo Monastery to get access to Lhasa through the Sikkim route. The main purpose was to chart the Sikkim overland route for trade purposes and his method was interaction at a personal level with the Tibetan communities. The advantage of knowing the local language and the ability to befriend lama scholars who guided them through uncharted tracks in the Himalayan region have been the principal selling points of these indigenous brokers on Tibetan soil. The account of one such intermediary, Sarat Chandra Das, an Indian Pundit who travelled through Sikkim into Tibet during 1879-1891 with the expertise of a scientific geographer is extremely engrossing.

Born in Chittagong to a Hindu family in 1849, Sarat Chandra Das first studied engineering in Calcutta. As headmaster of the Tibetan Boarding School in Darjeeling, he developed a passionate interest in Tibet, its language, Buddhist religion, cities and places of pilgrimage. With his knowledge of Sanskrit and Tibetan and his expertise in Tibetan medicine, Das

was acknowledged as Tibet's special visitor. His name was enrolled as a student of theology in the Grand Monastery that ensured his safe existence in the suspicious environment. The British were clearly on the receiving end when it came to exploration of new trade routes. Personal equations mattered and knowledge of a Buddhist space made the real difference and it is quite evident that people like Sarat Chandra Das succeeded while their colonial masters failed. Das's searching mind was focussed on the little known ancient monasteries (some more than 800 years old) where classical subjects like metaphysics, medicine were taught. These lamaseries and monasteries were a storehouse of documents on Buddhism and lay on the entire stretch of the road to Lhasa, along trading joints Shigatse and Gyantse where trade competition was intense. It is also apparent that there was strong bond between Sikkim and Tibet (often strengthened by marital ties among royal families).⁶

Sarat Das was a reporter who drew a balance sheet, making a correct assessment of the situation as it were. This exposed the odds about which the British were mostly unaware of. His unique method was to pacify his adversaries through personal interaction rather than antagonise them through military action or trade competition.

B. CULTURAL MISSIONS

South Asian scholar explorers like Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947) and Rahula Sankrityayana (1893-1963) came from different backgrounds. In the course of their Himalayan journeys, both of them depicted Asiatic Russia as a domain that was characterised by features as Mongol resilience, Buddhist lineage and shamanist traditions. Nicholas Roerich was an ardent proponent of the East's messianic tradition. He spent 24 years in the East, settling down in India, in the North, and travelling to Central Asia, Tibet, China, Mongolia and Japan. He undertook two expeditions to Asia on foot, not directly from Russia, but from the west to Asia, through Northern India. His idealized geographical landscape was somewhere in the landlocked mountainous region in the Himalayas and the Altai. His mountain art was inspired by a multitude of images about the Buddhist spiritual space that was articulated through his art. The region he chose to paint this time was essentially Asia, and not Russia. His main purpose was an attempt to trace the origins of all Eurasian religious traditions which had a common source-- in the mythical lands such as Shambhala and Belovodye which were the scenes of esoteric Buddhism.

Nicholas Roerich's goodwill Central Asiatic Expedition of 1923-28 began with the artistic aim 'to create a pictorial record of lands and peoples of Inner Asia.' The trip was the outcome of a combination of diverse but related interests-- artistic ambitions and spiritual quest in the Trans-Himalayan mountain territory. Roerich's sojourn to Tibet, Mongolia as well as Buryatia in the Altai was linked to his contacts with spiritual masters of Inner Asia who wanted to create a spiritual community of the Buddhist faith.

Roerich led two expeditions, the first one in 1923-28 and the second one in 1930-31. The first expedition, directed along the Srinagar-Leh-Ladakh route to the Altai via Chinese Turkestan (Khotan-Karashahr-Aksu-Urumchi-Kashgar), immortalised in his travel diary *Altai-Himalaya* (1929),⁷ gives us a glimpse of various images of spirituality, authority and defiance in Chinese Turkestan. Beyond Urumqi and Dzhungaria, the alternative route of entry was through Mongolia. Siberia was to be the first port of entry along this new route.

From the viewpoint of a Tibetan mission, Roerich's Himalayan expedition was a wasted trip. But, his only solace was his belief about the land of the Shambhala which lay not in Tibet, but in the Altai. Greater prospects of the revival of Buddhism, in his view, lay in India's Himalayan borders, i.e. Sikkim and Bhutan.

The stresses and strains and transformative aspects of the Himalayan region were not clear to many Indians though some of them did feel the need to revive the region's spiritual and linguistic traditions. To this generation belonged Rahul Sankrityayana, an Azamgarh-born scholar whose varied interest in lexicography, Sanskrit, Hindi and Pali texts and Buddhist philosophy brought him into close contact with the community of orientalist and historians in Europe and Asia. Rahulji documented his journeys to Tibet, Ladakh, Sri Lanka, Europe, Japan, Korea, Iran and finally the Soviet Union during the 1920's, 1930's and the 1940's in a series of travelogues.⁸ During his travels as a Buddhist *bhikku*, he described the cosmopolitan environment of the Himalayan region. In Sankrityayana's worldview, the region, despite its remoteness from the metropolitan core, was dynamic and vibrant. According to Rahulji, the inter-connectedness of a vast region was due to literary and linguistic links despite the dispersal of communities over a large Himalayan space. This was evident in his interaction with the Drukpa community in the Himalayan plains whose villages were Buddhist hamlets in which Buddhist affiliations thrived. This community gave Rahulji shelter and assisted him on his journey to Tibet that was under strict surveillance of the Nepali government (under Chinese supervision) that was still wary of casual travellers from British India. The members of the Drukpa community became his fellow-travellers to Lhasa. He convinced them of

his interest in Buddhist classical learning, and his desire to make India a storehouse of Buddhist texts and also popularise Buddhist practices in India. Rahulji's journey on foot across the Himalayas gave him a first-hand experience of the prosperous Nepali tribal communities like Gorkhas, Nebars, Tamangs, Gurungs, Elmos, Sharbas—each of them pursuing trade activities under the Ranas of Nepal. Trekking through villages like Thongla, Longkor, Tingri, Domba, Chakaur, Lahurch and Northong perched at an altitude of 14,000 feet Sankrityayana experienced the cosmopolitan environment of a Himalayan highland with several gateways—some of which were very different from the far easier Phari-Kalimpong route that was a commercial-military route.

The Nepali-Tibetan borderlands had many Buddhist communities who mingled with commoners and strangers of every hue. Rahulji entered Tibet via Nepal. In the late 1920's, he reconnoitred Tibetan monasteries that were the rich archives of Buddhist literature. His assistants took him to the heart of the monastic establishments in Lhasa where he was able to interact with students who came from Mongolia and Buryatia and were living in the Drepung and Sera monasteries to study Tibetan Buddhism. The Buddhist texts were jealously guarded by the Tibetan guards. Rahulji's Tibet retrospective is a full length account of the richness of Tibetan archives and the strong Indian-Tibetan scholarly links dating back to the age of Atisha Dipankar Śrījñāna(980-1054 AD) and others—the link that was broken due to imperial ambitions. As the rare Buddhist scholar from India, he was gradually involved in top-level discussions about a liberationist model that swept through the intellectual circles and academia of St. Petersburg and southern Siberia in the early years of Bolshevism. He came into closer contact with prominent intellectuals like Feodor Scherbatsky in the Oriental Institute of Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow that nurtured intellectuals with nationalist ambitions as in Russia and Mongolia. The potentiality of an Asiatic revival with Tibet as the pinhead became evident to Rahulji.

TIBETOLOGISTS FROM RUSSIA

Such revival came about at the turn of the 20th century when the surroundings of Lake Baikal became the nestling ground of Buryat autonomists. They responded to the new ideological approach about the study of ancient Buddhist texts that was emphasised by Russian orientalists S.F.Oldenburger and Scherbatsky in St. Petersburg. Their conviction about the knowledge of the Buddhist lamas led them to support the cause of lama ideology. Since the 1890's, the interpretations of eastern educators about Buddhist knowledge domain were adopted whole heartedly. Gombozhob Tsybikov (1873-1930), Bazar Baradin (1878-1937) and Tsyben Zhamtsarano (1880-1942) became future leaders of the Buryat autonomy movement after 1905 uprising in Russia and participated in the 'nationalist reconstruction' project in Buryatia in the 1920's. These Buryats were admitted to the Oriental Faculty at St. Petersburg and attained access into imperial diplomatic service. As students they were offered special training for their research trips to Tibet.

Gombozhob Tsybikov and Bazar Baradin reported to their Tsarist mentors about the state of Tibetan affairs. During his research trip to Tibet from 1899 to 1902, Tsybikov played a double or even triple role---as a fellow traveller and travel companion of the Buryat pilgrims, a dedicated fieldworker of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society taking unusual risks and as Russian secret agent whose goal was to gather as much geographical information about the political and socio-economic situation in Tibet, as possible. His trip went unnoticed in the west until the Younghusband military expedition (1903-04) that opened up a Pandora's Box about clandestine links among interventionists centering Tibet and the role of secret agents in this imperial 'game' for gaining access to the borderlands. The needle of suspicion was automatically turned to men on spot like Tsybikov and Sarat Chandra Das.

Tsybikov's reports⁹ say that after a year-long stay in Lhasa during which he collected valuable books by lama scholars on philology, astronomy, medicine, history and hu-rums (incantations), he turned up at the high passes of Central Tibet where he waited for the Kozlov expedition. In this report, there is a sketchy description of a fertile highland dotted with monasteries like Sera, Amdo, Daibun and Galdan and the communication among populous trade centres like Shigatse, Gyantse and Lhasa, and the settlements of foreigners and traders of Indian origin that Tsybikov saw. During his journeys, the mystery of old Tibet unravelled as he passed through the Buddhist pilgrimage route from China via the Mongolian grasslands, the Gobi, Tsaidam and onto Lhasa.

These intellectuals gradually drifted to the alternative political model of a Tibeto-Mongolian theocratic state with Dalai Lama as the leader and Agvan Dorjiev as his advisor. With their eastern mindset, and their eastern pathways, their agendas came to be associated with the broader transnational Buddhist space that India and her Himalayan neighbours represent. The widest coverage is about Agvan Dorjiev (1853-1938), the 13th Dalai Lama's Buryat emissary to Tibet who is rumoured to be actively involved in a parallel diplomatic engagement---i.e. Russian military preparations in Tibet. The interplay of local factors with imperial motivations is not a new subject of study. Somewhat refreshing is the Buryat

connection and the intriguing regional politics in the Himalayan region centring Tibet. What has also assumed focus is the wide gamut of trans-national networks based on the lamas' contacts.

Dorjiev's activities in Tibet and Russia, from the late 19th century until 1904 when he fled from Lhasa in the Dalai Lama's retinue, have been well recorded in his own memoirs. Glimpses of his career are available in his Mongolian and Tibetan autobiographical accounts and his Russian memoir (*Zapiska o moei zhizni v Tibete*) which ends rather abruptly.¹⁰ His political career began in the Lhasan court and he was able to convince Lhasa about British geopolitical interests and possibilities of British India's encroachments in trans-Himalayan sector.

Dorjiev's secret contacts with Buryat and Indian scholars and intermediaries, some of them being Indian Sanskritologists like Sankrityayana, also indicate the range of his ideas and his reach that few could comprehend at that time. Dorjiev alerted the Dalai Lama about British secret activities on Tibet's Sikkim border. The Dalai Lama and his associates left the Tibetan capital for a safer refuge in Mongolia. Such a dramatic sojourn happened just before the Younghusband Mission—so it was pretty clear that spiritual envoys like Agvan Dorjiev had a significant role to play as arbiter in Tibetan affairs.

CONCLUSIONS

Perceptions of a trans-Himalayan space varied because the contexts and content of the missions were different. The accounts are sombre reflections of local and regional geopolitics. Roerich's preference for alternative spiritual sects and leaders in the Chinese Altai struck a discordant note. Sankrityayana's perception of humanism and socialist order set the tone for political alternatives in resurgent India—an intellectual trend which can be compared to the ideas of Buryat autonomists who were trained as intelligence gatherers just like their counterpart in British India, Sarat Chandra Das. The variety of Eastern missions reflected the trans-Himalayan region (and Tibet in particular) not only as a space that gained notoriety for colonial encounters but also as an interactive cultural space that was visited by scholars from South Asia and Asiatic Russia who also turned out to be great disseminators of Buddhist learning.

ENDNOTES

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6. Sarat Chandra Das, pp. 98-107.
7. Nicholas Roerich, *Altai-Himalaya-a travel diary*, [First published in 1929]. Reprint, Delhi: Book Faith India, 1996.
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