TIBETAN LANGUAGE AND ITS DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

Tibetan language is like a tree which has many branches of dialects, i.e. Ladakhi, Balti, Lahuli, Spiti, Sherpa, Sikkimese and many other off-shoots that are spoken in the Trans-Himalayan regions ranging from Northern Himalayas to Eastern part of India. It is also spoken in Mongolia, Russia (Kalmyk and Buryat and Tuva republic) Nepal, Bhutan and South West of China. The Tibetan language script was brought from India in the seventh century by ThonmiSambhota one of the minsters of the great King Srong-btsansGampo, with whom the history and Tibetan literatures began and flourished. During the kings TrisongDetsen and Tri Ralpachen in eighth and ninth century, a huge translation works had taken from Sanskrit into Tibetan. Indian Pandits like Shantarakshita, Padmasambhava and Atishahad given immense contributions in the land of snow. Thus, Tibet is successful to preserve one of the most important literatures of the world that is the literature of the Gautama Buddha and the great Nalanda Buddhist scholars’ legacy.

Key words: Origin of Tibetan Language, Root texts of Tibetan Language and Contribution of native Tibetan Scholars.

Introduction

The Tibetan art of writing came to its existence in seven century when the Tibetan Dharma king Srong-btsansGampo\(^1\), son of the 32\(^{nd}\) king NamriSrong-btsan, was enthroned in 617, A.D.\(^2\) at the

\(^1\) The name Srongtsan ‘Srong’ denotes the king’s honesty and pure mind and ‘tsan’ means that his command and rules are strict and equal to all subjects without any partiality to tame the undisciplined people as well as to make them follow the religious and political path. sGampo denotes his wise, stern and prudent personality.

age of thirteen after his father was assassinated by his domestic attendants. Unlike other children, the king since his childhood had an extraordinary talent and skills to govern Tibet and its people and who firmly formed the political system of Tibet. Thus, he became the first Tibetan Dharma King who brought Tibetan art of writing as well as unified different tribes residing in the Tibetan plateau. Further, he established a centralized emperor, which was earlier scattered into small principalities. He actively ruled over Tibet and extended the area of his political rule over to China, Nepal and other neighboring countries. His glowing reign influenced the neighboring countries of China and Nepal, which made them to seek alliances with Tibetan King, and as a sign of friendship, the king married with two princesses: First was Brikuti Devi in 637 from Nepal and second was princess Wen chengin 641 that means Lotus of the Lake4 from the Tang dynasty of China. On the occasion of the king enthronement, the representatives from neighboring countries came with presents and letters to wish him but Tibet at that time was not in a position to send back the greetings in its written form as they did not have script of their own and were mainly depended on conveying oral messages. This situation profoundly struck the king and he along with his ministers discussed and reflected upon the matter intensely and decided to have their own script (Tibetan) and to bring Buddhism from India. There is no doubt that Tibet already does have a language but there was no writing system and Grammar before Strong-btsansGampo’s reign. However, the primitive religion of Tibet that is Bonpo claims that there was a script of Zhang-Zhung called Marchenand Marchung before the seventh century but so far, no evidence has been found. The use of Zhang-Zhung script in the model of Lanchana (Ranjana lipi) or Lancha, as claimed by the Bonpo priest prior to the innovation of Tibetan script (cent. 7th A.D.), may be hard to substantiate. Neither the Iranian source, nor the Chinese materials of the Wu dynasty record the detail about their neighboring people of the Trans- Himalayans.5 Therefore, the king sent sixteen of his young talented Tibetan to India (land of Aryas)6 including

6 India is known as ’Phagsyal (land of Aryas) by Tibetans as India was a great land for the knowledge about Buddhism and its Scholars.

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Thonmi Sambhota with handsome gold as a gift to Indian masters with the purpose to learn the Indian linguistics and Buddhism. However, unfortunately, some of them died due to excessive heat and few went back because of hardship on their way to India. Thonmi Sambhota who was courageous and wise reached India and got himself engaged in thorough study of Indian education especially on Mahayana Buddhism and linguistics under the guidance of South Indian Brahman li-byin. He offered gold as a present and requested him to teach the ancient Indian education.

Nevertheless, it remained imprecise in the history of Tibet whether Thonmi Sambhota went to South India or Kashmir or some other places of India. He did not write a memoir as the other Far East Asian countries like Chinese and Korean monks did while their trip to India or he would have failed to write, as there was no script for Tibet prior to him. However, Tibetan historians and linguists are having different views on this context like Zhalu Choskyong (1441-1527) rNamling Penchen (1641-1718) Prati Geshe Rinchen dondub (16th century) Setu Panchen Choski 'byungnas (1699-1718) and Tsetan Zhabdsrung (19th century) claimed that Thonmi Sambhota went to south India. However, according to his visit to India, it is more appropriate to say that, he would have visited Nalanda and Kashmir, as these places were famous Buddhist learning Centre at that time. It can be proved that, there was much curiosity for the Far East Asian countries’ people about the mystical land of Buddha, i.e. India. Therefore, from the 4th to 8th centuries, many monks travelled to India. Some died during their trip, but Korean monk like Gyeomik and Hyechoreturned to home with the gift of Indian Buddhism. Gyeomik also studied in Universities such as Nalanda in India and became fluent in Sanskrit. Similarly, Chinese monks like Fa-Hsien (4th century A.D.), Hsuan Tsang (7th century A.D.), Ou-khong (8th century A.D.) also travelled to Northern India and visited Nalanda University as well.

\[7\] Thonmi Sambhota was one of the king’s wisest ministers who is known as the father of Tibetan Grammar and literature.

\[8\] li-byin is written in accordance with the song sung by Thonmi Sambhota in front of his counterparts ministers. Some other different forms that appeared for his master name are Lipikara, Legsbyin and Libyinhara.

\[9\] Shanker Thapa, (?) Transmission of Indian Buddhist Thought in East Asian Historiography: Dhyanabhadra (Chi-Gong) and Buddhism in 14th century Korea. Kathmandu:

\[10\] Fa-Hsien pilgrimage to India was to procure Buddhist texts related to monastic rules i.e. Vinaya and that was his main trip purpose to India. His travelogue A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms provides detailed accounts of Indian society and its virtues as well as monastic institutions. The biographies of Chinese
A well-known Tibetan scholar Buston also mentioned that Thonmi Sambhotawas sent together with sixteen other fellows to Kashmir to study the script, and having studied phonetics Sgrawith the Pandita Lharigpa’ Senge, he assembled the 30 consonants and 4 vowels in accordance with the Tibetan language by taking the model of Kashmiri\textsuperscript{12} script. It is also clearly specified in Yi ge’ibshad pa mkhaspa’ikhargyan(The mouth- Ornament of the wise) that Thonmi Sambhota studied under the Brahman li-byinat Sri Nalanda University. The most renowned Tibetan historian Shakabpahas also mentioned in his book Tibet a Political History that Thonmi Sambhotawent to Kashmir in northwest India, where he had as his tutors Lipikara and Devavidyasimha.

However, in India Thonmi Sambhota met with Brhamanli-byin or Lipikara and requested him to teach language and Buddhism. He thus said:

“I am a minister of the remote land of Tibet. My king, the Great Compassionate One, in order to satisfy his subjects with dharma and to establish the law of the country in accordance with ten virtues, as there is no system of writing in my country, has sent me to study letters in India. Please teach me letters, grammar and logic.”\textsuperscript{13}

Under his guidance, Thonmi Sambhota learnt the ancient Indian education especially on Language, Grammar and Buddhism. He also studied Panini, Chandra and Kalapa’s Vyakarans from Pandita Lha rig pa’ Senge and became learned specially the treatises on philosophy which is hard to understand, and treatise on administration, which is relatively less hard to understand. Therefore, he was given the name Sambhota (Good Tibetan) by Indian masters for achieving extraordinary skills in the field of knowledge. Besides, as a token of appreciation master Lipikara offered him a note of praise and wishes. He thus said:

“You have achieved the pinnacle of all sciences. Now accomplish the wishes of the magically emanated king Satisfy all the beings of Tibet with letters, grammar, logic, scriptures and instructions.”\textsuperscript{14}

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\textsuperscript{12} Kashmir was known as Khacheyin Tibetan.


\textsuperscript{14} Ibid
Having completed his studies in Indian he returned to his homeland. It is not clear how many years he spent in India but it is mentioned in *Bod mkhas pa’ dam -choslegs bam* that he spent seven years in India while studying. On his return to Tibet, he resided in the castle of *Maru* near Lhasa where he also did three years retreat with the Dharma king and taught him the art of language and literature. The king was overwhelmed as his dream was not only fulfilled but also for the first time in the history of Tibet, *Thonmi Sambhota* brought the gift of writing from India and laid the foundation of literary system. Consequently, he was probably given the title *sLobpon* (Acharya) by the king as an honor. This event plays a significant role in the history of Tibet where indigenous religion i.e. *Bon* was taken over by Buddhism as well as creating new script for translating Sanskrit religious texts into Tibetan. Eventually, *Thonmi Sambhota* invented Tibetan script of four vowels and thirty consonants in accordance with the Tibetan language phonetics. From the sixteen of Sanskrit vowels he took only four, which coincided with Tibetan. The four Tibetan Vowels are:

**Sanskrit Vowels (16)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>अ</th>
<th>आ</th>
<th>ई*17</th>
<th>उ*</th>
<th>ऊ</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ऋ</td>
<td>ऌ</td>
<td>ए*</td>
<td>ऐ</td>
<td>ओ*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ओ</td>
<td>औ</td>
<td>ॠ</td>
<td>टू</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These four vowels are called *dByangs* in Tibetan. When a vowel is used by joining with simple or compound form it changes into these symbols, ु*Gegu* (ू), ु*Zhabskyu* (ू), ु*Grengbu* (ू), ु*rNru* (ू), representing the sound of i, u, e, and o respectively, i.e. (ू)*ri,*

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15 This source is not yet found
16 According to Tsetan Zhabdrung, rest of the sixteen vowels are: अः जः ऊः भः भः खः तः थः धः ं
17 Four Tibetan vowels taken from Sanskrit (*)

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However, Tibetan great scholars like Sakya Pandita and dByangs-can Grupa’irdorje accepted ‘a’ also as one of the vowels. Hence, they concluded that there are five vowels in Tibetan grammar. Further, dByangs-can Grupa’irdorje justified his point by saying that “if vowels are not present then the consonants cannot be expressed. Therefore, it is more appropriate to accept five vowels.” In this context, there is a huge contradiction in the exact number of vowels. The sound of vowel ‘a’ does exist in the consonants while its articulation, so by this reason earlier times they used to write small letter ‘a’ after each consonant, like, ka, kha, ga, nga, (ཀཟ་ཁཟ་གཟ་ངཟ་). Later, in the eight century, this system of writing was abandoned by the second Tibetan Dharma King Khri-Sronglde-tsan for a convenient writing during the reformation of Tibetan Language (sKadgsarbcad). It is therefore, more suitable to consider (a) both as a vowel as well as a consonant since it functions not only as vowel but also as a consonant letter to form a name or word, like Ama, (mother), Along, (ear ring), Asngon (sky) and so on. The letter ‘a’ possesses the most distinct potential to perform double characters unlike the other consonants. If it is not included in vowels, it is simply not accepting the fact of its existence in the consonants. Therefore, one of today’s most renowned Tibetan scholars Sangye Tander Naga states that:

“This in connection the extensive grammatical treatises have elaborate discussions on the question of whether the number of vowels should be counted as four or five. I think that, in this context it is unnecessary to delve into this question and thus prefer to leave it untreated here. In my own opinion it is somewhat more appropriate to take the number of the vowels to be five.”

The distinction between vowel and consonant is that while articulating any sound, those which do not possess a clearly discernible place of articulation and articulator and are being forced, are vowels. Those sounds, which possess a clearly discernible by the means of creating closures and openings in the articulatory tract like lips and so forth, are consonants.

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19 Ibid. p. 28
The thirty Tibetan consonants are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tibetan</th>
<th>Phonetics</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ක</td>
<td>khakhatanka</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ཐ</td>
<td>cha janya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ཐ</td>
<td>ta tha da na</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ཕ</td>
<td>pa phaba ma</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>བ</td>
<td>tsatshazava</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>བ</td>
<td>zhaza a ya</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>བ</td>
<td>ra la shasa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>བ</td>
<td>ha a</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Sanskrit Consonants (34)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>क</th>
<th>ख</th>
<th>ग</th>
<th>घ#20</th>
<th>ड</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>च</td>
<td>छ</td>
<td>ज</td>
<td>झ#</td>
<td>ण</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ट*21</td>
<td>ठ*</td>
<td>ड*</td>
<td>ढ#</td>
<td>ण*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>त</td>
<td>थ</td>
<td>द</td>
<td>ध#</td>
<td>न</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ध</td>
<td>फ</td>
<td>ब</td>
<td>भ#</td>
<td>म</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>य</td>
<td>र</td>
<td>ल</td>
<td>व</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>श</td>
<td>ष*</td>
<td>स</td>
<td>ह</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ष22</td>
<td>त्र</td>
<td>ज</td>
<td>$</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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20 five thick sound consonants (#)

21 five reverse consonants (*)

22 three cluster consonants ($)
Thus, based on the nature of Tibetan language sound ThonmiSambhota established thirty consonants by taking the model of Indian Gupta script.\textsuperscript{23} Below is the Gupta Inscription of 5\textsuperscript{th} Century in Sanchi with Tibetan Script.\textsuperscript{24}

![Plate VII, The Southern Alphabets from C.400 to 750 A.D., Gupta Sanchi, 412 A.D. (Column I)](image)

From the thirty-four consonants of the Sanskrit, he had omitted five base or thick sound consonants i.e. ད་ བ་ ན་ ས་ ཪ་ five reverse consonants ཥ་ ས་ ཡ་ ཅ་ ས་ and three cluster consonants: ཏ་ ཉ་ ཕ་ that are not necessary in native Tibetan writing. However, these letters are indispensable in translating Sanskrit words into Tibetan. Therefore, apart from thirty consonants and four vowels, the above letters are also included into the Tibetan writing system so that the exact pronunciation of Sanskrit Mantras can remain intact.

Most of the Tibetan experts say that, while creating the script there were six remaining Tibetan sound which do not exist in Sanskrit language that are three upper letters, ཚ ལ ཕ and three lower letters, ཀ ཁ ག. According to the Tibetan legends, it is mentioned, “ThonmiSambhota was discouraged for not finding the rest of the six Tibetan sounds. He became helpless and slept for a while in which he dreamt of having conversation with a stranger, dressed in iron armor. After he woke up, he deeply contemplated over the conversation and was able to find the remaining six letters. He thus, said to have found the complete thirty consonants.

On one hand, this particular narration or theory might be incorrect since he was very expert and skillful in Indian language and linguistic, this situation could not be possible to occur. On the other hand, the upper letters sounds were already existed in Sanskrit, ca, cha, ja, so this logic is

\textsuperscript{24}www.iisc.ernet.in/prasthu/pages/PP_data/98-1.pdf
not acceptable at this point rather ThonmeSambhotamust have invented ﱆ tsa, ﱇ tsha, ﱈ dza, as these letters’ sound are not available in Sanskrit.

The thirty consonants and five vowels in Tibetan are sufficient for any literary work to perform as well as to express one’s ideas, concept and feelings. Having invented the vowels and consonants he made prefix, suffix, post suffix, subscribed and superscribed letters, which are necessary in Tibetan language. Therefore, a complex Tibetan word formation at the max carries seven letters to form a noun or a word but a simple word or noun may carries one or two consonants to make a noun i.e. ﱔ kha(mouth), ﰎ so (tooth), ﱓ chu(water), ﱔ ﱑ charpa(rain), ﱐ ﱘ khang pa(house) and so on. It is said that in earlier times, these seven different articulations were clearly produced by Tibetans in their speech but due to the changes of time today the sound of prefix, post suffix and superscribed letters have become silent. In this context, TsetanZhabsdrung (a Tibetan Scholar) stated, “During the time of ThonmiSambhota, Tibetan language had seven different articulations and keeping that in mind he devised Tibetan letters which now we have in writing system. Even today, the existence of these seven sound variations can be found in the languages of Sikkim, Bhutan, Ladakh etc. that somehow became silent in the central Tibet and other Tibetan areas.

![Diagram of Tibetan Word Formation](image)
Thus, in this way, ThonmiSambhotas systematized the Tibetan language and laid the foundation of Tibetan Grammar and Literature. Furthermore, he, in the praise of the benevolent King, offered his first finest gift of the stanza without any vowel that was the priceless gift of grammar—the kind of which had not been presented before by anybody else. Hence, it marked the beginning of the literary work in Tibet.
Transliteration:

zhalrasgsal la rang mdangs gang babzang
gdamsgagzab lam ma chad tha dad rang
las dang bag chagsthams cad bsalmzad pa
’phags pa ma pham yang dag dam pa lags

bdegshegsbdennges ye shiste
ting ’zinzhinyid rig cinggzig
nyonmongsogsbscomgompomchog
duggsumbud ‘dul kun tuthul
spyanrasgzigswang thugs kyiras
srongbtsangesgampormtangsolb’i
chosrgyalkhyed la phyag ’tshal lo

Translation:

The one with shining face and good complexion, the one with many unbroken deep instructions, the one who clarifies all the traces of bad actions, the victorious noble and pure holy one.

With the true primordial wisdom of Tathagata and perceiving the real peace of Samadhi, please turn your eyes here.

To the highest lord who was destroyed the accumulation of defilements and tamed all the demons of the three times, the near disciple of Avalokitesvara, the one called by name Srong-btsangsGampo, to you Dharma King I prostrate.25

Subsequently, he translated the Sadharmapundarikasutra, Ratnameghasutra (Kkonmchogsprin), The Dharani Cintamani, The Crown Sutra (Adus pa rinpoche tog) and The twenty one sutra and

25Ibid.49
It is said that Thonmi Sambhota actually wrote eight treatises on phonetics and script including Sum-chupa (The text that deals with particles and cases) and rTags-kyi 'jugpa, (The text that deals with verbs and tenses) but no evidence has been found of its existence down to the present. Some experts say that, rests of the treatises were lost during the revolution of King Glang-darma who subdued the Buddhism in Tibet in the late 9th century.

However, Thonmi Sambhota became the first Tibetan Translator (Lotsawa) of Tibet. During the reigns of Three Tibetan Dharma Kings, Tibetan literature fully flourished with the core productions of Yigbsgyur (Translations), Gter-ma (revelations) and Bstan-chos (compilations and commentaries). In this way, Tibet became successful in bringing the sacred texts of Buddhism and Literature from India. Today, Tibetan language has complete resources based on Grammar, Poetry, Orthography, History, Drama, Astrology, Medicine, Arts and most importantly, Indian Buddhist Philosophy that is almost lost in its own birthplace India.

The two main texts to learn to Tibetan language are Sum-chupa (The text that deals with particles and cases) and rTags-kyi 'jugpa. (The text that deals with verbs and tenses). These textbooks are very important for the Tibetan learners in order to know its proper usage as well as get access to the Tibetan literature.

These root texts of Sum-chupa and rTag-kyi 'jugpawere enriched by Tibetan scholars like Sakya Pandita (1188-1251) in twelfth century. Thereafter, dBupabLo-gsal, (12th century) the disciple of Bcomldan rigs pairagri, composed a commentary on Sum-chupa and rTag-kyi 'jugpawhich are considered as the first commentaries on Tibetan Grammar texts. Ther, Lochen Namkhab Zangpo (14th century), Zha-lu Chos-skyong (15th century), dPaogtsug-lag 'preng-ba (16th century), rNam-gling Penchen (16th century), Pra-tiRinchen Don-grub (16th century), Situ Penchen Choskyi 'byunggnas (16th century), dNul-chu Dharmabhadra (19th century), dByang-can Grub-pairdorje (19th century) had written excellent commentaries. Thus, Tibetan scholars made their invaluable contributions in the development of Tibetan language and literature. These contributions can be traced in Snyan-ngag (Poems), Sum rTag (Grammar) Sgrungs (Tales), rNam-thar (Biography), mNgonbrjod (Synonym), Zlos-gar (Drama).

Bzo (Architecture) Gsowa (Medicine) Sgra (Linguistics) Tsadma (Logic), Ngandon (Philosophy) of Tibetan literature.

**Conclusion**

Tibetan literature and its script are being studied in the wide ranges of the Indian Himalaya in spite of having different dialects. Within Tibet itself, the Tibetan language has different dialects i.e. Amdo, Kham and Utsang from which Utsang dialect is generally spoken. The written language does not change, but the pronunciation varies from region to region. There are several forms of writing style in Tibetan but Uchen (Printed one) and Umend (Cursive) are the most relevant and useful Tibetan writing styles. Tibetans and Himalayan people have preserved Buddha’s canonical texts (110 volumes) written in elements like gold, silver, turquoise, coral, and pearl and many other commentaries written by Nalanda masters. Based on this, Tibetan and Himalayan people study the rich ancient Indian education even today, which has its impact on their way of life.

The first Westerner who opened up Tibetan Studies to Westerners was none other than Csoma de Koros who studied under Lama Sangs-rgyasphun-Tsogs and Kun-dga’ chos-legs at Zangskar in Ladakh and dedicated his life on Tibetan Studies and thus became the founder of Tibetology. His great work *Tibetan Grammar and Tibetan-English Dictionary* was published in 1834 by the Asiatic Society of Bengal.²⁷ Thereafter, many Western scholars have done their research on Tibetan as well as Ladakhi and other Himalayan languages.

**References:**

²⁷ Dr. Ernest Hetenyi (?). *Alexander Csoma de Koros Hungarian Bodhisattva*


