Ye-Shes-sDe; Tibetan Scholar and Saint

Dr. Sherab Rhaldi

It was being held for a long time that a large number of Buddhist texts have been translated by the Tibetan scholars. While the presupposition turned out gradually to be true, what, in fact was not equally certain was the number of texts translated, the areas where emphasis was laid and the scholars who were involved in the act of translation. The researches so far undertaken both by the Tibetan, Asian and western scholars appear to be inadequate in terms of the quality of information which they have obtained and the way they have sorted out their information. One of the Indian scholars who claims to have done some ground work in his book on Tibetan Literature is Rahul Sankrityayana. Rahul intended to formulate a list of scholars starting with the 7th century A.D. and closed it in the 17th century. The list might be useful as pioneering work; nevertheless Rahul’s over enthusiasm about the Indian scholars had blighted the facts of history on a number of occasions. This is revealed by a subsequent work, which was more detailed and somewhat exhaustively evidenced by the Tibetan sources. Guide to the Nyingma Edition of the sDe-dge-bKa’-gyur/bsTan-‘gyur edited and produced by Tarthang Tulku evidently is more informative and therefore more reliable have contradicted some information provided by Rahul on logical grounds.


On the whole the importance of Ye-Shes-sDe had surfaced inspite of the fact that this scholar remained incognito till today. No reliable biographical information could be obtained about Ye-Shes-sDe except that he belonged to the Nyingma [Ancient] sect and that he lived in the later part of the 8th century and in the early decades of the 9th century A.D. One reference to the Bengal ruler Dharma Pala in the context of Ye-Shes-sDe has suggested the probable date which is mentioned. The Tibetan sources almost in unanimity declared that Ye-Shes-sDe was a contemporary of Upadhyaya Santarakksita and Acharya Padmasambhava. In the course of our investigation an important point has emerged which suggests some textual scrutiny. It has been
mentioned in the Biographical Dictionary of Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism, compiled by Khetsun Sangpo⁷ Vol. III and having drawn largely from Thang-yig, of Padmasambhava in which the biographical data about Vairocana⁸ had elaborately figured out- that the names of the translators of the tantras, sutras, grammar etc. had been different. It had been suggested that the principal translator was Vairocana and he had used his name while translating the tantras and had assumed nom-de-plume as Ye-Shes-sDe while translating the sutras. It had been further suggested that other names had been used whose grammars had been translated by Vairocana. Therefore, it appears that the translator Ye-Shes-sDe whose reference appeared along with the translations of texts listed out in the subsequent part of the study was the same person as Vairocana. But the decision on this issue cannot be taken with certainty at this stage due to the fact that this position held by Thang-yig is not adequately evidenced by other Tibetan texts. In the majority of the tantra texts translated and listed out by us the name of Ye-Shes-sDe has been mentioned in place of Vairocana; so, the question if Ye-Shes-sDe was the original name and Vairocana being the nom-de-plume or the other way round virtually remained an unanswered question. On closer scrutiny it has been found that Ye-Shes-sDe had been inclined more towards Sutra and Tantra and in addition to that he took interest in many other subjects. It has been further observed that Ye-Shes-sDe had composed three books⁹, which presumably dealt with his philosophy.

The books which have been translated by Ye-Shes-sDe are the following:

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Surendrabodhi

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343 Bhadracaryacatustika-Pindarabhismarana,  
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345 Buddhmatika by Ye-Shes-sDe  
346 Mangalagatha, by Nagarjuna  
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In the final analysis it appears that Ye-Shes-sDe was not an ordinary scholar taking interest in the Buddhist literature from India. The fact that he had translated roughly three hundred forty seven texts, as far as our findings to date go, he seemed to have not only mastered a large number of texts but also developed
considerable interest in varieties of texts. His versatility may reasonably surprise any scholar of any persuasion. His biographical information not being available in detail, have understandably left the scholar of Buddhist studies both in Tibet and India in a state of academic dissatisfaction.

In the present context of political turmoil in Tibet and the Tibetans having to had to leave their homeland in a state of utter sorrow it turns out to be difficult to understand the level of civilizational excellence which Tibet had once reached. Nor is it easy to guess the level of cordiality which had grown in the relationship between Tibet and India over the centuries. The instance of Ye-Shes-sDe amply suggest the closeness which was imbied by the intellectuals of both countries. But the fact that he is not remembered by the scholars either in Tibet or in India is an act of civilizational disaster. However, by the researches we could have explored at least a part of the greatness of the man and could have given a glimpse of his activities.

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Lucknow University, Lucknow.

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11. Ibid
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