

WHAT CONSTITUTES THE IMPORTANCE OF ATISA?

- Nirmal C. Sinha

I

The above question is from a young Tibetologist, Helmut Eimer. Eimer has made wide study of Tibetan literary sources, and in my knowledge he is the only non-Tibetan scholar to have probed deep into the life and works of Srijnana Dipankara Atisa (982-1054). In 1982-83 millenary of Atisa was celebrated in India. The scholarly or academic output of these celebrations however did not go much beyond what the Indian pioneer Sarat Chandra Das (1849-1917) wrote. Indian scholars celebrating ATISA SAHASRA VARSHIKI were not even aware of many Tibetan sources come to light after Sarat Das, and all our seminars and talks boiled down to the old, already known, conclusion that Atisa was the great Pandita who brought learning and light to Tibet when Dharma was in danger there. The ATISA SAHASRA VARSHIKI did not impress the interested scholars even in India.

Helmut Eimer does not refer to the muddle among Indian celebrators but has written a critical article on "Life and Activities of Atisa Dipankara Srijnana" in Journal of the Asiatic Society, Vol XXVII No. 4 (Calcutta 1985). Eimer frames the question "What constitutes the importance of Atisa?" in this article. With my limited acquaintance of Tibetan literary sources, a fair knowledge of Tibetan oral tradition and good on-the-spot knowledge acquired in Central Tibet in 1955-6, I had posed nearly twenty years ago the same question in Bengal Past & Present: Diamond Jubilee Number (Calcutta 1967). As my question did not attract any serious notice in our country at the moment and later, I take the liberty of reproducing below the relevant portions of my article (1967).

II

"A decade ago the present writer had visited the temples and monasteries of Central Tibet in the company of some Ladakhi Lamas. The writer did not, as he still does not, suffer from the complex called Greater India and was

not particular in tracing the Indic origins of the objects noticed. An event from this itinerary constitutes a historic experience for this writer, a student of history. This happened in the first month of Tibetan year.

"Besides being the time for new garments, luxury dishes and merriments for all, the first month is a special celebration for the Yellow Sect (dge-lugs-pa, pronounced Gelugpa). The Yellow Sect originating with Tsong-kha-pa (1357-1417), a great Lama from Kokonor region, captured political power in Central Tibet in the sixteenth century and by the middle of the seventeenth century made their hierarch, the Dalai Lama, the undisputed sovereign of Tibet. Though in actual administration lay element (members of ancient royal/feudal houses and the like) was taken into power and in fact at every level of administration a monk-official and a lay-official worked together, the ruling Lamas at the top maintained that the power belonged to the Sangha (dge-dun, pr. Gedun).

"Tsong-kha-pa, the founder of the Yellow Sect, had instituted a special prayer for the new year month. This prayer (smon-lam, pr. Monlam) was to invoke the advent of the Buddha Maitreya. The Fifth Dalai Lama (1617-1692) enlarged the Prayer to the form in practice till the Flight of the Fourteenth (1959).

"During the month of Monlam the entire administration of the metropolis, that is, Lhasa, was taken over by the Lamas from the three monasteries around Lhasa. These monasteries had captured political power in the sixteenth century and the exclusive Lama administration of the metropolis was a token of the residuary powers or ultimate sovereignty of the Sangha.

"In the Monlam month no Lama high or low was to bow to a layman, particularly a stranger. Another protocol proscribed riding on the road around the Cathedral (Jo-khang = Skt. Bhattarakagriha) during the Monlam as the Dalai Lama usually resided in the Cathedral at the time. Horse as an engine of power first emerged in Inner Asia, and appropriately riding around the seat of the Imperium came to be banned during the period.

"A few days before the commencement of the New Year, the writer had left Lhasa to visit Gan-den (dgah-Idan = Skt. Tushita), one of the three monasteries and the one

with the mausoleum of Tsong-kha-pa. When he returned the New Year had set in and the special rules of the road were effective. Though his Ladakhi companions affirmed that a visitor from India - Phag-yul (hphags-yul) or Aryabhumi - would be permitted riding because at the moment the Dalai Lama was not inside the Cathedral, the writer dismounted on reaching the ring. Some Lamas noticed this and were delighted at the observance of propriety.

"One Lama asked the writer whether he was also a Ladakhi. On answering in the negative he wanted to know the exact place - the city - from where the writer hailed. The writer said "Kata" (Kata or Kalikata is Tibetan for Calcutta). The inquisitive Lama burst out "Kata Kalikata. That means Vangala". He collected quite a few of his friends and bowed thrice (Namaskar in Indian fashion) and said "Look, this man is come from Vangala from where Jo-Atisa (Prabhu Atisa) came to Tibet". Then followed this dialogue.

Lama : Are you a Buddhist?

Writer : No.

Lama : Then you will not know Jo-Atisa.

Writer : I do know his name.

Lama : How is that for a non-Buddhist?

Writer : In Vangala many know him and know his full name Dipankara Srijnana Atisa. His name lives as the mark of intellect.

Lama : I do not fully accept your word. Is the name current today in your country?

Writer : Yes, I have my son named Atisa.

Lama : I am surprised. I am surprised.

"The Lama's peroration still rings in the ears of the writer. "Today is a most auspicious day for me. I come from Mongolia and this man comes from Vangala. I have taken nearly two years to reach Lhasa. I arrived only this morning a few hours ago to participate in Monlam and what a happy augury that I meet a native of the land of Jo-Atisa. Jo-Atisa came to preach the correct Doctrine nine hundred years ago and his preachings spread from Tibet into Mongolia. Friends, join me in a salutation to this man from the south. We salute the land of Jo-Atisa". The Lama bowed thrice again and departed.

"This strange conduct of a Lama during the Monlam

was an inscrutable sight to the non-Buddhist traders on the street. Monlam is also the season when Musulman merchants from India (Ladakh) and Turkestan (Sinkiang) along with the Tibetans and Newars throng the streets of Lhasa. Most confounded were the Chinese, the civilians in blue as well as the soldiers in khaki.

"Though not a devotee of the fetish of Greater India, this writer quite naturally felt a gratification on being honoured as a compatriot of Atisa. He, however, felt more interested to know the place of Atisa in the history of Inner Asia, Tibet and Mongolia. Atisa (b. 982) came to Tibet in 1042 and passed away in 1054 near Lhasa".

III

Ten years later I visited the Baikals and was more surprised to note that the Buriats esteemed Adisa Dibangkara (Atisa Dipankara) as second only to Gautama Buddha. I was told that the Buriats shared such sentiment with the Mongols in general. All Mongols reportedly admitted the greatness of Nagarjuna as the authentic exponent of Buddha's Transcendental Teachings and that of Tsong Khapa as the Teacher of the Dharma. The tradition among the Mongols, as I could understand, was that though Atisa indeed never travelled beyond Central Tibet his teachings in their purest form reached the Mongols through Tsong Khapa and his disciples.

Atisa had visited Tibet and worked there till his death. Atisa had indeed consolidated Dharma in Tibet and the great renaissance was the outcome of Atisa's work in Tibet. Atisa's name as a household word in Tibet is no puzzle for anyone, a Buddhist believer or a modern scholar. But why and how Atisa became a prized figure in the north, in Mongolia or Siberia? Clearly Atisa left a legacy not for Tibet only but for all Mahayana or Northern Buddhist peoples.

This important question has not however interested scholars and intellectuals in the land of Atisa's birth. The Atisa-Sahasra-Varshiki (millenary) was celebrated in India in 1982-83. The consensus among Indian scholars and intellectuals was that Atisa was a great son of India and that nothing much about Atisa can be found from records in India. There was however much noise about the precise

spot where Atisa was born. Was Atisa a Bengali or a Bihari in modern sense of the terms? I would contend that we in India -- Bengalis, Biharis or others -- need not shout to claim Atisa as our compatriot. Atisa is indeed a lost figure of Indian history while he is a live tradition of Asian history.

I have not much claims to scholarship yet as one with nearly 30 years close associations with Northern Buddhists I dare record my observations on Atisa's role in Inner Asian history. I would make some preliminary remarks before I offer my observations. It is a sad fact that after Sarat Chandra Das and Rahul Sankrityayan not much worthy work on Tibet has been done in India, that is, by Indian scholars. Indian scholarship regarding Tibet is a gloss of patriotic verbiage to conceal our poor knowledge of the subject. The Western scholars, on the otherhand, have delved deep into the literary and archaeological data available and have made original and outstanding contributions. I owe much of my knowledge about Tibet to several Western scholars as well as to Rahul Sankrityayan and a large number of Lamas and scholars of Tibet and Mongolia. I am however constrained to submit that Western scholars in general, barring a few like Hugh Richardson, have misunderstood or misinterpreted certain facts and features of the Northern Buddhist countries.

A point to illustrate would be the Western view about the origin and development of the Incarnations and Incarnate Rulers in Tibet and later Mongolia. Despite considerable positive data in Buddhist and pre-Buddhist Brahmanical literature, there is a notion among Western scholars that the institution of Incarnations commenced in Tibet under the auspices of the royal patrons of Dharma. For a brief authoritative account of the concept of Nirmanakaya (Sprulsku/Tulku) in Sankhya, Yoga and even Rig Veda, Western scholars should read Gopinath Kaviraj in the Sarasvati Bhavan Studies (Sanskrit College, Benaras) or Aspects of Indian Thought (University of Burdwan). If a great lot of Indic imagery and idiom migrated to the Trans-Himalayas along with Akshara and Dharma, the concept of Nirmanakaya was undoubtedly an important import.

The inventor of the script, Thonmi Sambhota was apotheosized as the incarnation of Manjusri while Songtsen

Gampo as that of Avalokitesvara. Later tradition dated before Atisa's arrival in Tibet, recognised Lha Tho Thori, the ancestor of Song-tsen Gampo, as an incarnation of Samantabhadra in commemoration of the event that the first Buddhist book, Karandvyuha, came in Lha Tho Thori's reign. Likewise, Lhalung Palgyi Dorje, who killed the apostate king Langdarma (c. 845), was apotheosized as an incarnation of Vajrapani. A monk resorting to murder and regicide to protect the Dharma was no doubt worthy of veneration as Vajrapani. The act of regicide by a monk anticipated by centuries the role of Lama as Dharmapala (Chos-skyong/Chokiyong) or Dharmaraja (Chos-rgyal/Chogyal).

IV

The regicide however could not prevent the decline of Dharma. Two centuries later Srijnana Dipankara, celebrated as Jo Atisa in Tibet, arrived in Western Tibet in pursuance of repeated invitations and later settled and propagated in Central Tibet. The Dharma was in decline and only a Sthavira cum Pandita like Atisa could fully retrieve the lost position and even usher in a period of renaissance. In regenerating and rebuilding the Sangha, Atisa enjoined stern discipline for the monks and, though himself old and come from warm plains, he refused any comforts which he considered to be luxury. Atisa's disciples (the Kadampa monks) and their successors (the Gelugpa monks) were renowned for their austere living and naturally commanded respect from all people. A Guru (Blama/Lama) or a Nirmanakaya (Sprul-sku/Tulku) would no longer be just an object of ritualistic veneration but a protector par excellence (Skyab-mgon/Kyam-gon) for the commonman when the remnants of monarchy or the feudal lords failed in their duties.

Atisa's experience in Suvarnadvipa must have inspired him to strive for a Sangha as the leading force in the land and for a Sangharaja as the leader of the people. The institutions of Lama and Tulku were thus handy. Atisa recalled the old Indian adage -- "The Guru is the Buddha : the Guru is the Dharma : the Guru is the Sangha" and confirmed the refuge formula, popular in Tibet -- "I take refuge in the Lama (Guru) : I take refuge in the Sangye (Buddha): I take refuge in the Chos (Dharma) : I take refuge in the Gedun (Sangha)". Later this refuge in the Four became

universal from the Himalayas to the Altai Karakorams. The concept of Tulku (Nirmanakaya) was further sanctified by Atisa. He not only confirmed the recognition of Songtsen Gampo as incarnation of Avalokitesvara but recognised his disciple Domton (hBrom-ston) also as in the same spiritual lineage. Atisa, according to Kadampa and Gelugpa sources, even prophesied that centuries later the lineage of Domton would produce in succession the incarnations of Avalokitesvara. The hierarchs of the Gelugpa Sect, later called Dalai Lamas by the Mongols, are the incarnations in fulfilment of Atisa's prophecy. An epithet of Avalokitesvara is Sangharatna, and who could be a better Sangharaja for the Land of Snow than the incarnation of Avalokitesvara.

Fifty years after Atisa passed away, the Sakya hierarch Sa-chen Kunga Nyingpo (1092 - 1158) was found to be incarnation of Avalokitesvara. The first Karmapa hierarch Dusum Khenpa (1110-1193) was the next find. The Karmapa lineage was claimed as the lineage of Avalokitesvara; later this claim was contested by the Gelugpa Sect. The Gelugpa won the battle, when all the four main sects (Nyingma, Sakya, Kargyu and Gelug) accepted the Gelug hierarch, the Dalai Lama, as the paramount incarnation for all Nangpa (Buddhist). Various theories have been propounded by Western scholars to account for the victory of the Gelug hierarch. This is not the occasion to discuss that question.

V

In ancient India, as in Tibet later, the legacy or heritage of a saint would be best preserved or continued by saintly disciples and the successive abbots or hierarchs were to be celibate. So the lineage was known as spiritual lineage. Such lineage could be in one or more pitha/ashrama. The most famous such lineage surviving to our days is the spiritual lineage of Sankaracharya in four different seats in four directions of the country. In Buddhist Tibet also we have records of one or more incarnations of the same deity or saint.

Western scholars have taken great pains to find better English equivalents for the terms "spiritual" and "incarnation". For the former terms like "metaphysical" and "non-biological" have been coined and for the latter terms like "re-incarnation" have been used. I would stick to the old

usage "spiritual" and "incarnation" and simply submit that with all their proficiency in Tibetan language the Western scholars ignore or lack the context of Sanskrit originals.

It was the spiritual lineage represented by the Kadampa and later the Gelugpa hierarchs who preserved and continued the legacy of Atisa. This legacy stood for the rights of the Sangha and the authority of the Sangharaja.

It may be noted that from the very beginning in China there was an open confrontation between Buddhism and Confucianism; and except during the Tang regime, Buddhism had all through a precarious existence in China. As an accident of history, Buddhism had made its first hold in Tibet while the Tang dynasty was ruling in China; even Chinese princesses are known to have brought to their Tibetan consorts Buddha images.

Nevertheless the confrontation between Buddhism and Confucianism was continued in Tibet, and eventually Buddhism became the identity mark for the barbarian Bod-pa visavis the civilised Han. When a "barbarian" or "conqueror" dynasty like the Mongol or the Manchu ruled China, the close relationship between the Grand Lamas of Tibet and the Emperors of China was a matter of the common Dharma. The Lama was the highly honoured Priest/Teacher and the Emperor was the highly prized patron. Tibetans did not become "civilized" and Tibet continued as a "barbarian" country. That is to say, Tibet did not become during the regimes of "barbarian" emperors "Tibet Region of China". Besides there was no question of Mongols becoming submissive or civilized either.

Sino-ophile scholars roundly describe the Manchu emperor as the suzerain, if not sovereign, over Tibet and Mongolia. True facts are not to be found in the Chinese Annals which as a rule omit events of misdemeanour or rebellion in Tibet or Mongolia. The fact of the matter is that the Great Fifth (Dalai Lama V) was prevailed upon by his imperial patron to keep the Mongols under control and within their boundaries. The Mongols under the advice of the Dalai's second -- the Hambo lama -- agreed to keep peace if they were left alone. It is interesting to note that while the so-called Tribute Missions from Tibet were sometimes too frequent and had to be banned by the Confucian diplo-

mats, such Missions from Mongolia were not even very regular.

The great economic gain for the Mission bearers was not a good incentive for the Mongol traders who retained their ancient spirit of war and freedom. In the second half of the eighteenth century, the Mongols, Kalmuks and Buriats chalked out new trade channels in Tibet (and through to India) and in Turkestan (and through to Russia and Poland).

Earlier, that is, previous to Dalai Lama Manchu alliance, sword was the instrument for freedom in Tibet and more so in Mongolia. Now Dharma was the symbol of national identity or independence. The great merit of Gelugpa ascendancy was that the barbarians had a new consciousness of being civilized and superior, and even the most illiterate or superstitious could notice material and temporal power in the religion. For such illiterate or superstitious, the teachings of Buddha, Nagarjuna and Padmasambhava found their logical fulfilment in Kadam Phachos, Kadam Bhuchos and the trail of tracts and treatises.

Legacy of Dharma propounded by Gautama Buddha and expounded by Atisa, may be summed thus. One who takes refuge in the Three Jewels does not and cannot owe higher allegiance to any mundane superior. In China, a Buddhist was often accused as being disrespectful or insubordinate to the Son of Heaven on the Dragon Throne. In India, the Buddha (after Nirvana) and the Dharma were transcendental and intangible objects; the Sangha was immanent and tangible and refuge in the Sangha evoked spontaneous devotion and faith. The Sangha under favourable circumstances could be the sole refuge in matters spiritual as well as temporal. The Sangha had a mission from the Master, "for the profit of the many, for the bliss of the many, out of compassion for the world, for the welfare, the profit, the bliss of devas and mankind". It was the Sangha which under favourable auspices, could take the Dharma abroad and build permanent and glorious home for the Dharma spread from the sunny south to the cold north. In the new home the Sangharaja would be the Refuge or Protector par excellence and would thus not bow to any temporal power. Thus for Tibet and Mongolia, submission to any external temporal power, even if that be the Son of Heaven, would be blasphemy as well as treason. It was this non-reli-

gious or non-spiritual consequence of the teachings of Atisa's followers which had a popularity of its own for the Tibetans as well as the Mongols when the Manchu empire was at its apogee and the first British envoy to China was dismissed as a Red Barbarian.

Gautama Buddha and Dipankara Atisa are prized figures in Tibet and Mongolia for moral as well as material reasons no doubt.

VI

I have written this article to draw the notice of Indian elite and to divert the attention of Indian scholars to a truly viable subject for research. Helmut Eimer is thirty years junior to me in age but considerably senior to me in scholarship. I shall be the last to find fault with Eimer's Tibetan scholarship.

I however seek Helmut Eimer's indulgence to say a few words on proper reading and proper review of Tibetan literary sources and a millenium old tradition. He has cited a number of German authorities on science of history and historiography as guides for correctly presenting Tibetan history, history of the sects (Kadampa and Gelugpa) and lives of saints and scholars as found in Tibetan literary sources. I do not read German but am well aware of the inhibitions of Western scholars regarding historical source materials of Eastern countries. I began my career as a student of history, particularly modern history, and submit the following comments about history, eastern and western.

Persistent century old tradition, even if not recorded in paper or stone, cannot be totally rejected. Theodore Mommsen, the first Nobel Laureate in literature, wrote his monumental book on Rome based on innumerable sources in paper and stone. Mommsen's main theme, namely, idolization of the state was not always based on epigraphic or literary sources. Later researches found much to criticise Mommsen. For instance Brutus in later research was apotheosized as the champion of liberty. But the age old Roman veneration for paramount position of the state remains a firm fact of history.

In Britain historians of old, down to the end of last century, adored Magna Carta (1215) as the bedrock of

"rule of law" and "liberty of subject". Later historians like Tout and Pollard found the Magna Carta as a mere charter of rights of the barons visavis the king. It was found to be 'a charter of liberties' for vested classes and not 'a charter of liberty' for the people. But Magna Carta remains a Bible with the common man and the elite in Britain as the document was the first contract between a king and his subjects to define and limit the authority of the king. It was not blind veneration for a totem when during the German air invasion of Britain, British authorities decided to deposit the document, Magna Carta, in the vaults of the United States Congress.

A great figure of Indian history - I should say of universal history - is Asoka Maurya. Indian literary sources had very little to say about Asoka though literary sources of Sri Lanka, Tibet, and Mongolia kept alive the name Asoka. Even after the Asokan edicts came to be read by European scholars like Prinsep and Hultzsch, there was great reluctance in Europe to admit that the Maurya Empire stretched beyond Hindukush to Afghanistan, though ancient Greek writers bore testimony. It was in 1956 that the Kandahar Edict was discovered and deciphered. Western scholarship now admits that the oral tradition of India or Tibet was no myth.

Tibetan literary texts and oral traditions no doubt contain many legends and apocryphal narratives but display no pompous claims as in Chinese Annals, e.g. kings of West sent Tributes to the Son of Heaven. It took quite long time for modern Western scholars to realize that Tibetan Tributes, recorded in Chinese Annals, did not render Tibet a domain of the Celestial Empire. Western scholars had greater shock to discover that in pre-Buddhist time Tibetan kings carried their victorious arms to the heart of China, Sian (Chang-an). The Tibetan inroads and such uncomfortable events are blacked out in Chinese Annals. It will therefore be waste of time to look for any confirmation or corroboration about the rise to temporal power of the Tibetan and Mongol hierarchs in Chinese Annals.

That story has to be found in Tibetan texts, not all discovered so far nor much may be expected three decades after Tibet became Tibet Region of China. Even then the trail of tracts and treatises, following KADAM PHACHO

and KADAM BHUCHO, would in my contention, confirm the Gelugpa tradition of Tibet and Mongolia that Dipankara Atisa's spiritual child was the Lama Protector, Kyamgon Chenpo. Many of my Lama teachers and Lama students, including Sakya and Kargyu, read and speak English. I have discussed with them the modern disciplines, history and historiography. These Lamas are optimistic like me that as in the past so in the present, history will bear out that Atisa was a great scholar and a great monk but was greater as a statesman with the vision of a prophet.

VII

Celebrators in India were confident in their sole conclusion that Dipankara Atisa was the greatest of Indian monk scholars visiting Tibet. The older sects, particularly Nyingma, would not place Atisa above Guru Padmasambhava (+750+) while all sects, including Gelugpa, would claim Santarakshita, the celebrated contemporary of Padmasambhava, as the greatest scholar from India. All the sects, including Nyingma, adore Jowo Atisa as the monk-statesman who came to the rescue of Dharma in Tibet (1042) and preached there till he passed away (1054). For nine centuries since his Nirvana, Jowo Atisa has remained the embodiment of Tibet's identity.