The Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual Buddhist Manuscript of Nepal: Its Role in the Buddhist Studies

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1. Introduction

Nepal preserves the abundant quantity of Sanskrit manuscripts. The diplomat-turned scholar Brain Houghton Hodgson (1800–1894) introduced their existence to the world for the first time. Since then, many researchers have visited to Nepal to study Nepalese Sanskrit manuscripts. Until today several investigations on various manuscripts had been conducted, and the achievements can be seen in the already published catalogues and research papers. Needless to say, there are many Buddhist scriptures, whose Sanskrit original texts have not been discovered yet. For the Buddhist studies, it is no doubt to say that the Sanskrit Buddhist manuscripts are the primary source. The Nepalese manuscripts played a remarkable role in the development of Buddhist studies, as many Sanskrit Buddhist scriptures had been discovered from the Nepalese collection, which were only survived in the Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist canon. There are still many unexplored Buddhist and non-Buddhist manuscripts especially belonging to the public and private possession in Nepal. In general, the surveys of Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal include mainly the Sanskrit manuscripts, while the study on Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual Buddhist manuscripts have just begun. In this paper, I will focus on the Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual manuscripts of Nepal kept in the different institutional and private collections. Analyzing their characteristics I will also discuss on their role in the study of Buddhism.

2. Types of Buddhism Existed in Nepal

Briefly speaking, at present, there exist three kinds of Buddhism in Nepal: (1) Theravāda Buddhism, (2) Tibetan Buddhism, and (3) Traditional Nepalese Buddhism (Newar Buddhism). Among them the Pāli-based (1) Theravāda Buddhism is reintroduced-
Buddhism in Nepal that has a history of less than 100 years, but it gained a remarkable popularity within Nepalese community, as it is open to all castes. Again, the ethnic groups like Sherpa, Tamang, etc. especially lived in hilly region together with the Newar community of Kathmandu Valley follow the (2) Tibetan Buddhism in Nepal. Likewise, the (3) Traditional Nepalese Buddhism (hereafter Nepalese Buddhism) is popularly known as “Newar Buddhism” because its followers are the from Newar Buddhism community of Kathmandu Valley, who speak Newari as their mother tongue. The Buddhism is vanished from India after Vikramaśila, the largest centers for the Buddhist Tantric studied, was destroyed by the Muslim-attack in 1203 CE. But its tradition is still survived in the Buddhist monasteries called Vahā, Vahi dotted at the Valley, where the Mahāyāna Buddhism as well as Vajrayāna (Tantric) Buddhist rituals are still strictly practiced, and thus this paper dealt with the Sanskrit-based Nepalese Buddhism, the living tradition of Newar community.

3. Aspects of Nepalese Buddhist Manuscripts

As described in the Prajñāpāramitā and many Mahāyāna Texts, on coping the Buddhist scripture it is believed that one will gain various benefits like gaining of health, wealth, longevity, etc. This faith is highly familiar in Nepalese Buddhist community, and the possession of huge Buddhist manuscripts in Nepal is the result of it. Some of them are in the government and public possession, which are preserved in the Nepal Nation Archives, Kaiser Library, Āśā Archives, etc., and are already listed in the various catalogues. And again there are still many unknown quantity of Sanskrit manuscripts, which are either in monasteries or in private (Gūthi, Samgha) possession. Furthermore, these Buddhist manuscripts have six typical aspects in Nepal. For the local people, these Buddhist manuscripts are (1) deity itself, and are the (2) object of faith as well. In addition, these are (3) family heirlooms and bear high (4) artistic value, too. At the same time, these are the (5) ritual tools for priests and followers. Finally, they are undoubtedly (6) invaluable research materials.

Nepal preserves mainly four kinds of Buddhist manuscripts: (1) Sanskrit manuscript, (2) Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual manuscript, (3) Tibetan manuscript transliterated in the Devanāgarī letters, and (4) Newari manuscript. This time I will only consider on (2) Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual manuscript.
4. Definition of Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual Manuscript

In Nepal, the dhāranīs, mantras, sūtras including various ritual manuals are still in Sanskrit language. That is to say, the Sanskrit scriptures are not translated in the local language like Newari or Nepali language for a long time. Nepal alone preserves the Sanskrit-based Buddhist tradition of Indian Buddhism along with several modifications, even after the Buddhism collapsed in India in the 13c, and it is no doubt to say that this is one of the core characteristics of Nepalese Buddhism as well. The various ritual traditions are still preserved and continued in the Vahās and Vahīs. However, in the latter part of the fourteenth century, a change is shown in the Nepalese manuscripts. The Newari language is appeared together with Sanskrit language. The tendency of adding Newari alongside of Sanskrit becomes conspicuous especially after the eighteenth century. The contents of Newari portions used in the manuscripts are normally the translation or the annotated explanation of Sanskrit original scriptures, and these kinds of manuscripts are called the Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual manuscripts (hereafter Bilingual MSS). Many of them are yet to be explored.

The decline in Sanskrit ability among the younger generation of Newar community can be thought as one of the reasons why there is a noticeable increase of Bilingual manuscripts seen after the eighteenth century. In fact, the evolution of numerous Bilingual MSS, which include the translation as well as annotated explanation of various Buddhist scripture from Sanskrit to Newari, contributes to make the Newari literature rich. Since these manuscripts adopted Newari contents, even a layman can study the Buddhist teaching, though one is not good in Sanskrit, and it made Buddhism more familiar to the Newari speaking people.

Now I will analyze the characteristics feature of the Bilingual MSS.

1. Material: The Bilingual MSS are copied in the yellowish paper with black or vermilion ink. In the case of violet paper the letters are inscribed in gold or silver paste. To differentiate the Sanskrit reading with Newari portion both vermilion and black ink are used together in the yellowish paper while in the violet paper gold and silver paste are used together. The Bilingual MSS copied in the palm leaf is too rare.

2. Script: These are the scripts used mostly in the Bilingual MSS: Pracalita, Rañjanā, Bhujimola, Kuṭila, and Devanāgarī. Among them, the Devanāgarī is regarded as a new
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script that has been employed in the latter period replacing the other.

3. Contents: The contents of Newari portions added in the Bilingual MSS can be compiled into following four points: (1) the translation of Sanskrit original scriptures, (2) the original annotated explanation of Sanskrit scriptures, (3) the guidance to perform the ritual such as consecration of manḍala, and (4) the iconographic illustrations of mudras or deities.

4. Style: Generally the manuscripts are copied in the conventional rectangle styled papers, while the folding book (Nw. Thyā-saphu) and modern notebook styles are also adopted. The modern notebook styles are mostly seen in the younger Bilingual MSS of 19th–20th centuries.

5. Production Area: On surveying the colophons, it is revealed that the Vajrācārya priests of local monasteries scribed these manuscripts at Kathmandu Valley. When the manuscripts are copied upon the request the donors sometime they specify the wishes such as the benefit of all the sentient beings, the reposes of one’s soul, etc.

6. Era: Basically, in most of the manuscripts the Nepal Saṃvat is adopted as the date of transcription, while the Vikrama Saṃvat and Śaka Saṃvat are also mentioned.

7. Source of Information: The Bilingual MSS were copied in the Kathmandu Valley after the Buddhism collapsed in India. And thus from these manuscripts we can obtain valuable information to understand how the Sanskrit-based Indian Buddhism was adopted in Nepal after the 13c. In addition, these manuscripts could play a vital role to figure out the religious culture of the Nepalese Buddhism, as they were produced under the influence of Newar culture of the Valley.

5. The Reading of Bilingual MSS (Hymns to Tārā)

In this paper I will introduce the reading of the Bilingual MSS of Tārā deity, entitling “Āryatārābhaṭṭārikāyānāṃstottaraśataka-buddhabhāṣita,” preserved in the Āśā Archives (batu 011, DPNo 3974), Kathmandu. It is commonly called as Tārāśottarasatanāmastotra (T no. 1106, D. no. 727 = 785 = 100), a Sanskrit Stotra in praise of Tārā with one hundred and eight epithets, where the annotation translation of Newari is also adopted.

Transliteration and Translation

(1b1) Oṃ namaḥ śrī āryātārāyaiḥ // // oṃ dhā (b2) yagu adyākṣara nhāpa yāgu ākhalah, namaḥ (b3) dhayāgu namaskāra yāya // śrī dhayāgu aisva (b4) ryya, tārā dhayāmha bhaya

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dako phutakamha, he (b5) āryatārā, chalapola yātaṃ ji na(2a, maskāra)
(1b1) Om namaḥ śri āryatārāyaḥ// // om is adyākṣara (adyākṣara) that means (b2) the
letter of beginning, namaḥ (b3) is to do namaskāra (pay homage), śri is (b4) aiśvaryya
(aiśvarya, a state of being supremacy), ṭārā (Ṭārā) is the one who eliminates all kinds of bhaya
(fear), Oh (b5) Āryatārā I pay homage to you.

The bold letters display Sanskrit Text of the Stotra inscribed in the vermillion ink
while the non-bold letters in black ink are the Newari annotated translation portion,
and the italic letters are the Sanskrit words used to annotate the Text. As seen above, to
explain four words (the bold form) of the Text four different Sanskrit words (italic
form) have been borrowed in the Newari annotated translation portion. It is obvious
that the Sanskrit used here is problematic, however those Sanskrit helps to understand
Newari portion even with a little knowledge of Newari grammar.9)

6. Roles of Sanskrit-Newari Bilingual MSS in the Buddhist Research Field

I have been conducting a survey of Nepalese manuscripts particularly possessed by
Vajrācārya priests and the household followers, and a clear difference is revealed in
their possession. The possession of priest includes various categories: Buddhist sūtras,
ritual manuals, dhāranīs, avadāna stories, etc. Except ritual-related manuals the
householder followers are possessing almost similar kinds of manuscripts. It is because
in Nepalese Buddhism only the initiated Vajrācārya priests are granted privilege to
perform the religious rites. Additionally, there are still many sacred esoteric Buddhist
texts restricted to non-priest, who are not even allowed to receive the Vajrācārya
initiation.

But it is noteworthy to write that all of these manuscripts are not in good state of
preservation. I have confirmed many houses in Kathmandu Valley where the
manuscripts are stored in their worship room, which are simply wrapped in cloth.
These manuscripts are heirloom and are worshiped as deity together with their lineage
deity; it means these are not often opened. These days even the owners of the
manuscripts are also realizing the need of preservation. So, a “careful survey”
cooperating with the local people is essential, that can preserve many endangered
resources from Nepal. And, it is sure these endangered manuscripts may be utilized as
research materials. Eventually, the results of researches contribute not only to the
development of Sanskrit-based Nepalese Buddhism but also to the whole Buddhism.

As mentioned before, most of the Bilingual MSS contain both the Sanskrit original reading and Newari annotated translation, which is one of their core characteristics. It is known that there are grammatical errors in Sanskrit material preserved in Nepal. The similar problem can be seen in the Bilingual MSS, too. Again mistranslations and misinterpretations are also often seen in Newari portion, and in most of the Bilingual MSS even the translators and commentators are not mentioned. These are some of the issues that made it difficult to treat them as research materials, though they are being realized as the precious source of information for Buddhist studied. As seen above, in the Bilingual MSS of Tārā, it preserves Sanskrit original reading together with Newari annotated translation. It shows that on surveying the Bilingual MSS there are possibilities of recovering the Sanskrit original text of Buddhist scriptures. Meanwhile those typical Newari interpretations contain various factors to investigate the Newar Buddhist culture, and this fact is simply not deniable.

7. Conclusion

After the Buddhism collapsed in India in the 13c, the Buddhism developed in the surrounding countries. And Newar community in Nepal alone is the place where the Sanskrit-based Buddhist tradition of Indian Buddhism is still surviving along with typical expansion. Thus Nepalese Buddhism is essential to figure out how Buddhism is practiced and given continuity after it loses its foundation in India. Interestingly, most of the Bilingual MSS preserved in Nepal were copied in the Kathmandu Valley after the Buddhism disappeared from India. And these manuscripts are not only the sources to reconstruct the Sanskrit original but also the guide to Nepalese Buddhism developed under the influence the Newar culture. It is will be no exaggeration to say that the Bilingual MSS are the major resources for them.

Notes

1) "Hasta likhita grantha" is the Nepalese (Nepāli) word for the manuscript, while "saphū" or "saphu" is Newari (Nevāri) expression, whereas “saphuli” is classical Newari.


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4) Newar (Skt. Nevāra) is the native inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley (also called Nepal Valley), who covers only 5% of the total population of the county. Again, the Newar community consists of Buddhist as well as Hindu, and they are normally Tibeto-Burman. Shakya, Vajracarya, Dhakwa are the major castes belong to the Newar Buddhist community, who are leading figure of the Nepalese Buddhist as well. (See Lienhard 1988: IX–XI.) It is them who preserved the Sanskrit-based Buddhist tradition of Nepal. Their language is called “Nepāla Bhāṣā” (language of Nepal) or Newari, which is the non-Aryan origin used as a major language in the Kathmandu Valley from the 12–13c. The Newari so called modern Newari spoken today is different from the Newari used in the manuscripts and other materials, and it is also called as classical Newari.

5) There is an interesting ritual of visualization of Triratna-manḍala: Buddha, Dharma, and Saṃgha Maṇḍala. In general various deities populate the manḍala, but in the eight-spoked Dharma manḍala, a group of nine scriptures as placed instead of deity, employing the Prajñāpāramitā at the centre, and this very group is called “Navadharma” or “Navagrantha” that supports the foundation of philosophical aspect of Nepalese Buddhism. For detail see Shakya 2015.

6) These kinds of manuscripts are made for the Newari speaking followers of Tibetan Buddhism. See Shakya 2010: 17–18.

7) The Newari (Nevāri) and Newar Era (Nepāla-saṃvat) were the official language and calendar respectively of Nepāla Maṇḍala (the present Kathmandu Valley), which were used widely in manuscripts, inscriptions and many other official and historical resources until the Shah King Prithvi Narayan from Gorkha conquered Kathmandu Valley in the eighteenth century. After the Gorkha King established Kathmandu as its capital, their language Gorkha or Khasa language, the present Nepali, became dominant language in Nepal. It shows that Nepali language is comparatively new language for the Nepalese Buddhist manuscripts.

8) For detail see Lienhard 1988: XI–XII.

9) For the script Shakya 1973, for the Newari classical grammar Jorgensen 1941, and for the dictionary Jorgensen 1936, Malla 2000 could be the basic tools to study the Bilingual MSS.

Bibliography


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