

Did Atisa-Dipankara Srijnana Visit Sikkim ?

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Today India's foreign policy is primarily based on immediate monetary and political gains. Probably for that reason, India mostly sends her traders, bureaucrats, politicians and musicians abroad with a view to establishing her favourable trade and political relations with other countries. This approach may earn dividend for her temporarily but this may not sustain in the long run. On the contrary, India, in the past, believed in maintaining cultural understandings with other countries on permanent footing. She, therefore, used to send her learned scholars, philosophers, saints and social reformers with missionary outlook abroad in order to propagate her thoughts and to maintain lasting cultural understandings with those countries. Although these dedicated Pandits had no such ambition like earning money, false reputation or to conquer other countries by force but to spread their knowledge, they used to accept such offers knowing fully well the hazards of such tours. They used to earn respects from the kings and the people alike in foreign lands for their exceptional qualities. They also upheld prestige of India so high in abroad that foreigners used to look forward to India for spiritual guidance.

Since the time of the first Tibetan polyglot, Thon-Mi-Sam-Bhota (632 A.D. onwards), a galaxy of saints and scholars from different universities of India visited Tibet for propagation of Buddhism. Atisa—Dipankara Srijnana (982-1054 A.D.)¹ was one of them². His role as a scholar, teacher and a reformer who intensified the cultural ties with eastern Asia including Tibet can hardly be exaggerated. He travelled Burma to

Most popular
in Tibet

1. Pratul Chandra Gupta, Forward, Atisa-Dipankara Srijnana Millenium Celebration Committee, First Edition, Sept. 8, 1982. But according to Sarat Chandra Das, Atisa was born in 980 A.D.

2. Ibid.

Tibet on foot and contacted people despite his old age and frail health. He preached Buddhism and popularised the cultural heritage of our country in these areas. He is, therefore, remembered in these countries even today—one thousand years later, with reverence. He was also regarded as the greatest scholar of India in his time. Hence, kings¹ and people of Tibet made efforts and sacrifices to bring Atisa in their country in order to reform and re-invigorate the old religion of the land which had then become lax and corrupt. Although Atisa was warned by one of his well-wishers that his life would be shortened by twenty years² if he dared go to Tibet, he decided to visit this land of snow at the age of 60 for he had a strong sense of social responsibility. He thought³, "If I be of service to Tibet even if my life be shortened by going there I should not mind it". He believed that longevity should be subordinate to that of good of the world and his love for other things should prevail over his self love.

Atisa established Kadampa⁴ (bKah—gdams) sect which literally means who knows how to translate every single word of Buddha into practice. (The religious discourses delivered by him at the request of his chief disciple, Domtonpa, are collectively known as Kadam Phacho consisting of 26 chapters). He wrote several valuable books including Bodhipathapradipa, Caryasangrahapradipa, Satyadvayavatara, Madhyamopadesa, Sangraharabha, Hridayaniscita, Bodhisattavamanyavali, Bodhisattvakarmadimargavatara, Saranagatadesa, Mahayanapathasadhanavarnasangraha, Mahayanapathasadhanasangraha, Sutarthasamucchayopadesa, Dasakusalakarmopadesa, Karmavibhanga, Samadhisambharapariwarta, Lokottarasaptakavidhi, Gurukriyakarma, Cittotpadasamvraividhikarma, Siksasamucchaya - abhisamayaya and Vimalaratnalekhana.

1. Jecung Rinpoche, Jampal Kunzang, Bulletin of Tibetology, Vol. xii, No. 2, pp. 19.

2. Sarat Chandra Das, Indian Pandits in the Land of Snow.

3. Ibid.

4. Kadam Phacho, Part III (reprint), Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology, 1980.

He also trained scholars how to translate Sanskrit and Pali books verbatim into Tibetan and thus saved our sacred and rare books from extinction (most of our original Sanskrit books had been destroyed later by foreign invaders in India). Western historians and scholars were unwilling to accept India's glorious past till recently in the pretext of non-availability of evidence. After discovery of these translated and some original Sanskrit books they were, however, obliged to accept India's philosophy and civilisation seriously.

As Atisa-Dipankara was the spiritual guide of Bromton, the founder of the grand hierarchy of Tibet, he is still remembered in Sikkim with profound respect. His personal belongings have been jealously guarded by the Lamas in various monasteries since long. Talung Monastery is one of them which is situated at the periphery of Kanchenzonkha National Park, the second highest National Park in the world, in a remote area in Dzongu, reserved for the local

Atisa's Footprint

Lepchas. One has to take one full day jeep drive from Gangtok via Mangan and then he has to walk on foot to reach to this secluded three hundred years old monastery. The monastery is opened to devotees once in three years for only one day (sometime in January and February as per Tibetan lunar calendar). One Foot-print thanka (scroll) of Atisa has been preserved by the Lamas of the monastery secretly for centuries. The Sikkim Forest Minister, Mr. Atup Lepcha who visited the monastery during the festival in 1981 confirmed me about the existence of the thanka which he saw there during his visit.

The monastery was constructed by the first Lama of Sikkim (Lhob-sang Chempo) who came to Sikkim from a monastery in eastern Tibet where Atisa stayed (Tholin monastery) for sometime. The Lama constructed the original monastery somewhere in West Sikkim (probably Dubli Rabdenchi). He, however, shifted all valuable articles including the footprint of Atisa to this new place just before Gorkhas invaded Sikkim. The invaders captured the whole of West Sikkim and plundered houses of Sikkimese and also demolished the original monastery abandoned by the Lama. It is said that the Lama

came to know about the Gorkha invasion well in time with his Tantric power and accordingly warned the first king of Sikkim (Thinsuk Namgyal) to take necessary actions. But the Chogyal did not believe the Lama's forecast and did not take any precautionary measures to intercept the invaders. The Lama cursed the Chogyal and warned him that if any member of the Royal family would ever dare enter into the monastery he along with his family for generation would suffer his curses for not believing his forecast. Since then, as story goes, no member of the Royal family has ever visited the monastery.

The famous Rumtek monastery is also preserving the original signature of Atisa. The present Regent of the monastery, H.H. Samarapa Rinpoche has also confirmed this to me recently. It is reported that the rare and the sacred thanka was shown to the first Governor of Sikkim, Mr. B.B. Lal a few years back by no less a person than the late H.H. Gyalwa Karmapa XVI.

Many Sikkimese believe that some of the old monasteries still possess some personal belongings of Atisa and the Lamas guard them secretly for fear of theft. It is also commonly believed in this area that Atisa like Guru Padmasambhaba visited Sikkim. An exhaustive survey is needed to reveal the truth.