

BUDDHIST FOLK TRADITION AND THE HISTORY OF THE SHERDUKPENS

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The pre-British history of the Sherdukpens of Arunachal like most tribes of north east India is not known with certainty. Some of their oral traditions, however, are often used for writing the early history of the tribe. In this short paper we propose to discuss two folktales of the tribe. These are an important oral source of their history. The first of these relates to their origin. It is as follows:

King Ge-porading-darje lived in Debolojari with his Queen and son. Sometime later he heard about the beauty of the daughter of the Ahom king of Assam, and sent one of his ministers to bring the Ahom princess to enable him marry her. The Ahom king did not agree to the proposal. The Tibetan minister, kept on persuading the king, and at last after twelve long years of persuasion the Ahom king sent his daughter.

On his way back the minister seduced the princess and brought her to his king. The king of Tibet married her and soon after found out that she was pregnant. He enquired about it from the minister but he gave an evasive answer. The king liked her so much that he did not leave her. Later she gave birth to a monster having the face of a dog with goat horns and a human body. The child was left out in a forest. Still later, she bore two more sons - Jabdang-Mawang-Namja and Gyaptang-Bura.

When the boys came of age, their father made his eldest son king of Tibet. He gave Bhutan to Jabdang-Mawang-Namja, and the territory

round Rupa and Shergaon villages, to Gyaptang Bura, the first Sherdukpen king. Later, the Ahom king invited his grandson Gyaptang Bura to Sibsagar and gave him the land between Dhansiri and Gabru rivers asking him to take taxes from the people inhabiting the region.

Gyaptang-Bura was also advised by his father the king of Tibet. He told him that his people should not pay taxes to Tibetans and carry their loads, but should give cows and other tribute to Hrussos.

There is another version of the tale. In this version the name of the king of Tibet is given as Ge-Sron-btsan-Gampo and that of the Sherdukpen king as Japtang Bura.² This version gives certain other details to which a reference shall be made later.

Some scholars have accepted this tradition to explain the origin and early migration of the Sherdukpens to their present area of habitation. The tradition has been accepted as providing some historical information about the tribe in the absence of any other evidence and the fact that the tradition was popular among the Sherdukpen people. The tradition cannot be accepted. In fact, it is not a tradition of the Sherdukpen people. It is a Buddhist tradition developed to explain the origin of the tribe with the purpose of attracting them to the Buddhist faith.

Such legends are usually developed by the followers of a religion that is new to an area or people professing another faith and thereby⁴ to create a support base for the new religion. It is possible that the story was developed and circulated by some Monpa or even Sherdukpen monks to impress upon the people and

their king their Buddhist connection by relating them to the king of Lhasa. This was meant to secure their help in the spread of Buddhism among the Sherdukpens. After majority people of the tribe had accepted Buddhism they also gradually came to believe in this tradition and retained it perhaps as a popular record of their connection with the royal families of Tibet and Assam.

The other version of the tradition indicates that once Japtang Bura visited Kalaktang area of the Southern Monpa. Here he met a Buddhist monk, Khambu Takha, who had earlier killed a man-eating snake, and saved the people there. He invited this monk to his area, every three years, to conduct worship and receive gifts from the king. This part of the tradition suggests that Buddhism was introduced in Sherdukpen territory from Kalaktang during Gyaptang Bura's reign.

Strangely enough the king of Tibet and his son Gyaptang or Japtang Bura are not mentioned as Buddhists. Buddhism was introduced in Tibet in the seventh century. Therefore, had Japtang Bura really come to Sherdukpen area from Tibet any time after that date he must have brought Tibetan monks with him. Thus, it is possible that the story of the king of Lhasa perhaps refers to a period earlier than the introduction of Buddhism in Tibet. That is why both father and son are not mentioned as Buddhists. This also goes to prove that the story is purely imaginative and has no historical basis. That Buddhism came to Sherdukpen area from Kalaktang may be true but the origin of Gyaptang Bura from the Tibeto-Assamese royal family is purely imaginative.

The Tawang monastery is the oldest Buddhist establishment in the area. It was established by Mera Lama in the early seventeenth century. It is possible that the area may have been under Tibetan influence and the people from the Indian side - Monpas and others - may have been often visiting Tibet. Some of them may have been attracted towards this faith even before the establishment of Tawang. Mera Lama and his associates may represent the earliest Monpa converts to the Buddhist faith.

A regular and concerted effort to spread Buddhism among the neighbouring tribes could have been taken up only after the establishment of Tawang. Thus, the introduction of Buddhism in Sherdukpen area cannot be placed before the middle of the seventeenth century.

The oldest Buddhist establishment in the Sherdukpen area is Rupa Gompa. It is also the largest. It was built according to one view in 1742 and one hundred and sixty two years before according to the other. Supposing the information that Rupa Gompa was built 162 years before was got in 1955, we may say that the Gompa was built around 1955-162 = A.D.1893. Whatever the date of its construction, it is possible to suggest that the Gompa was built only after Buddhism had become sufficiently popular among the Sherdukpen people or had somehow brought their chieftain under its influence. Supposing this took another fifty years or a little more we come to the first half of the eighteenth century. That means the introduction of Buddhism in Sherdukpen area cannot be placed earlier than the first half of the eighteenth century by any stretch of imagination.

It is also possible to suggest that the original version of the folktale may have developed

during this period. It was during this period that the Buddhists must have suffered greatly at the hands of the tribalists who opposed the spread of this religion. That is why a story was developed and circulated to emphasize the Tibeto-Buddhist connections of the tribe. Not only this. The story also attempted to publicise the coming up of Buddhism at the instance of one of their own kings. There is nothing, however, in this story to suggest the initial response of the tribe to Buddhism.

To know the initial response of the Sherdukpen people to Buddhism we have to discuss another folktale.

II

A Sherdukpen-Buddhist-tale explains the origin of rat, mosquitoes and 'dimdam' flies. Before coming to the origin of the rat and the insects the tale briefly refers to a character who was inimical to Buddhism. This is also a Buddhist story and portrays Dut-Gepu-Langdir as an evil person opposed to Buddhism. It will be more appropriate to give briefly the tale first before discussing it.

There was a Sirinpu or Sinpu called Dut-Gepu-Langdir. He was a great enemy of the Buddhists or the Lamas. He used to chop off all the plants and shrubs planted by them for their sacrifices. The Lamas wanted to kill him. It was with this view in mind that they performed the Ajilama dance hoping that Dut-Gepu-Langdir will come to watch it and then they would kill him. A lot many people came to watch their dance but Dut-Gepu-Langdir did not come.

Dut-Gepu-Langdir had three daughters. They saw the dance and liked it. They came home

and asked their father also to go and watch the dance. Consequently, Dut-Gepu-Langdir went to see the dance and was shot by the dancers who had bows and arrows concealed on them. Dut-Gepu-Langdir fell on the ground wounded seriously but did not die.

After a time his daughters unable to bear his pain and suffering requested him one by one to die. The eldest daughter requested her father to die promising that she will pluck all the flowers of the Lamas and place them on his tomb. But he did not die. His second daughter similarly requested him to die promising that she would prepare poison and kill all the Lamas with it. But he did not die. At last his youngest daughter came and requested her father to die promising him that she would give birth to a rat who would destroy the books of the Lamas, and the clothes and grains of other people. And Dut-Gepu-Langdir died.¹²

The last part of the story says that he was cut into small pieces and burnt so that he may not lead to any further evil to the people. One small piece of bone, however, remained. It was thrown away. And from this were born the mosquitoes and dimdams.

This story was also developed by the Buddhists. In the story Dut-Gepu-Langdir is mentioned as inimical to Buddhists not only throughout his life but also on his death bed. His refusal to die in spite of the great pain he was suffering from was only to extract an assurance from his descendants and supporters to continue his struggle. This assurance is given to him in the form of promises that his daughters make. The assurance of his youngest daughter, however, satisfied him most as it promised to continue the struggle from generation to

generation. All these relate to a fight against Buddhism. On the contrary, at the end of the tale, a passing reference perhaps as an after thought, is made to the destruction of clothes and grains of the other people. In addition to this, the origin of mosquitoes and dimdam flies who spare none, not even Buddhist monks, is added to enhance the general evil in Dut-Gepu-Langdir. The natural suggestion of this addition is that the Sirinpu or Sinpu was not only evil to the Buddhists but to all alike. But the major part of the story relates his enmity only to the Buddhists.

According to Buddhist Sherdukpen belief, the harmful male supernatural beings are called Sinpus and their female counterparts Simnus. They live beyond the Himalayas where there is a land of women.¹³ In actuality, however, these harmful beings are those Sherdukpen tribals who fought the Buddhists and resisted the spread of their faith in their homeland. But after the Buddhists were successful in converting their tribe, the tribals who had fought Buddhism were accorded the status of the supernatural enemies of the faith and portrayed as harmful to all alike.

Dut-Gepu-Langdir thus represents the Champions of the Sherdukpen tribal faith who effectively resisted¹⁴ the spread of Buddhism initially among them. In this struggle between the Sherdukpens and the Buddhists many people belonging to both these groups must have been killed. It is possible that those who championed the cause of the tribal faith showed their opposition to Buddhism by cutting off their trees and plants, killing them and destroying their books and monasteries.

The Lamas used all this knowledge of the struggle to devise this tale and it gradually became popular and accepted in the tribe at a time when most of them had taken to Buddhism.

The story developed at a time when the struggle between Buddhism and Sherdukpen faith had finally been resolved in favour of the former. By this time the tribal opponents of Buddhism had been supernaturalized as Sinpus. With this process the rats, mosquitoes and dimdams came to be associated with them. As such the story may have developed sometime in the second half of the eighteenth century.

III

The story that records the origin of the Sherdukpen chieftains also contains some information about their giving and taking taxes. The first of these relates to Tibet itself. The story suggests that the Sherdukpen area, like Bhutan, was under Tibetan domination. That is why the king of Tibet gives these areas to his third and second son respectively. The inclusion of Sherdukpen area in his territory however, is contradicted by his statement in which he advises Gyaptang Bura that his people should not pay taxes and carry the loads of the Tibetans. Had the area really been under his control he would have straight away exempted the subjects of his son. Actually the Sherdukpen area had nothing to do with Tibetans and they never paid any tributes to them. Hence this statement is included only to show the generosity of the Tibetans to the Sherdukpens for being their co-religionists.

The next reference relates to the payment of tribute to the Hrussos. The Hrussos are mentioned as demons of yore by the king of Tibet. This may

suggest that the Hrussos or the Akas often raided neighbouring tribes for loot. The neighbouring tribes on their part paid them tribute to buy peace. The Monpas and Sherdukpens also followed suit. They were paying them tributes at the time when the story was first formulated. Hence it is included in it.

In later times also the Sherdukpens paid tribute to the Hrussos. It is said that they paid "an annual tribute of three bullocks, ten woven bags, one large and six small pieces of cloth, ten loads of salt, twelve loads of Jabrang seed, twenty three¹⁵ fowls and two goats" to each of the Hrusso kings.

The six Miji chiefs were each paid "one bullock, one load each of salt and Jabrang spice, two goats, and a cowrie waistband" annually. Additionally "three cows, one goat, one large and one small piece of endi cloth and one dao"¹⁶ was paid to them every five years.

Our story does not contain any reference to the payment of tribute to the Monpas of Tawang. But the tradition recorded by Sharma shows that a Lama was invited every three years to perform worship and receive gifts. This, however, may have been the practice till Buddhism was not firmly established in the Sherdukpen area. After that it may have continued as a tradition. But it cannot be styled as tribute. However, Sharma says that "the rulers of Tawang" were paid by Sherdukpens every three years "eighteen pieces of endi cloth, twenty seers of rice and forty seers of paddy. The Tawang Monpa officials made return gifts of coats, hats,¹⁷ shoes, blankets and necklaces" to the Sherdukpens. This exchange of gifts between the Monpa and Sherdukpen authorities cannot be taken as tribute. It is an exchange of gift perhaps mutually agreed

upon between the Monpa and Sherdukpen leaders. Exchange of gifts is a kind of barter and as an economic transaction it may not necessarily have originated at a time after they had both taken to Buddhism.

Thereafter the Sherdukpens are said to have collected tribute from the Kachari villages, Monpas of the South West and immigrant Bhutanese families.¹⁸ Out of these our story refers only to the collection of tribute from Kachari villages. The area was supposedly given to Gyaptang Bura by the king of Assam and he had authorised him to collect taxes from them. Therefore, the story seems to provide some legitimization for their collection from the Kacharis.

The rates and periodicity of the collections and exactions are not mentioned in the story. But these must have been the same as in later times.

The aforesaid discussion shows that folklore and other oral traditions of a people can be utilized for a reconstruction of their history. The folktales of the Sherdukpens discussed critically above bring out some aspects of their history that are not known otherwise.

Notes & References

1. Verrier Elwin, **Myths of the North Eastern Frontier of India** Shillong, 1968, pp. 131-33.
2. R.R.P. Sharma, **The Sherdukpens**, Shillong, 1961, pp.5-6.
3. R.R.P. Sharma, **Ibid.**, pp. 5-6; L.N. Chakravarty, **Glimpses of the Early History of Arunachal**, Shillong, 1973, p.6.
4. Many such legends are found in the North East itself. For instance the origin of Manipuris from Arjuna, that of Kacharis from Bhima, and of the kings of the Assamese ruling families

from Narakasura, the son of Prithivi and Vishnu. The tradition that Rukmini was an Idu princess from Arunachal is also of the same type.

5. There is no evidence to suggest a matrimonial relationship between the royal houses of Tibet and Assam. From twelfth century onwards Tibet was ruled by monk kings. A line of kings was there in Tibet before twelfth century. But then the Ahoms were not there in Assam. They came to Assam in 1228 and took a few hundred years to become a paramount power in the region.
6. R.R.P. Sharma, **Ibid.**, p.7.
7. The pre-Buddhist nature of the story, to an extent, is suggested by the name of the king of Tibet as Ge-Sron-btsan-Gampo, Cf. R.R.P. Sharma, **Ibid.**, p.5. Sron-btsan-Gampo is the first historical ruler of Tibet. He also introduced Buddhism in that country. He defeated both Nepal and China and married princesses of the two countries. His association with the Sherdukpen area, however, is baseless.
8. Between 1643 and 1647, Cf. Sarkar, N. **Tawang Monastery**, Shillong, 1981, p.13; **Monpas of Tawang**, Shillong, 1980, p.11.
9. There is also a view that it was built in 1680. Cf. Sarkar, N., **Monpas of Tawang**, p.13.
10. R.R.P. Sharma, **Ibid.**, p.76.
11. R.R.P. Sharma's **The Sherdukpens** was published in 1961. He may have taken about five or six years in collecting data, writing and publishing it. According to Sarkar (**Monpas of Tawang**, p.13) it was built in 1742.
12. Verrier Elwin, **Myths of the North Eastern Frontier of India**, pp. 456-58.
13. R.R.P. Sharma, **Ibid.**, p.75.
14. Everywhere the initial response to a new faith is always inimical. Buddhism is no exception. It was introduced in Tibet under royal patronage. Its spread among the tribals of Tibet was resisted. The followers of the tribal Pon or Bon faith strongly resisted Buddhism for a long time.

