

ANTIQUITY OF THE WORD BLA-MA

NIRMAL C. SINHA

Western and Japanese scholars generally hold that the usage BLA-MA is not as ancient as the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet (c. 7th century A.C.), and that the word became current long after the assassination of Glang-dar-ma (c. 842 A.C.) and long after the final victory of Buddhism. The earliest chronicles which did not undergo any revision, paddings and interpolations in later times as the contemporary inscriptions of the Chhos-rgyal period do not use the word BLA-MA. The words used are Ban-de, Slob-dpon, Rab-byung, Mkhan-po or Rin po-chhe,

In an article in this *Bulletin*, Vol. V, No. 2, p. 41, I wrote "No epigraphic or contemporary evidence is available so far to vouch for the usage Lama (bla-ma) in the seventh century and even in the eighth". Several epigraphists and linguists have enquired whether I have any evidence for the usage in the ninth century. I do not read the ancient documents, literary or epigraphic and thus submit my affirmative answer on corroborative but unimpeachable data.

The word Bla-ma occurs in several different contexts in the *Mahavyutpatti*, a word admitted to have been completed in the reign of Ral-pa-chan, that is, first quarter of the ninth century. The diverse contexts make clear that like its Sanskrit prototype (Guru) the Tibetan form (Bla-ma) was an omnibus word not unknown to scholars and translators of the time. A careful notice of these (given below) rules out interpolations in later time.

उत्तरः	ལྷ་མ།
उत्तर-ग्रन्थः	གཞུང་ལྷ་མ།
उत्तर-तन्त्रम्	རྒྱུད་ལྷ་མ།
उत्तर-मनुष्य-धर्म-प्रलापः	མིའི་ཚེས་ལྷ་མང་སྐྱེ་བ།
उत्तर-मनुष्य-धर्माशौचनम्	མིའི་ཚེས་ལྷ་མང་བརྗོད་པ།
उत्तर-मनुष्य-धर्म-युवततोक्तवर्तमानः	བདག་མིའི་ཚེས་ལྷ་མང་དང་ལྷན་པ་སྐྱེས་པ།
गुरु-भक्तिः	ལྷ་མ་ལ་སྦྱིང་ཉེ་བའི་ས་གུས་པ།

गुरु-कारः

ལྷ་མར་བྱེད་པ། བཙུན་པར་བྱེད་པ།

गुरु-शुश्रूषा

ལྷ་མ་ཡ་སྲིད་བྱ་ཆེ་བ།

If the word Bla-ma is not derived from Sanskrit Brahma/Brahmana and is of indigenous origin (1) there is more reason to believe that the Indian Pandita and the Tibetan Lo-tsa-va agreed to have a current (indigenous) form for Brahma/Brahmana in the sense of Guru with the well-known permissive 'l' for 'r'. For tracing the history of the word Bla-ma the etymology of Brahma/Brahmana has to be studied as much as that of Bla-ma. In Buddhism, notwithstanding its opinion about Brahmana as a caste, the word Brahmana was an honorific usage. Brahmana was the holy man or the teacher and even Buddha called himself a Brahmana (2). In Saka-Khotanese languages words cognate with Brahmana were used to denote Buddha (3); this is not surprising in view of the wide circulation in Central Asia of Sanskrit *Dhammapada* (*Udanavarga*) the earliest Buddhist treatise in eulogy of Brahmana' the holy man (4). I am inclined to accept the usage of Bla-ma for Buddha, Brahmana or Guru sometime after the ordination of the first Lamas by Santarakshita and Padmasambhava towards the end of the eighth century. Indian Buddhist diction has an important example of change of spelling and change of meaning in Dipa/Dvipa. Tibetan Buddhist diction is not free from mystic forms,

If Buddha and Brahmana Sangs-rgyas and Bla-ma, are synonymous, the occurrence of the word Bla-ma descriptive of the ordained monk may be dated sometime after the Ordination. Once an equivalent of Guru/Uttara was found the word was handy for the different contexts as in *Mahavyutpatti*.

When Tibet's own ordained monk expounded the teachings of Buddha, Buddha was no longer an unknown stranger,

ལྷ་མ་མེད་པའི་གོང་རོལ་ན།
མངས་རྒྱས་བྱ་བའི་མིང་ཡང་མེད།

I am not a specialist in linguistics but as a reader of history I trace the origins of the saying "When there was no Lama the name of Buddha was not known even" to the intervening period between the Ordination (c. 780 A.C.) and the succession of Ral-pa-chan (c. 815 A.C.) in supersession of the claims of the anti-Buddhist elder Glang-dar-ma, The historical significance of the historic saw, as I have submitted here, cannot be overlooked in tracing the antiquity of the word Bla-ma.

1. For a recent discussion see Richard Keith Sprigg in *Tibetan Review* (Darjeeling), May 1969, P. 12.
2. *Prolegomena to Lamaist Polity* (Calcutta 1969) may be seen.
3. Harold Bailey : *Khotanese Texts*, Vol. IV (Cambridge 1961) P 12.
4. Standard editions (and translations) are those of P. Steinthal (London 1885), D.M. Strong (London 1902), K. Seidenstucker (Berlin 1920) and N. P. Chakravarti (Paris 1930) besides notices in journals by B. C. Mazumdar, Pischel; Sylvain Levi and La Vallee Poussin. Tibetan translation of *Udanavarga* is incorporated both in Kanjur (Mdo-sde) and Tanjur (Mngon-pa). The Tibetan *Udanavarga* was translated into English by W. W. Rockhill (1883) and the Khotanese *Dhammapada* by A. W. Bailey (1945).

