



International Journal of Humanities & Social Science Studies (IJHSSS)

A Peer-Reviewed Bi-monthly Bi-lingual Research Journal

ISSN: 2349-6959 (Online), ISSN: 2349-6711 (Print)

ISJN: A4372-3142 (Online) ISJN: A4372-3143 (Print)

Volume-V, Issue-III, May 2019, Page No. 100-105

Published by Scholar Publications, Karimganj, Assam, India, 788711

Website: <http://www.ijhsss.com>

DOI: 10.29032/ijhsss.v5.i3.2019.100-105

A Brief Account of Gendun Chophel's Views on India

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Abstract

The 20th century Tibet has abounded in brilliant scholars, Gendun Chophel [1903-1951] was the first modern scholar of Tibet, was born in Amdo, north east Tibet. He completed traditional Tibetan education and travelled abroad, learnt several new languages and collaborates with scholars with different nationalities. The fame he achieved as a scholar is indeed derived from having taken full advantage of the years he spent in India and Sri Lanka and because of his writings in many fields like History, Paintings, Philosophy, and Literature. Gendun Chophel made a friendship with the Indian scholar Rahul Sankrityayana who had gone to Tibet for second time disguised as a Buddhist monk, Rahul Sankrityayana's aim was of collecting ancient Sanskrit manuscripts that had been brought from India by many Tibetan and Indian Scholars in ancient time. They went together to search for Indian manuscripts in various monasteries and temples in Tibet. As a result he became very upset at the way old Sanskrit manuscript, and other various rare texts were preserved by various monasteries. When Rahul Sankrityayana returned to India, Gendun Chophel also came to India with Rahul Sankrityayana. At the age of thirty two Gendun Chophel came to India and spent twelve years in India. He toured across India, visiting cities, scared places, archaeological sites and even brothels. After twelve years in India he returned to Tibet in 1946, with loads of notes and manuscripts, a mass of experiences. In this article gendun chophel's views on Indian atmosphere, Indian cast system, Indian women, Indian deities, Indian dress and Indian statues have been described.

Introduction: The 20th century Tibet has abounded in brilliant scholars, Gendun Chophel [1903-1951ad] was the first modern scholar of Tibet, was born in Amdo, north east Tibet. He completed traditional Tibetan education and travelled abroad, learnt several new languages and collaborates with scholars with different nationalities. The fame he achieved as a scholar is indeed derived from having taken full advantage of the years he spent in India and Sri Lanka and because of his writings in many fields like History, Paintings, Philosophy, and Literature.

The first Tibetan biography of Gendun Chopel, named *Domed Khepa Gendun Chopel* (Tib. *mdo smad mkhas pa dge 'dun chos 'phel*) was written by Rikha Lobsang Tenzin (Tib. *ri kha blo bzang bstan 'dzin*) and published in Varanasi in 1972. Rikha Lobsang Tenzin said that he did not meet Gendun Chopel personally. He collected biographical information in India by interviewing five of Gendun Chopel's Tibetan friends. In recent years Gendun Chopel's works and scholarship have been highly recognised by both Tibetan and western scholars. For instance the Amnye Machen Institute, Dharmasala, from 1994 organise the Gendun Chopel award to be presented every three years to a Tibetan writer who has maintained special dedication on persecution and hardship. Unlike most Tibetan scholars of his time, Gendun Chopel did not accept unquestioningly Tibetan scholastic curriculum, and he studied and investigated the original sources.

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When Gendun Chopel came to India, he joined Bihar Research Society in Patna; the scriptures which Gedun Chopel and Rahul Sankrityayana collected from Tibet on their expeditions have been preserved there. Later Gendun Chopel wrote his history book of ancient Tibet; *the White Annals*, based on information of ancient Tun-huang¹ texts and in Tang² historical records.

Gendun Chopel was also well known for peculiarity which caused him into a highly controversial figure in Tibetan society. The causes for the controversy were mainly his different approach and because of his interpretation of religious, social, and political ways of thinking that controlled Tibetan society of those days. In this article Gendun Chopel views on India, which he had written in his travelogue during the stay in India has been discussed.

¹ Tun-huang is city in north-western Gansu Province, Western China. The Tun-huang manuscripts are important religious and secular documents discovered in the early 20th century.

² Tang Dynasty was the most popular historic period in Chinese history. Founded in 618 AD and ending in 907 AD.

Before discussing Gendun Chopel's account of his time in India, it is important to discuss briefly the importance of India in Tibetan history, Tibetan culture. Although Tibet was surrounded by Buddhist cultures for centuries, according to traditional histories the first contacts did not occur until the seventh century, when the king Srong btsan sgam po³ sent a delegation to India to learn Sanskrit and to develop a script for the Tibetan language. The script modelled on devangari of Gupta period, based on the eight cases of Sanskrit. This script was invented, according to tradition of Tibetan culture and people to provide the medium for the translation of Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan. After developing a Tibetan script many Indian Buddhist books were translated into Tibetan. This prodigious collection was made possible by the presence of Indian masters who made their way to Tibet and Tibetan scholars who made their way to India, especially during the period from the eleventh through the thirteenth centuries. Tibetan pilgrimage to India continued until much of northern India came under Muslim control. The Tibetan scholar and translator Chag lo tsa ba (1197-1264) arrived in India in 1234 to find the major monasteries and places of pilgrimage either destroyed by Muslim armies or barely under Buddhist control. Direct Tibetan contact with India decreased sharply from this point, and was curtailed even further after 1792, when the Qing emperor⁴ declared Tibet "closed." India was called the "Land of the Noble Ones" or the "White Realm". With the decline and fall of the Qing, Tibetan travel to India became easier, although few made extensive visits, or left accounts of their travels. The Pan chen Lama spent six weeks in India in the winter of 1905-06. The Dalai Lama spent 1910-1912 in India, but remained for the most part in the Himalayan border region, making a one-month pilgrimage to the Buddhist holy sites in February 1911. But among the many Tibetan travellers to India over the past five hundred years, none spent as long a period of time, learned the languages as well, or left such a detailed account as Gendun Chopel.

Gendun Chopel's Views on India: The way Gendun Chopel described India is that this land is called the great India and he pays his obeisance to the Buddha. The topography of India is the source of different kinds of people, communities, religions and behaviour. There are very high mountains, almost touching the sky, and low plains, with their surfaces like mirror; beautiful people, radiant like a lotus, staying common class people. The hills and valleys were carpeted with junipers. Further down, *Salas, banyan, papal*, driftwood trees and sparkling flowers, jostle for space. Dish-like leaves, with glistening dewdrops, struggle

³ Songtsen Gampo was the 33rd Tibetan king. He is also regarded as responsible for the creation of the Tibetan alphabet and therefore the establishment of Classical Tibetan, the language spoken in his region at the time, established as the literary language of Tibet.

⁴ The Qing dynasty, also known as the Qing Empire, was the last imperial dynasty of China, established in 1636 and ruled China from 1644 to 1912. The Qing multi-cultural empire lasted almost three centuries and formed the territorial base for the modern Chinese state. It was the fourth largest empire in world history.

to find their place on the road from both sides. A variety of birds with musical sounds could be heard. In the midst of the mountain peaks, jutting out of white clouds enveloped with an expanse of forest, two or three clusters of houses can be seen.

When dawn came, one could see the mountain peaks from there, glowing like refined gold by rising sun. Rolling waves of clouds stretched for eternal distance around, and the upper part of the forest and the big mountains appear like islands on top. This is popularly known everywhere, as the ocean of Himalayan clouds. At the foot of the mountains, large rivers make their way around with roaring noises. Wide fields of rice, barley and peas lay at the entrance of the valley. Many small and big villages and towns have their presence. It seems to enjoy a mild climate and the inhabitants have a fair complexion with a red tinge. A single day of climbing and descend on that mountain, can subject you to a cool or a hot weather. One cannot experience such changes in nature on mountains in any other places. These mountains on the Indian side are very cool at the summit, with some snowfalls in winter, but further down, temperature changes completely. A wide variety of trees, flowers, animals and birds can be seen like a dream in a single day on that mountain. Due to natural changes, this place in the mountain became heaven-like that one could only dream about. Gendun Chopel claimed that such beautiful and majestic valleys could not be seen anywhere else.

On Erotic Statues and Female Deities of India: Gendun Chopel says in India, *yab-yum* [male and female deities in embrace] images are common everywhere. The cosmic form of Chakrasamvara⁵ and Guyhasamaja⁶ with multiple faces and hands, and with female companions, seems to have been rare in India. However, they did exist in Nepal. Temples of *Ganesha* are surrounded on the outside with numerous *yab-yum* deities in Nepal. The early non-Buddhist temples also have at least one such image, but none of them is depicted as deities. The *Surya-Vishnu* temple of Odessa in Kalinga, which was built a thousand years ago, has some magnificent stone carvings, amongst which tens of thousands of statues, from human-size to thumb-size, in sexual embrace decorate the whole exterior of the temple. Even the mouths of the water fountains are given the shapes of sexual organs.

On statues and images in India: Gendun Chopel said like Lhasa Jowo [Buddhist statue in the Jokhang Temple in Tibet], which is crowned and necklaced, and has its right hand out of its robe, such aspects [positions] are found in countless old stone images in India. Old bronze statues in India are also depicted in a similar way. He thinks the crowned Buddha did not spread to Tibet. However, he thinks this type of image is very common in Burma and Siam [Thailand], and if a band of precious stones would be not tied near the forehead on small statues. The statue is considered to be somewhat incomplete. Gendun chopel said that during the time of king Ashoka, no images or statues of Buddha were made in india.

⁵ Cakrasamvara is a name of a Tantra, is considered to be of the mother class of the Anuttarayoga Tantra in Vajrayana Buddhism. It is also called the Discourse of Sri Heruka (sriherukabhidhana).

⁶ Guhyasamāja Tantra is one of the most important scriptures of Tantric Buddhism. In India, it was classified as a Yoga or Mahayoga Tantra.

On Indian Dresses: It is said on Indian dress that all the Indians, including those from the central region, wrap their head with two fathoms of cotton cloth. The *Marwaris*⁷ wrap their head with thin cotton cloth. Some wrap it in the shape of a square. The Indian farmers wear a wraparound of a very short cloth. Some wrap their sexual organ so tightly with a small cloth, the size of one's palm, that it almost seems like a goat head put in a small pouch. It is indeed such a strange sight.

Males wearing coloured lower garments are considered barbarians. On top, they wear a big collarless shirt. A big cloth of any colour is worn like a shawl. In winter, they wear fine linen and soft woollen cloth. Some don't wear anything sewn with a needle. They wear sandals, protecting only their heels, while some wear handle less shoes, on the nose of which is a papal leaf-shaped long leather piece. At home, no one goes around in shoes. Shoes are also not worn during meal times, ritual performances and making offerings. Most of the Indian males have thick hair, covering their chest and stomach area. Adult men lacking such hair are looked down upon. Those who don't have any hair on their wrists and calves are called the chicken-footed ones.

On Indian Women: The womenfolk cover their lower parts with half of a diaphanous lengthy cloth; the short end is arranged at the front. The other half is worn like a shawl over the torso. There are red, yellow, green, black and many different coloured clothes. Elderly women wear white mostly. The villagers wear bracelets and anklets on their wrists and ankles. Gold earrings are sometimes hanged from the ear with a fine string. It must look quite strange to travellers from other places. The women living in towns wear only light bracelets and anklets. They keep their hair rolled in a knot on their shoulder. The women paint their hands, feet and fingernails. They also wear bras inside the bodice, to lift their breasts, supported by two straps over the shoulder. He also saw balls of cloth placed on both hipbones to enlarge the buttock.

Calling the dark-complexioned women beautiful is very true. The eye-adjacent areas of fair Indian women are very dark, and it is considered a sign of youthful beauty. The soot burnt sesame oil is collected in container, and with a delicate iron spoon they apply it around their eyes, making a black circle. This is called drawing with eye-medicine, but in this context, *it* does not mean the liquid eye-medicine that one drops into the eye. Long and proportionate dark eyelashes, like the eyes of an ox are considered as beautiful. The one, having beautiful eyelashes, is said to become the foremost of the herd. The eye-medicine is also applied for this purpose, and its name *paksham*. The Indian women are very expressive. Even when saying one word, their eyes flicker right and left. Their necks also bend right and left. When walking, they twist the whole of their body like a flying sack of straw. The

⁷ The Marwari or Marwadi are a South Asian ethno-linguistic group in India that originate from the Marwar region of Rajasthan, India. Their language, also called Marwari which is part of the Western Zone of languages. They have been a highly successful business community.

other beauties all have big eyes, a thin waist, ample lower parts of the body and other features that naturally bring out the poetry within you.

The Indian women always prostrate before their husbands, and they drink the water with which they washed their husband's feet. The women don't even utter the name of their husbands. Some women paint their forehead with vermilion, mixed with the dust on the feet of their husband. If husband becomes excessively angered, he effaces the colour on the forehead. This is like killing the wife. Because of that some women kill themselves. Generally, those women not having vermilion colour on their forehead are called widows.

On Indian Caste System: The caste system is still growing profusely, like a tree branch without a root. In some parts of India, where there are strict religious codes, a low caste member, accused of contaminating a Brahmin by coming in contact with him, cannot seek justice if he is beaten. They must wait and seek permission from a higher caste member if they want to drink water from a pond. They cannot just go near the pond and take some water out. This is considered a very serious crime. However, the rules of the caste system during the day are violated during the night in bed. A Brahmin becomes an untouchable and an untouchable, becomes a Brahmin. Such incidents are countless. People, whose castes get contaminated, are born from wedlock with low caste women. Such people travel around in remote places in India. Drinking water from hands of a low caste member, breaking of the Brahmin's thread, or falling on excrements, is supposed to cause contamination to a high caste member. However, bathing once in the river Ganges, can purify everything. One can also bathe three or seven times respectively, in the rivers Yamuna and get purified. Staying on fast for seven days, entering a hole in the earth, drinking a bull's urine or drinking the water, with which a Brahmin or a king's feet were washed, are other difficult methods for purification. Low caste Hindu communities, who worship Vishnu and Brahma, have no chance of entering the temples of the gods they worship, during their lifetime. Such is the affair of the compassionless religion, called Brahmanism.

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