

ABOUT DIPANKARA ATISA

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A

Pandita Srijnana Dipankara, famous in Tibet as Jo Atisa or Jowo Atisa, was born in 982 A.D. In 1982-83 Indian scholars and elite celebrated the Sahasra Varshiki of Dipankara Atisa. The celebration of Atisa millenary was generally confined to eastern India (and Bangladesh). Atisa was born in what was then (10/11th centuries known to Tibet and Tibetans as Vangala. Vangala later came to be called Bangala under the Muslim Sultans and Nawabs, and thereafter under the British, was called Bengal.

The area and boundaries of Vangala, Bangala and Bengal changed a number of times between mid 10th century and mid 20th century. Tibetans all through these ten centuries stuck to the term Vangala. Hence Buston, Taranatha, Sumpa Khenpo, Lama Tsenpo or Geshe Chhoda cannot refer to the same region with the same boundaries. I write this to contend that any discussion about Atisa being a Bengali or Bihari diverts us from more important points about this great Pandita.

The important fact about Atisa is not the exact place where he was born but the role he played in the history of Tibet. More curious than Atisa's fame in Tibet is the fact that in Mongolia, which Atisa did not visit, or ever planned to visit, he was held in esteem as second to Gautama Buddha. Our homage to Atisa, during our celebration of the millenary, was not concerned with such questions.

In my submission the two most important questions about Atisa relate to (i) Atisa's special teachings in Tibet, that is, Kalachakra Tantra and (ii) Atisa's efforts and directives about reconstruction and regeneration of the Sangha in Tibet. Four centuries later Atisa's legacy in both doctrinal and organizational matters was carried north by the Yellow Sect monks and teachers.

B

Kalachakra Tantra, according to tradition in Tibet and Mongolia originated in the country called Shambhala. Like that of Uddyana, the geographical and historical reality of Shambhala is shrouded in fables and legends of Tibet and Mongolia.

According to Sarat Das, Sham-bha-la was probably the metropolis of Bactrian Greeks where Mahayana flourished in the first century

B.C. and first century A.D. Shambhala as a place in or around Bactria (Skt. Bahlika) cannot be ruled out. While Sarat Das would locate Shambhala in the Oxus valley, Csoma de Koros (half a century earlier) would locate this in the Jaxartes valley and Helmut Hoffman (half a century after Sarat Das) would locate the place in the Tarim basin, that is, eastern Turkestan.

Geshe Chhoda in his Dictionary (in nineteen forties) sums the legends and fables thus: Shambhala is on the north of India and was abode of Raja Suchandra, seven other Dharmarajas etc; the name (Shambhala) means home of happiness.

Indian tradition—Puranas, Tantras, and legends and fables in vernaculars—preserves the memory of a Sambala/Shambhala situated in the direction of Pamirs. The mystic saints of India, who brought the lore of Sambala/Shambhala, probably founded seats of this new learning (Kalachakra) and named the seats Shambhalapura (in vernacular Sambalpur). Even today two townships, Sambalpur (Moradabad) of Uttar Pradesh and Sambalpur of Orissa, are known to have been centuries ago centres of Tantra.

From Tibetan evidence it may be inferred that Kalachakra had come from Shambhala to Indo-Gangetic plains nearly two decades before Atisa was born; and that Kalachakrapada and Naropa were the precursors of Atisa in this new learning. Atisa might have delved deeper into Kalachakra while in Nepal on his way to Tibet. I should note that in Nepal also there was a Shambhala whose location today is not very clear; the tradition of Shambhala in Nepal could have come with the Khasa settlers from far west.

Shambhala in later tradition of Tibet and Mongolia attained importance as the land from where the Saviour would arise when Buddhism would be in danger. Northern Buddhists very much prize the memory of Atisa as a saviour with the background of Shambhala. Indian scholars may ignore the later political overtones of Shambhala as not worthy of academic investigation. But with a large number of highly learned Tibetan scholars settled in India and with good collections of Puranic and Tantrik literary texts in places like Varanasi and Calcutta, Indian scholars should find Shambhala the home of Kalachakra as a promising subject of research. Certainly this would be more viable than locating the place where Atisa was born.

C

Guru Padmasambhava and Acharya Santarakshita founded the Gedun (Sangha) in Tibet around 780; the first seven Tibetan monks ordained by Padmasambhava and Santarakshita are celebrated as the first Lamas of Tibet. The Order thrived well without dependence on

monks from India but with the assassination of the great Chogyal Ralpa-chen (around 830) and the reign of the apostate Lang Darma, the systematic persecution of the Dharma and the Lamas in particular was begun. This continued for long after Lang Darma was assassinated by a monk (c.842); often Bon rituals infiltrated into Buddhist households and Buddhist temples. A century later loyal and devout Buddhists living mostly in obscure and distant places (particularly in Western Tibet) started despatching emissaries to Nalanda, Odantapuri or Vikramasila to invite saints and scholars to visit Tibet and preach the Saddharma (Pure Doctrine) there. It was in pursuance of such invitations for several generations that eventually Srijnana Dipankara came to Tibet.

Atisa, travelling through Nepal, arrived in Western Tibet in 1042 and, after spending three years in the west, he went to Central Tibet and lived the rest of his life there, passing away in 1054. He indeed preached the Pure Doctrine both in the Western and Central Tibet; that is, he ruthlessly eradicated the Bon infiltrations and the lax morals thriving under the cloak of Tantra. By example as well as precept, Atisa made clear that monastic power rested on monastic discipline; celibacy and discipline like plain living and high thinking were to go together. Atisa's disciples and their successors naturally commanded respect of all, loyal as well as ambivalent devotees. Abbots and incarnations would thus become the refuge, in true sense, both for spiritual and material needs, when the remnants of monarchy and feudal houses could not provide leadership to the community.

Despite the open condemnation and organized hostility by Atisa's later followers, namely, the Gelugpa monks, Atisa remained an object of highest adoration with the Nyingma, Sakya and Kargyu Sects. Atisa's injunctions about monastic discipline and mystic rituals were not complied with by the three Red Sects, exactly as would the Yellow, even after the final triumph of the Yellow Sect as the temporal rulers of all Tibet; while Mongols were exclusively Yellow with the remnants of earlier Sakya or Kargyu followers fast disappearing. The high esteem for Atisa in the Red Sects was not so much because he was a great Pandita. With my close association with the Red Sect monks and priests, I would say that Atisa would not be ranked higher than Padmasambhava or Santarakshita in the Red Sects. Yet Atisa's stock is very high with the Red Sects because he had not only rescued or revived the Dharma but had confirmed the place of the Sangha as the highest in the community.

Atisa found that Mahayana, because of its emphasis on universal salvation and joint community striving for such goal, had tremendous attraction for the nomadic pastoral peoples in the Trans-Himalayas; and that the Bodhisattva Nirmanakaya would thus be the appropriate leader for such peoples. All were eligible for Nirvana irrespective of status, birth, wealth or intellect. This was a promise from Gautama Buddha. Nagarjuna added to this the concept of mundane Bodhisattva who would share his piety with the less fortunate.

Atisa readily approved the prefix of "I take refuge in the Guru (Lama)" to the Triple Refuge, and also sanctioned the occurrence of Nirmanakaya (Tulku) in Tibet. Atisa, himself an incarnation of Amitabha, recognized the Tibetan tradition that Srong-tsen Gampo was an incarnation of Avalokitesvara and prophesied that the same Bodhisattva would appear successively in the lineage of Dromton, the great disciple of Atisa.

Atisa, as reported by the Gelugpa monks and scholars to Sarat Das, had predicted that when the Dharma would be in danger again, and no royal protection was available, the Sangha would come forward and if necessary would exercise temporal power. In this situation Sangharatna Avalokitesvara would incarnate successively in the hierarchy of the Sect, succeeding Dromton's disciples. The Dalai Lamas are the successive incarnations in fulfilment of Atisa's prophecy according to Yellow Sect, and all Red sects have accepted the Dalai Lama's spiritual and temporal authority, despite all doctrinal differences. This tradition, even though oral through centuries, is reported to have support in the numerous Gelugpa tracts and treatises. I learned from several highest Nyingma, Sakya, and Kargyu Lamas about their whole hearted support to Atisa prophecy. The Gelugpa scholars now settled in India express their willingness to collaborate with Indian scholars in exploring the Gelugpa sources. Would Indian scholars take up this as a worthy subject of research ?

The prerogatives of the Sangha and the paramount position of the Sangharaja are well-known features of Theravada (Hinayana) tradition. In India, even in Pala Vangala, such concepts did not thrive in Srijnana Dipankara's time. Did he then notice these concepts growing or flourishing in Suvarnavipa where Mahayana and Hinayana co-existed at the time ? Whether Srijnana Dipankara realized the potentialities of the Sangha from the facts in Suvarnavipa or from his readings of the Pali Canon or from his vision of Shambhala Dharmarajas, Atisa in Tibet inspired the rise of an ecclesiastical polity which saved the Dharma in Tibet and Mongolia from the mystic of Han hegemony, and eventually preserved the independence of both countries.

Restoration of **Bodhipathapradipa**, from Tibetan or Mongol translation, is undoubtedly an academic as well as patriotic duty for Indian scholars. No less academic or patriotic would be a probe into Atisa's legacy in Inner Asia. The probe involves researches into the past of India, Burma, Malaysia, Indonesia, Nepal and the Oxus-Jaxartes valley besides Tibet. It is time Indian scholars realize that Dipankara Atisa was a great Asian, much greater than a Pandita from Vangala.