



The Biography of Rinchen Zangpo (958- 1055) and Revaluation of Contemporary Events

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Rinchen Zangpo (958 – 1055) wrote on events that are over centuries old. The contemporary scholars face the challenge in reading his work because names of places, locations, and religious practices of geographically inaccessible Himalayan region cutting across human civilizations have changed over the years. However, some non-Buddhist accounts of travellers such as Giuseppe Tucci and Herbert Franke have shed light to the subject while the texts from the Buddhist point of view have also provided some literature but are dotted with inconsistencies. Scholars have studied the iconographies, painting and scriptures during this period and although the documentations during the 9th century to the 12 century have been vague, some indigenous accounts such as the biographies of Atisha or *Guru Padmasambhava* and Rinchen Zangpo have been valuable sources. Other sources which have not been referred extensively are works of Sarat Chandra Das and Raul. Works of Prof. Plitker, currently a visiting professor at Chengdu University has also written on the subject.

Researches conducted on western Himalayas are inadequate primarily because the Tibetans don't have their own historiography. The only historical records that are available are the *Chezum* which charts the monastic history and history related to the monks and leaders. Rinchen Zangpo's contribution was the revival of Buddhism that was introduced by Songstan Gambo during the 7th century. As Buddhism underwent a lull under the Vinaya system, the narratives and practices before Rinchen Zangpo were almost the same and did not vary much from each other.

During the life of Rinchen Zangpo, the centralization of Kingship was challenged and Tibet fragmented into several smaller tribal chiefdoms. The *Lang Dharma* was divided into the West and the East. Buddhism in the western part of Tibet was revived with the works of Rinchen Zangpo. He was born in Kinnaur in a village situated on the banks of the Sutlej River. He belonged to the Bonpo Shen family and followed the traditional *bon* religion as practiced in the western Himalayas. In his childhood, he was directed in his dreams to go to *kache* or Kashmir and still as a teenager, in 975 AD, having obtained permission from his parents, with six hundred cowry shells, he set out on the treacherous journey with a friend largely depending upon begging and alms.

On reaching Kashmir, he learnt the local language and Buddhism and studied Sanskrit texts on philosophy and tantric practices. After thirteen years of learning, he returned to Tibet and under the patron of the king of Guge, Lha Lama Yeshey O, Rinchen Zangpo along with Indian artisans worked in building the royal monastery and of Toling, and two other monasteries.

The title *Lhocen* is the abbreviated name of *Lhotsava Chenpo* which literally means, the one who investigates the texts and discusses them. It is more than being the translator or interpreter of the texts. This title was given to him because he had mastery over the Sanskrit and Tibetan language. He initiated the *Vinaya* tradition in Western Tibet which continues to be practiced in the region. It is said

that on one occasion Rinchen Zangpo made a statue and presented the gift to a monastery with 60 members.

There are three biographies of Rinchen Zangpo, the extensive one, abridged version and a short version highlighting the important events in his life. In the extensive biography, there is a mention where King Lah Lama Yeshey O summons texts from India along with scholars and artisans and as the reward he promises horses and elephants (a metaphor for the returns because there were no elephants in western Tibet). In the biography five intelligent students are sent to Kashmir and two died because of the summer heat. The record annals that the great patron King Lah Lama Yeshey O is said to have died a natural death.

Rinchen Zangpo is said to have studied over seventy-five Indian panditas. Among them he learnt the Yuktantra and the *Ratnasiddhi* was said to be given to Rinchen Zangpo when he met an old man and offered him *Shadrarkar Verma*. The *mandala* depicts the teachings in a well formulated design and has been depicted in *Nyama*, *Toling*, *Tabo* and the *Kachar* monasteries. The Kadam sect in the region was founded by the disciples of Atisha but Padmasambhava (Atisha) being credited for bringing the mingma sect is not true. When Rinchen Zangpo counted the temples that he built, it amounted to 107 and finally in Dilchum, he erected the 108 monastery, a number auspicious to the Buddhist tradition.

During the final days of Rinchen Zangpo, he met Atisha at Toling and after discussing with him, Atisha exclaimed that with scholars like Rinchen Zangpo, there was little need for him to come and teach. However upon asking Rinchen Zangpo how one should practice the tantras, he replied that each should be practiced separately in its own chamber, (or, more specifically, Guhyasamāja on the ground floor, Hevajra on the second floor, and Cakrasamvara on the top floor) which Atisha replied that in fact, there was need for him to come and the tantras were not to be practiced separately but together in the mind, through meditation. On these instructions Rinchen Zangpo was instructed to go on a meditation retreat. There he created three chambers and according to tradition, he wrote above outer door to his meditation cell: "Within this door, should a thought of attachment the phenomenal world arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head." Over the middle door he wrote: "Should a thought of self-interest arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head." Over the inner door he wrote: "Should an ordinary thought arise for even a single moment, may the dharmapāla split open my head."

On the thirteenth year of meditation, at the age of ninety-eight, he passed away and his disciples followed Atisha. His funeral rites were conducted by his disciples whom he called the four pillars and eight beams.

Questions and Answers

Alka Acharya: How does one search for the reincarnate by higher authorities and how is he recognised?

Gautam Das: The definition and borders of Nari have fluctuated by time. Which areas are considered in the monastic traditions?

Speaker: Nari comprises of two areas, Maryul and Ladakh and Zanskar. The region of Guge, Ladakh-Zanskar, Laul Spiti and Purang and Dolpo areas. In the monastic tradition the major monasteries are the Tholing, Kachar and the Alchi monasteries.

Yeshe Choeden: The period of Rinchen Zangpo is considered to be the dark period of Buddhism but instead, it is the renaissance period as different schools of lamas sprung up especially under the auspices of patron kings. How come Rinchen Zangpo's teaching didn't become a school with any principles and tradition and in the light of having a patron king, where did Rinchen Zangpo receive the resources for constructing the monasteries?

Speaker: Rinchen Zangpo no doubt was a great sculptor and a painter and nobody could compete with him but what set him apart was that he was not associated with any monasteries unlike others. The Shakyapas were associated with the Shakyas monasteries and similarly were the other sects. He focussed more on the attainment of nirvana and during his times, Atisha was a great teacher whom every monk followed. Although he didn't know Atisha before but later he came to acknowledge the greatness of Atisha's teachings.

Bharti: A few methodological questions, when you're sourcing the history, many of these sources is esoteric and not always revealed and definitely not written and is a transmission of sorts. If hagiography is not a source of religious history in the Himalayas, how does one source out. References to sources like Sarat Chandra Das and Shakabya although they prevail over our academic discussions do not get attention but people like Oswald Headding, Franke, Tucci and their accounts are profound but I don't know if their narrative has gravity to its attribute. Is there a failure on our parts as academics that we do not take the esoteric unless it has a foreign name attached to it and can hagiography be taken as a source of understanding? There has never been a system of writing but a lack of systematic writing.

Speaker: Sources need not always be writing but also can be taken from folk songs, and cultural practices. If looked at these sources objectively we can find materials but if looked at it subjectively, no material can be gathered from it. Esoteric is also sometimes deliberate or sometimes because of ignorance or just the reluctance to reveal themselves which is a cultural thing among the people of the Himalayan region.

Gautam Das: In the historiography How would you put Shakaba in the political context?

Speaker: He did try to give a political history but there was no need for such documentation during Rinchen Zangpo's period. The training did not demand for political documentation.

Col Verma: How do you evaluate Tucci's Indo- Tibetica which is the only source that gave the biography of Rinchen Zangpo.

Speaker: Tucci's contribution has been indispensable in accounting history of Himalayas. However, he states that one hundred and eight temples is not to be taken literally but more symbolically. However, Rinchen Zangpo did build one hundred and eight temples. When he mention about the master artists taken from Kashmir, literal sources prove about Kashmir tradition in the architecture of monasteries. Tucci mentions the statue made by Rinchen Zangpo was in bronze in the image of his father but actually it was Bidhaka who made the statue of Avalokiteswara that was the size of his father and was installed in Gokhar Lhakhang in Khatse and still exist today. However, his records have been helpful but we have to go through them with cautious.

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