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Travel of Gendun Chopel with Rahul Sankrityayana in Tibet and Nepal

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Abstract

Gendun Chopel and Rahul Sankrityayana are the two prominent scholars of Indo-Tibetan Studies. They are called the modern scholars of Tibet and India respectively. Both have the strong contributions on literature, history, philosophy and travelogue. In old times when Buddhism was declining in India, many Sanskrit texts on palm leaves were taken to Tibet by Indian Buddhist monks. In 1934, Rahul Sankrityayana went to Tibet for second time in search of ancient Sanskrit manuscripts which had been lost from India. There Rahul Sankrityayana met the great Tibetan scholar Gendun Chopel in Lhasa and decided to do a joint expedition for the search of old Sanskrit manuscripts in various monasteries and libraries around Tibet. And in between, they also wrote few travelogues of the places they encountered during their quest of manuscripts along with all the details of how they searched old manuscripts and what they had founded etc. When they completed their work in Tibet, they came to Nepal where they stayed at great Pandita Hemraj's house. There they also translated many Tibetan texts in Sanskrit for restoring. Thereafter they came to India. Thus in this article, I have tried to shed some light upon the accounts of their expeditions that we find in their travelogues.

Key Words: *Zhol, Samye, The refined Gold, Sakya monastery, Ngor Monastery, Sonam Palbar Horkhang.*

A brief account of Gendun Chopel and Rahul Sankrityayana: The 20th century Tibet has abounded in brilliant scholars, Gendun Chopel [1903-1951] was the first modern scholar of Tibet, was born in Amdo, north east Tibet. He completed traditional Tibetan education and travelled abroad, learnt several new languages and collaborates with scholars with different nationalities. The fame he achieved as a scholar is indeed derived from having taken full advantage of the years he spent in India and Sri Lanka.

The first Tibetan biography of Gendun Chopel, named *Domed Khepa Gendun Chopel* (tib. *mdo smad mkhas pa dge 'dun chos 'phel*) was written by Rikha Lobsang Tenzin (tib. *ri kha blo bzang bstan 'dzin*) and published in Varanasi in 1972. In the colophon *ri kha blo bzang bstan 'dzin* states that he did not know Gendun Chopel personally. He collected the

biographical information in India by interviewing five of Gendun Chopel's Tibetan friends. The second biography is the one by Trethong Thupten Chodar (tib. bkras-mthong thub-bstan-chos-dar) represents the longest Tibetan version of Gendun Chopel's life story which was published in 1980 by Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala. In 1983, another versions of the life of Gendun Chopel by Horkhang Sonam Palbar (tib. hor khang bsod nams dpal 'bar appeared as the article *mkhas mchog dge 'dun chos 'phel gyi rtogs pa brjod pa dag pa'i snang ba* in Bod ljongs zhib 'jug in Lhasa. In that same year Kirti Tulku's (tib. kirti sprul-sku) *mDo smad pa dge dun chos phel gyi skor ngag rgyun lo rgyus phyogs bsdoms* was published by the Library of Tibetan Works and Archives in Dharamsala. Heather Stoddard's *Le Mèdiant dw l'Amdo*, written in French, is the most comprehensive biography of Gendun Chopel. Unfortunately, this biography is not in English translation. Besides this, a thorough study of Gendun Chopel's treatises, articles and poems could reveal more autobiographical sources.

In recent years Gendun Chopel's works and accomplishment have been highly recognised by both Tibetan and western scholars. For instance the Amnye Machen Institute, Dharmasala, has since 1994 instituted the Gendun Chopel award to be presented every three years to a Tibetan writer who has maintained dedication and courage in the face of persecution and hardship.

Unlike most Tibetan scholars of his time, Gendun Chopel could not accept unquestioningly the centuries old Tibetan scholastic curriculum, and he took every opportunity to study and investigate Indian Buddhist original sources. While assisting Rahul Sankrityayana on expeditions to numerous important monasteries in central Tibet in search of old Indian manuscripts in 1934 and 1938, Gendun Chopel developed a keen interest in them and became aware of their value. As a result he became very annoyed at the way old Sanskrit manuscript, and other various rare text were being kept by various monasteries, and he criticized the ignorance of Tibetans in the following manner;

“Some religious people saying, it will bring misfortune to keep books that have got into disorder, discard them into the rubbish dump in the basement, and due to that, they spoil them all. Because even a single page of the old books written on palm leaves are difficult to find even in India, such a lack of respect for that precious value is strange. Similarly some faithful people steal a page from each complete volume of scriptures and make them into amulets. And they cut the paper of pages to pieces and calling them a blessing, they eat them. And the offer them as filling material for statues and stupas and make them disappear forever. Harming the continued existence of the doctrine, they still show off in front of others.”

When Gendun Chopel travelled India, he worked at Bihar Research Society in Patna, the scriptures which Gedun Chopel and Rahul Sankrityayana collected on their expeditions have been preserved there. Later Gendun Chopel wrote his unfinished history of ancient Tibet; *The White Annals*, based on informations contained in ancient Tun-huang texts and in Tang historical records. Horkhang S. Palbar also mentions on task of Gendun Chopel that

consisted of copying the inscriptions on old stone pillars in Lhasa, Zhol, Samye, etc. These notes are unlikely to exist as an independent ancient original historical sources used by Gendun Chopel.

Gendun Chopel was renowned in Tibet as a brilliant scholar, a talented artist, a highly gifted poet, an excellent translator, and a skilful dialectician. But he was also well known for nonconformity which turned him into a highly controversial figure in Tibetan society. The causes for the controversy surrounding him were mainly his different approach to and interpretation of prevailing religious, social, and political ways of thinking that controlled Tibetan society of his days.

Mahapandit Rahul Sankrityayana, a prominent Buddhist scholar and creative Hindi writer, was born in Kedarnath on 9th April 1893. His father is Govardhan Pande of village Kanaila in Azamgarh district, Uttar Pradesh. While studying Urdu in the primary school, the following couplet by Navzinda Bajinda caught his imagination: "Sair kar duniya ki gafil zindgani phir kahan, zindgani gar kuchh rahi to naujavani phir kahan" Rahul Sankrityayana quotes this couplet several times in his autobiography. Inspired by this philosophy of seeing the world and his rebellious and adventurous nature promoted Rahul to run away from home. Once he initiated into Vaisnab dharma. Later on, he again initiated into Buddhism, at that time he got name Rahul Sankrityayana. He was honoured as Tripitakacharya in Sri Lanka, when he had gone there on invitation for teaching. At the end part of his life he became communist. He is first man who showed a great interest to bring back the Sanskrit manuscripts which were lost from India and he took a magnificent courage to travel to Tibet for bringing back that manuscripts.

Rahul Sankrityayana visited Nepal in the months of March and April 1923. Here he came in contact with some Buddhist scholars and monks from Mongolia and China. Early in 1929 Rahul secretly entered Tibet via Nepal. On the Nepal Tibet border, a Mongolian monk; Lobjad Sherab, whom he had met in Buddha Gaya, helped him to get the entry permit. Having loaded the materials collected by him such as; books, manuscripts, paintings and thangkas upon 22 mules, Rahul Sankrityayana left Lhasa for India on 24th April, 1929 accompanied by a Mongolian monk Dharmakriti. On the way, he purchased some more books at Shalu Vihara, Tasha Lumpo and Narthang. After 39 days the party reached Kalimpong.

Between 1934 to 1938, he travelled to Tibet four times. As a result of his four hazardous journeys to Tibet in 1929, 1934, 1936, 1938, he brought back to India 80 Sanskrit Buddhist works, some of which he himself edited and published. In 1934, Rahul Sankrityayana went to Tibet second time with sole object to find a Sanskrit work on *Pramanavartika* of great Indian pandit Dharmakriti. He obtained a fragment of commentary by Prajnakara Gupta on the *Pramanavartika*

Travelogue of gedun chopel: When we study *The refined Gold*, the travelogue¹ (translated into English) of Gendun Chopel which later on compiled and published, we come to know, in Gendun Chopel's own word, "Therefore my attempt in this work is to present a collection of information I have collected during my travel in various parts of Tibet and India which concerns the fields of learning. This collection is not intended for those who are used to exaggerate the things conjecturally those who include fictitious stories in their works in order to attract greater number of readers, or those who gloss over the matters that may harm their survival. Nor is this collection for my name and fame, but for those who are objective and unbiased in their perspectives. There will be no progress in one's understanding if one prefers to remain diplomatic for fear of criticisms. Being a Tibetan, I know what will be the reaction from the people of both high and low class if I openly give my comments saying 'this is wrong, this too is wrong and so forth'."

Before travelling for India he spent seven years in Drepung Monastery in central Tibet. At that time he meets Rahul Sankrityayana on Rahul's second time visit to Tibet in 1934 and said to Rahul for his desire to travel to India. Because of Rahul encouragement he decided for travelling to India. Before that they went on a tour to Phenylul and Rating monasteries. He also studied little bit of Sanskrit under him. Because of Rahul good connection with Tibetan aristocrats, they easily accessed all the important holy objects preserved in the monasteries they visited. It is said that in Phenylul there were many old time monastic centers than Lhasa and upper Phenylul appeared to him a nomadic place with its vast land of pleasant atmosphere. There are many important monasteries of Kadampa tradition² such as Langthang, Poto and Tragyp etc. It is said that these monasteries were full of stupas. The oldest of the Kadampa monasteries Gyal Lhakhang is located in the upper part of the upper Phen-yul. Thos is among the major Buddhist learning places. This monastery was built by Shangnam Dorjee Wangchuk. This monastery has a huge statue of Buddha Maitreya and a huge stock of texts in traditional poti or canon format, but without 'wooden covers'. These type of statue and stocks of texts are also seen at Rating and Sakya. All these texts were written in ancient Tibetan writing style. They found a book in a corner of this monastery behind statue of Buddha Maitraya. Gendun Chopel in short, short discussed the slaying of book, it says;

'This holy object of maitreya's statue
Installed by Tsangdo kontsek.

¹ The Refined Gold: A Travel Account of First Hand Experience: Horkhang, Sonam Palbar who collected all writings of Gendun Chopel, published it in volumes, among those volumes the volume 10 and first half of volume 11 consist the whole travelogue of Gendun Chopel and Gendun Chopel named it, *The Refined Gold: A Travel Account of First Hand Experience*.

² Kadampa Tradition: Kadam Pa tradition is the second ancient tradition of Buddhism of Tibet. The root guru of this tradition is Atisa Dipangkara.

As a sign of this region's victory
May help all in generating Buddha-mind.
Om ema-hara-na hum!

Perhaps the statue was made by an Indian sculptor. Gendun Chopel said that these four lines were similar to those found in several rock inscriptions of old times. A long sign on the syllable 'Om' had been a subject in almost all the old documents. The early Tibetan transliterations of Sanskrit are biased on phonetics only. 'Vajra' is transliterated as 'ba' 'dza' 'ra', for such examples are found in the signed letters of several lobsawas. The standard transliterations system, which is currently known, seems to have come into being lately. This system however has given birth to mispronunciation of several Sanskrit words. For example with the advent of this system, the Sanskrit 'pra-jna' is transliterated in Tibetan as 'pra dznya', which a Tibetan would pronounce as 'ta jna' and not 'pra jna'. Whereas this term according to their phonetic transliteration system is transliterated as 'par gya' which is closer to the original Sanskrit pronunciation 'pra-jna' than of 'ta jna'.

It is seen that Gyal Lhakhang is located in the base of Lho-hil, although it was possible to build it in nearby locality. Perhaps this monastery was built in the time of king Yarlung and in the beginning of 'latter spread'. A human size pillar is located at the door of Gyal Lhakhang. In the middle of the statue there are Vajra, a jewel, a lotus and a cross. On the eastern face, the following inscription is engraved thus installed. Generally, people with religious thought are rare these days. However, as for those who have taken refuge in the three jewels should observe the followings;

“Regard the deities as your Buddha.

Regard the dharma as your ultimate source of advice.

Regard the Buddhist view as your principle practice.

Bring your speech and conduct to their natural state.

Live on a pure livelihood.

Act according to the Dharma.

Get the essence of any group-discussion.

Control each and every sense doors

Do not participate in harmful discussions.

Follow the truth.

These ten practices will bring happiness in your present as well as the next life”.

Towards Riphug monastery, they came to Zalu monastery via Tashi Lhunpo. After that, they visited Riphug. The collection of Riphug monastery was stored in two grey coloured wooden boxes. The collection included several hand written Tibetan manuscripts also. Among the collections was a text wrapped in nine different pieces of brocade. They unwrapped it and the text inside seemed to have been the first draft monograph of Buton's work *dron sel shed jar tha drug sel ba*. It has a note saying 'this is hand written by Thug-se

lotsawa and thus care must be taken against being lost. All the pages have yellow lines and the text is in Umed³ script, very much resembling which these days known as Kham dri.

The texts discovered from Riphug are sets of 42 works and some are as follow;

1. A complete set of *Tarka jawala* by Acharya Bhava,
2. A complete set of *Abhidharma sammuchaya*.
3. A complete set of *Hundred Thousand Prajnaparamita*.
4. The *Guhya-samaja* both root text and commentary.
5. The *Tri samya purvasolva viddhi* by Acharya Jaya Prabha.
6. A complete set of *Manjusri nama sangiti*.
7. A complete set of *Siddhi Kavira tantra*.
8. A complete set of *Manjusri nama samgiti*.
9. A complete set of *Tara stuti tika*
10. A complete set of *Trimsika* by Acharya Vasubandhu

On Ngor Monastery: They came to Ngor Monastery, following the short cut from Zalu, it took half a day to reach there. This monastery has over 40 volumes of Sanskrit texts. Gendun Chopel wrote on this monastery, “due to the fact that the majority of monks in this monastery are Khampas, the khampa accent of Kunkhyen Gorampa is still a living accent here. Ngorchen’s collection of texts is preserved in a room in the middle floor of Khangsar residence. We went there to see them. Most of the Tengyurs are still present. Tibetan texts are comparatively better in condition and uniform in size. This monastery has over 40 volumes of Sanskrit texts. The volumes include both full length and short length formats.” Here are few mentioned;

1. The hundred thousand *Pranjnaparamita*, part 4, excellent condition.
2. The *Kalachakra*
3. *The Kriya samuccaya* by Siddha Daven.
4. The *Bhasha virti*, a commentary on *Panini vyakarana*.
5. The commentary of *Ge tshul gyi tshig liur je pa* by Gyalsrung.
6. *Nyen dzog gyi cho ga ma ti*
7. A set of *Dron sel* in Sanskrit.
8. Five large volumes of *Asthasahasrika pranjnaparamita*: consisting of both complete and fragments.
9. A set of commentary on *Kala-pa* by Durga Sinha.
10. The commentary on *Su pratyaya* of *Chandra vyakarana*.
11. The commentary on *Tso rig* or *Ayurveda*

On Sakya Monastery- After that they came to Sakya monastery via Shapshung. There are 40 volumes of both short and full-length format of Sanskrit texts. Gendun Chopel said, “Texts of past Sakya lamas were preserved in Gorum temple. There are over one thousands volumes of texts. The first volume on which I laid my hand turned out to be Pandita Naljor

³ Umed Script: There are two types of script in Tibetan writing, one is Umed and the other is Uchen.

in his handwritings. It is a Sanskrit text written on papers. Thinking that there might be more of such texts, we did a thorough search, but no luck. That was the only Sanskrit text there. Then we discovered another book room, which was located a story above the assembly hall, there we found 40 volumes of books.” Here are few mentioned:

1. A fragment of *pramanapaka vriti*, a commentary of *pramana vartika* by Dharmakriti.
2. *The Pramana vartika tika* by Acharya Kantagoma.
3. *A fragment of Amarakosha* by Rabjor Dawa
4. A complete set of *Nava sloka prajnaparamita*.
5. A complete set of *Asthasharatika pindartha* by Mal Pada.
6. A complete set of *Asthasahamnan* by Acharya Yonten.
7. A complete set of *Arya guladharani*
8. A complete set of *Arya guli kalapa*.
9. A fragment of *Manjushri huhya chakra*.
10. A fragment of *Vinaya sutra pratimokha sutra tika*.
11. A fragment of *Vinayakarika* by Visakha.

On Tsang Thupten Namgyal Monastery: Gendun Chopel said that this monastery has a few fragments of Sanskrit texts such as *Lankavatarasutra*. Kunling Labrang has a copy of Kamalashila’s *Tso rig gi grel ba*; a commentary of Tibetan Aryu veda in short length format, which Rahul made a copy. The other texts are *Asthasaharikaprajnaparamita* and *Manjushrinamasangita*. It has also a copy of Bashed which is among the rarest documents now days.

Narthang monastery: Narthang monastery had no Sanskrit text. It had a collection of commentaries on *Bodhicharyavatara*, such as *Chu mig ma*, *Yang gon ma* etc.

Samye Monastery: Gendun Chopel and Rahul had great hope for Samye monastery but many people told them it was empty and they found it was true. There was no Sanskrit text.

Travel of Gendun Chopel in Nepal: Gendun Chopel and Rahul Sankrityayana reached River Maja to the south of Sakya and went Latogyal Gyishri. Then passing through Dingri⁴, Nyenang and others, they reached Nepal.

A detailed account of Nepal has been given by Gendun Chopel. I am here trying to give a brief account of his presentation.

Nepal is surrounded by mountains and one third of this population are Tibetans by race. Their language is more less a reformed Tibetan for example, in Nepali ‘chig-ga’ for one in Tibetan chig’ is one, ‘nyi-ka’ for ‘nyi’ two, ‘sum ka’ for ‘sum’ three and so forth. There are many like ‘mig-ga’ for ‘mig’ = eye, ‘na –wo’ for ‘na –wa’= ear, ‘ne’ for ‘na’ = nose, and ‘lag’ for ‘lagpa’ = hands etc.

⁴ Dingri: Dingri is a pass through Tibet and Nepal

Gendun Chopel said that Gorkhas⁵ are of Rajputana origin and they came lately in Nepal. At the time of King Manglon Mangtsen and Tride Tsugtsen Nepal was under Tibet. It is said that lama Ralo had seen five hundred double storied building there at the time of his visiting.

They (Gendun Chopel and Rahul) meet the Royal priest of Nepal, Mahapandita Hemraja at his home. He (priest) is highly learned in both Brahmanism and Buddhism. He was very well known in Nepal and India.

Pandit Hemraj had a Buddhist text on Pramana. Hemraj and Rahul composed it with Tibetan, when Gendun Chopel went through it. While they were comparing the texts Gendun Chopel told a verse on refutation of a Brahmin doctrine. There was a Tibetan phrase 'eaters of dog meat' on this context Hemraj told him that actually in Sanskrit it was 'eaters of meat' and not 'dog meat'.

Hemraj had great insights on Vedas. He could chant verses of Vedas well. He was a priest of Royal king. Hemraj misunderstood Gendun Chopel as a servant of Rahul. Gendun Chopel said that there was a misunderstanding on the word 'Liyul'. Gendun Chopel told that many people mistook Nepal to be 'Liyul'. In fact, the location of 'Liyul' is in the northern Tibet. Their language is Khotan, Chinese called it 'Sunja' or 'Hotana'. Drolungpa had rightly listed 'Liyul' as a separate land from Nepal.

In this way, according to Gendun Chopel's words: "Then, soon after crossing the Chandragiri pass in the south of Nepal, we came across the Indian railways. At the age of 32, I drank the water of river Ganges for the first time and I spent that winter in Patliputra city with a heart full of sadness." These were the last lines on the chapter of Nepal.

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⁵ Gorkhas: Gorkha is a race of Nepal.

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