

Tracing Buddhism in Mongolia: A Historical and Cultural Perspective
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Abstract

India and Mongolia have shared a Cordial relation since Ancient times due to its shared cultural legacy. Buddhism has played a pivot role in defining this ancient cultural connection between these two countries. There are many evidences, oral narratives and folklores that reverberates the advent of reaching of Buddhism in different parts of Asia. However, there is no written archival work that would/might provide us with the historical beginning of Buddhism in Mongolia albeit there is an existence of some research on the origin of Buddhism in Mongolia by eminent scholars like Shagdaryn Bira and L.Khurelbaatar. One can also find some references regarding the origin of Buddhism in the written records of Gandantekcheling Monastery in Mongolia¹. According to the available records, roots of Buddhism dates back to 4th century with the beginning of cultural exchange between Chinese civilization and Mongolians. Some historians opine that the influence of Buddhism touched the territory of Yenisei region by the end of 7th century.² One can find further evidences on Buddhism and its influences in the Buddhist monasteries and Chinese inscription found in the ancient monuments of Yenisei region.³ This study attempts to do a historical and analytical study on the status of Buddhism in the past and modern day Mongolia. This study would explore the origin, and various facets related to rise and influence of Buddhism in the land of Mongolia.

Keywords: Cultural legacy, Cultural Connection, Oral Narratives, Folklores, Analytical Study.

¹OidovNyamdavaa (2003), "Mongolia-India Relations", Bhavana Books & Prints, New Delhi, p.18

² ibid

³ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S187704281401338X>
<https://medcraveonline.com/AHOAJ/AHOAJ-02-00087.pdf>

Introduction

The historical and cultural links between Mongols and Indians dates back to centuries ago. It is believed by many historians that due to the great wave of migration of the Central Asian nomads including Mongol tribes, Mongols and Indians met in South and South East Asia in the pre-historic period. Ts. Damdinsuren opines that "there are many thousands of golden sources that flow to the Mongolian side along the Ganges valley and over snowy Himalayan high mountains". Therefore, one can conjecture that the literary tradition of Indian origin that had passed through Mongolia for many centuries to be one of the part of the "many thousands of golden sources. The first "golden source" of Indo-Mongolian history and culture and their cultural exchange might date back to the end of the first century A.D. when development of Buddhism in the Mongolian Steppe through Central Asian countries like Khotan and Sogd took place.

Many Scholars have analyzed the bilateral relation with reference to the introduction of Buddhism in Mongolia. According to the article "Indian-Mongolian Literature, History and Cultural Relations, Tradition" by L. Khurelbaatar, major territories in Mongolia welcomed the influence of

Buddhism by the end of 1st century A.D. Since then, even scientific field embraced the principles of Buddhism and were on the basis of religious teachings.⁴ Most of the existing historian agrees that the spread of Buddhism as a religion started in the Indo-Ganges plain in during the lifetime of Buddha. The influence of Buddhism started escalating and reached its apex when Mauryan Dynasty was in power, in the Indian Subcontinent. The task of propagating and preaching the Buddhist faith and principles in Indian subcontinent, south Asia and north-east Asia was undertaken was King Ashoka of Mauryan Dynasty. The King delegated the work of preaching the Buddhist principles or *Dharma* to a group of *Bikshus* or monks Gandhara to propagate the dharma.⁵

F.M. Hassnain in his work mentions about the first group of missionaries who introduced Buddhism in Central Asia.⁶ He also observes that Vairochana was amongst the first one who took the task of taking Buddhism in Central Asia. Vairochana was

⁴OidovNyamdavaa, *Mongolia-India Relations*, Bhavana Books & Prints, 2003, New Delhi. p.21

https://www.urbandharma.org/pdf/king_asoka.pdf

⁶ Kaw A. Mustaq *Central Asiatic Journal* Vol. 54, No. 2 (2010), pp. 237-255 (19 pages)

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a Kashmiri Buddhist scholar, who built the first monastery, at Khotan.⁷ One can trace the spread of Buddhism in Central Asia and its connections with the Silk Routes and trade that flourished amongst ancient settlements/ civilizations. According to the historical records, it is certain that both the schools of Buddhism-*Mahayana* and *Hinayana* were familiarized in Central Asia by the Chinese pilgrims.⁸ The travel accounts of Chinese pilgrims like Fa-hien and Hsuan-Chuang were associated with Mahayana school of Buddhism and the centers on the northern route - Kashgar, Kucha and Turfan were, Hinayanist.⁹ As Central Asia had remained under the faith and influence of Buddhism for many centuries, a large number of Buddhist “stupas, viharas, manuscripts, paintings and relics” have been found there. The rapid proliferation of Buddhism in Central Asia had also laid an impact on the neighboring settlements and civilizations. Similarly, the rising tides of Buddhism also touched the ‘Land of Blue Sky’ during the same time period.

While array of eras witnessed the rage of invasion and advent of expansion of

civilization, Huns, one of the ancient tribes of Mongolia came into contact with the settlements of South Asia and Indian Subcontinent.¹⁰ The Huns engaged themselves into political and economic relational exchange with the countries where the principles of Buddhism were believed and practiced by people. The Mongolian historical sources states that the Huns predominately worshiped "golden portrait of the Buddha". Both the Mongolian sources and the accounts of Chinese pilgrims tell us the possibility of spread of Mahayana and Hinayana schools of Buddhism in the Hun state of the present day Mongolia. Most of the Mongolian historians anonymously agree that the advent of rapid spread of Buddhism in Mongolia took place in Kitan Dynasty (approximately 902 A.D.). The Kitan Buddhist monuments and stupas as well as fragments from the ruins of the town of Kerulon Bara Khoto in the territory of Tsagan-Obo Semon of the Eastern aimak of Mongolia still exists and one can know more about the initial phase of Buddhism and its history in Mongolia, through the existing structure. The Mongolian scholars are of the opinion that all fragments with Buddha pictures found in the excavations of Kara-Korum, the capital of ancient Mongolia established

⁷Oidov Nyamdavaa, *Mongolia-India Relations*, Bhavana Books & Prints, 2003, New Delhi, p.14.

⁸ ibid

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http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/special/travel_records.pdf

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¹⁰ Ibid

in 1235, could be related to the time of the Kitans.¹¹

It is believed that the increasing power of Turkish domination was a major reason for the decline of Buddhism in Mongolia (in and around 9th century). According to a renowned Mongolian Buddhist scholar Sh. Damdin of 19th Century (1867-1937), "the downfall of Buddhism in Mongolia came between the first period beginning from the time of the Huns and the second period beginning from the time of Chinggis Khan."¹²

In India, Nalanda was a center for educational and scholarly work, in the ancient times. Chinese pilgrims like Fa-Hien (5th century AD), Hiuen Tsiang (620-645 AD) and I-tsing (675-685 AD) were amongst some of the foreign students in the university. One can find great details of description pertaining to the Nalanda university in their chronicles. The accounts in their chronicles have a mention that during seventh and eighth centuries "Mongols used to come to Nalanda University by camels and yaks through the

Himalayas to study Buddhism"¹³ (C.S. Upasak, *Nalanda: Past and Present*).

The Great Khan Ogodei, son of Chingis Khan (1229-1241 A.D.) also was in support of Buddhism. He started to construct many Buddhist monasteries and Stupas in Karakorum. According to some Chinese sources, Monkhe Khan promoted a Lama and named him "guru", as a "State teacher"¹⁴. One of the significant projects undertaken by Yuan dynasty was to translate books of Buddhism from Sanskrit, Tibetan and Uighur into Mongolian. The books were later printed and became a vital source for the people to know more about Buddhism and its principles. Around 14th century, some major books on Buddhism were successfully translated into the Mongolian language. The massive work of translation was undertaken by many eminent scholars of ancient Mongolia. Choigi-Odsar was one amongst those Mongolian scholars who were engaged in translating the teachings of Buddha in their language and opening it up to the people (believers) of Mongolia. Their work of translations also consisted of connotation/commentaries which made it more

¹¹ibid

¹²Lkhagvademchig Jadamba and Bernhard Schittich Negotiating Self and Other: Transnational Cultural Flows and the Reinvention of Mongolian Buddhism

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¹³ C.S. Upasak, *Nalanda: Past and Present*, Nava Nalanda Mahavihara, 1977.

¹⁴ <http://www.mongols.eu/mongolia/history-buddhism-mongolia/buddhism-in-mongolian-empire/>

accessible and understandable for the people. At the beginning of the 14th century, principal works of “Buddha and his philosophies were translated and printed in almost 1000 to 2000 copies in Mongolia”.¹⁵ Thus one can understand that there was an existence of strong religious and cultural bond between India and remained and Mongolia.

In the 6th Century, some Indian spiritual leaders like Sokyavamsha and Narendrayasha, came to Mongolia. They made an effort to spread their thoughts on various subjects like language, literature, culture, society and philosophy which are believed to have major influence on Mongolian people. Since then, subjects like Buddhist philosophy, medical science, astronomy etc., were taught in the intuitions of monasteries. Five basic subjects were predominately taken up by the monks who majorly belonged to Tibetan School of Buddhism: “*Pramana* (logic), *Prajnaparamita* (metaphysics), *Madhyamaka* (pure philosophy), *Abhidharmakosha* (description of external world) and the *Vinaya* (disciplinary rules). The texts of Indian Origin like *avatara* of Santideva, Sarnarakstia's *Tatvasangraha*, *Tatvasangra-panchika* of Karnalasheela, *Sputarthatika*

(commentary of Abhisamayalankara of Maitreyanatha) of Haribhadra *Bodhipathapradipa* of Atisha Dipamkara etc. were also along with Tibetan and Mongolian commentaries and sub-commentaries.¹⁶

Modern Times

Over the period of times, there has been a constant efforts from both countries to enhance the relation without any conflict. In the modern times, as the pace of development in every aspect of society is going through a lot of changes, there has been more evident efforts from the both countries to enhance the bilateral relations. The Government of the both countries have expressed their commitments to accelerate the pace of the development. Efforts are being made at the various levels and in diverse areas. One cannot overlook the contribution of Ven. KushokBakula who was appointed as Ambassador of India to Mongolia in 1990. During his stay in Mongolia for 10 years, he played a vital role in reviving Buddhism in Mongolia. Ven. KushokBakula is better known for his initiative for the construction of a Buddhist monastery and school project in Ulaanbaatar, capital city of Mongolia. It is known as ‘Pet hub Buddhist Institute’

¹⁵<http://www.mongols.eu/mongolia/history-buddhism-mongolia/buddhism-during-the-yuan-dynasty/>

¹⁶OidovNyamdavaa, *Mongolia-India Relations*, Bhavana Books & Prints, 2003, New Delhi. p.18

which was named after his monastery in native place Ladakh. This monastery was built with the vision to revive Buddhism in the Mongolian and also promote Indo-Mongolian ties. On the other hand, Nyamdavaa, the Ambassador of Mongolia in India also took some major initiatives and approached the government of India and administration of Gaya for the approval of construction of Mongolian Monastery. The year 2001 finally witnessed the laying of plinth for the monastery when the President of Mongolia visited India. These events stand as a major exemplar of re-unification and rejuvenation of Buddhism in Mongolia and strengthening of political and cultural ties between both the countries, in the 21st century. However, in modern times, the modernization process in Mongolia and fast paced Globalization has impacted the Mongolian society to a great extent. Due to this, there is a visible change in the religious composition of the Mongolian society due to their adoption of new religious faiths or neither of them. However, it can be said that the elements of Buddhism still exist in the core of their belief system, consciously or sub-consciously.

Conclusion

The Mongol-Indian cultural relations have been maintained for centuries in a direct or

at least indirect way through the countries of Central Asia and Tibet. The existence of historical records proves that the culture exchange between both the countries were quite prevalent. To sum up, India and Mongolia relation can be broadly analyzed from Cultural, which has its roots in Buddhism and historical, through various historical events (majorly related to Chinggis Khan) and the Economic factors leading to the bilateral relation between the two countries to the present level. One can conjecture that Buddhism in Mongolia aggravated the advent of the influence of Indian culture in Mongolia. Over the period, this cultural bonding has paved the way for more meaningful agreements. The recent visit of many diplomats and State Heads in both the countries are testimony of the growing partnership. It can be concluded that in the emerging geo-political scenario and in a fast paced globalized world, India and Mongolia have come a long way owing to the strong cultural links mainly through Buddhism. With this strong cultural foundation, both countries can be mutually benefitted by further venturing in to new areas of cooperation and by promoting more people-to-people contacts.

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