

## A BRIEF REVIEW OF EARLY TRANSLATIONS BY MONGOLIAN SCHOLARS

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**Товч утга:** Миний бие энэхүү өгүүлэлд монголчууд хэзээний орчуулгад элэгтэй агаад өнө эртнээс нааш орчуулга хийж ирснийг товчхон түүхчилж харуулахыг зорилоо. Монголын эрдэмтэн, гүүш орчуулагчид Энэтхэг, Хятад, Түвд тэргүүтэй Дорны ном бүтээлээс орчуулан ард түмнийхээ хүртээл болгож, Дорны соёлтой танилцах боломж олгож байжээ. Монголд дэлгэрсэн бурханы шашины нөлөөгөөр шашины ном судар тэргүүтэн орчуулгын бүтээлд зонхилох байр эзэлж байсан нь илэрхий. Гэсэн хэдий ч зөвхөн шашинаар хязгаарлагдахгүй, Дорны гүн ухаан, тэр дундаа, эртний Энэтхэгийн гүн ухаан, уран зохиол, соёлтой холбоотой бүтээлээс ч арвин орчуулж байсныг баримттай өгүүлэхийг хичээлээ. Манай гүүш эрдэмтэд самгарди, түвд, хятад, перс, араб зэрэг Дорны хэлүүдийг төгс эзэмисэний зэрэгцээ гүн ухаан, шашин, соёлын гүнзгий мэдлэгтэй байсан нь түүхээс тодорхой харагддаг. Түүнчлэн монголын гүүш хэлмэрчид эртний Энэтхэгийн самгарди хэлнээс орчуулдаг арвин туршилага, уламжлалтай байсныг онцгойлон өгүүлэхийг зорилоо.

**Key words:** translation, languages, Buddhist literature, India, sutras, texts etc

Mongols have a long and rich tradition of translating literature from other languages and this tradition is an important component of Mongolia's national literary and intellectual heritage. It can be regarded that Mongolian tradition of translating from foreign languages has been originated since ancient time. It is evident in the script which was used in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC and the historical facts that *Tripitika* – Indian famous collections of writings were translated into Mongolian under the stewardship of *Uighur* and *Sogdian* teachers.<sup>23</sup> (Yu.Munkh-Amgalan, 2000; 150) The works of the old Mongolian literature abound in Sanskrit terms is *Sogdian* and *Uighur* spellings. The entry of them into our literature is likely to date back to the early period of the history, since then by the XIII century already had no distinction from the very Mongolian words. The Sogdians who lived in Mongolia had been teaching the Uighurs and the Mongols their script and propagating the Dharma in their own languages. It is most probable that the Mongols earnestly studied the Buddhist literature in those days with the assistance of their Indian, *Sogdian* and *Uighur bagshi*-teachers.

The historical facts and sources reveal that Mongolians have translated various scholarly writings and literary works from Uighur, Persian, Arabic, Chinese, Tibetan and Sanskrit languages. It is very difficult to determine the exact time during which

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<sup>23</sup> Yu. Munkh-Amgalan, "Indian Literature in Mongolia", In the book *Mongolia and India: Spiritual Neighbors*, New Delhi, Himala Publishers, 2000, p. 150.

Mongolians started translations and writings related to different spheres of knowledge, in general and Buddhist studies in particular. With the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia many invaluable Buddhist *sūtras* have been translated into Mongolian from Tibetan, Sanskrit, Chinese and Uighur languages. Many historical, religious and literary works have been written in Mongolia under the influence of the ancient Indian science and literature.

Hence, I would like to touch upon here some issues on history of translation by Mongolian renowned scholars and translators in early and medieval periods. More focus is on Buddhist literature and its translation which attracted Mongolian scholars' attention even more in those days. Mongolian scholars devoted special attention to India in the development of Buddhism in Mongolia, considering India as a homeland of Lord Buddha. A deep analysis of voluminous Buddhist literature is beyond the limit of this short paper. Therefore, the purpose of this paper is just to review survey of available literature on Buddhism that translated and written by Mongolian scholars.

There is an evidence that introduction of Buddhist literature in Mongolian territory started as early as in the period of first tribes inhabited in Mongolian territory. The first Emperor of the Wei dynasty of Toba, Toba Gui (386-409) supported dissemination of the Buddhist religion by a decree and he himself read books on the Buddhist teachings and sutras. During this period, twelve monks translated 83 Buddhist texts and sutras. Indian monks also visited Mongolia and met rulers of the Toba Dynasty, and translated religious books.<sup>24</sup> (Г.Сүхбаатар, 2001: 130)

Buddhism began to gain support from Mongolian Empire during the Great Khaan<sup>25</sup> Ogodei,(1229-1241A.D.) He started building Buddhist monasteries and a big *stūpa* in the city of Khar-khorin. The big five storey *stūpa* was completed in 1256, during the time of the great Khaan Munkh (1251-1258), a grandson of Chingis Khaan. During the reign of Ogodei Khaan, a Kashmir monk Namu with his brother came to the Mongolian court. Namu stayed even the period of great khaans Guyuk and Munkh (Ogodei's successor). Munkh Khaan promoted Namu as a Lama and named him *guru*<sup>26</sup> and appointed him as the State Preceptor. He was in charge of Buddhist affairs. He was much honoured at the Mongolian court and was assigned to be the head of ten thousand Kashmiri households. All this explain, in the earlier period of the Mongolian Empire Buddhism held much more influential position at the Mongolian court. In Khar-Khorin several Buddhist temples were built, Buddhist texts were taught and translated.

The Khubilai Khaan stupendously supported Buddhism. He openly declared that he was a believer of the Buddha. Since the Mongol Khaans converted to Buddhism, they of course encouraged the translation of the scriptures. Among the Mongolian and Tibetan materials there are records concerning the translation of Buddhist scriptures and literature by Mongolian scholars. A mass of books from Sanskrit and Tibetan was translated during this period. The translation of Buddhist texts persistently demanded

<sup>24</sup> Г.Сүхбаатар, Монголын эртний түүх: Сяньби улс, II боть, Ulaanbaatar, 2001, p.130.

<sup>25</sup> Commonly recognized usage of "Khan" in western literature, instead of "Khaan" is very confusing with a Muslim surname.

<sup>26</sup> It is an evidence that Mongols used Sanskrit terms

from scholars the knowledge of Mongolian-Tibetan literature as well as a good understanding of Sanskrit.

Even those translators who did not know Sanskrit had been referring to the Indian originals with the help of their foreign colleagues – Indian, Uighur and Tibetan pandits. In 1305, A.D. the Mongolian philologist and famous scholar Pandit Choiji Odser translated The *Bodhicaryāvatāra of Santideva* from Tibetan into Mongolian and in 1312 he wrote an extensive commentary of more than 300 pages on it in Mongolian.<sup>27</sup> (МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ТҮҮХ, 1999: 362) He also wrote *The twelve deeds of Buddha. Oda to Mahakali*, a religious treatise *Pancaragsa* and a Mongolian grammar *Jure Ken-u Tol ta* under the influence of the Indo-Tibetan grammar school founded by Panini, which has been studied and referred to for centuries to these days. At that time the ancient Indian *Sūtra Altangerel/Swrarna prabhāsa* – golden beam / was also translated into Mongolian. Thus, through Buddhism Mongols were able to reach the different branches of the ancient Indian knowledge. Many words from different languages absorbed into Mongolian language and are still in use, as a result of translation of Buddhist works from Persian, Tibetan, Chinese and Sanskrit languages. For instance, Sanskrit words like śaśin /śaśana/ tsadig /jātaka/ badir /patra/ bazaar or ochir /vajra/ sansar /sansar / Persian words blood /pulad / bulgar /bulgari / dari /dari devter / togos /taus/ are common words in Mongolian.<sup>28</sup> (МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ТҮҮХ, 2004: 349)

The Mongolian scholars of this period were greatly influenced by Indian literature through their faith in Buddhism. This great endeavor of the translation of Buddhist scriptures could not be separated from Sanskrit. Indian influence in Mongolia became especially strong.<sup>29</sup> (Jagchid Sechin, 1997: 147). The translation activity of the Mongols was increased, particularly, since the end of the XVI century.

As an example I would like to focus on the translation of the wonderful collections of Buddhist treatises and ancient Indian scientific texts: 108 volumes of Ganjur and 225 volumes of Danjur were completed and printed in this period. The Ganjur and the Danjur containing altogether over 5000 texts were translated into Mongolian from Tibetan, partially from Sanskrit and Chinese languages over centuries (XIII-XVII) and were printed in the early XVIII century.

The translation of Ganjur was completed in 1629 during the reign of Ligden Khaan of Tsakhar by 35 renowned translators headed by Gunga-Odser Guush and written with golden script ...<sup>30</sup> (МОНГОЛ УЛСЫН ТҮҮХ, 1999: 363)

The work has printed by wooden block in 1720. Both manuscript and printed copy of Ganjur has been kept in the Mongolian State Library. One copy of Ganjur has been preserved in Paris. The Hungarian Mongolist L.Ligeti compiled the contents of the Ganjur from this Paris copy and had it published in Budapest. One complete copy of the Mongolian Ganjur was kept by the late Pandit Raghu Vira, which was reprinted by his

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<sup>27</sup> Монгол улсын түүх, хянан тохиолдуулсан акад. Ж.Болдбаатар. Улаанбаатар, 1999, 362-р тал.

<sup>28</sup> Монгол улсын түүх, 5 боть, II боть, хянан тохиолдуулсан проф. Ч.Далай, Улаанбаатар, 2004, 349.

<sup>29</sup> Jagchid Sechin, A Retrospective look at Mongol – India Historical Relations in the book Mongolia: Tryst with Change and Development, New Delhi, Everest Press, 1997, p. 147.

<sup>30</sup> Монгол улсын түүх, хянан тохиолдуулсан: акад. Ж.Болдбаатар, Улаанбаатар, 1999, 363-р тал.

son Dr. Lokesh Chandra in New Delhi. In the words of Dr. Lokesh Chandra: ‘While the Mongolian people are widely known as world conquerors, their extensive literary output for the last seven centuries is a heritage that deserves wider dissemination. It is the pride of the joint literary legacy of the Indian and Mongolian peoples. Majority of the Buddhist works in these two encyclopedic collections have been lost in India. Their reconstruction into Sanskrit would enrich the understanding of several facets of India’s cultural development during the last two millennia.’<sup>31</sup> (Lokesh Chandra, 2000:33)

The Danjur contains more serious scientific and specific terminologies, a special dictionary of terminologies was compiled for its translation and over 200 best translators were mobilized from all over the country. This translation was completed by 1794. According to Dr. Lama Chimpa. Indian Mongolist, the Mongolian Tanjur is far richer than the Tibetan Tanjur because the Mongolian scholars had translated several other Indian texts, both from Sanskrit and Chinese, which were not included in Tibetan Tanjur.<sup>32</sup>(Lama Chimpa, 2000: 95) Such translations of the Buddhist canons required deep and broad knowledge in the field of Sanskrit and Tibetan. Because of these translations, there are many foreign items that have been “borrowed” into Mongolian language. There was another translation of the tale of the king Vikramaditya, stories were translated directly from Sanskrit into Mongolian by an Indian, Acharya Pandit Baha, who was the disciple of the first Mongolian Bogdo Jebzundamba. The above mentioned books, translated from Tibetan and Sanskrit have been preserved by ordinary Mongols with great care and have been read and preserved by them up to the present day.

The number of ancient Indian works relating to religion, literature, philosophy and science were available in Mongolian language. As we have a great tradition of translation, the numerous works of ancient Indian literature and science has been translated and printed in Mongolia. There is an enormous quantity of Sanskrit literature translated into Mongolian, in some cases from Sanskrit itself, but mostly retranslated from the Tibetan, Uighur and Chinese languages by several generations of learned Mongolian /khelmerchi/ translators.

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Thanks to the translation of all these works, Buddhism was widely spread and the Buddhist philosophy was studied in Mongolia.

<sup>31</sup> Lokesh Chandra, *Pilgrims of Shared Eternity*, Mongolia and India: Spiritual Neighbours, New Delhi, Himala Publishers, 2000, p.33.

<sup>32</sup> Lama Chimpa, *Mongolian and Indian Literary Links*, The same book, p. 95.

Later on, during the XVIII and XIX centuries some curious Mongols and pilgrims used to visit India-especially those places connected with Buddha's life. On the other hand, the Indian scholars had been studying Mongol history with great interest. The number of ancient Indian works relating to religion, literature, philosophy and science 'were available in the Mongolian language.

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The spread of Buddhism brought great achievements in the cultural life of Mongolia during XVI-XVII century. Scholars consider, there was a beginning of the Mongolian renaissance at that time. Many historical, religious and literary works have been written in Mongolia under the influence of the ancient Indian science and literature. Mongolian historical works were created - reason to prevent the loss of valuable history. For example, *Erdene-in Tobchi* by Sagan Sechen was the most famous historical works of this period. It has several editions. One of them is titled *Enetheg Tuvd Mongol gurban ulus-un tuuji*. It deals with history of India, Tibet and Mongolia. The well known *Altantobchi* also follow the footsteps of Sagan Sechen. *Tsagaan Teukhe /history/*.

The Mongols have not only translated numerous early Indian literary works into the native language, but they adapted some of them to the national form and local environments. They have created their own works after the model of the earlier Indian literature, thus introducing new forms and genre. Some of the books have even been Mongolized to such an extent that their Indian origin became doubtful. For instance, the trilogy of the tale of King Vikramaditya, stories of King Bhoj and Krishna. Out of the three books on the stories of Bigarmijid "the story of King ArjiBurji / or Raja Bhoj" has been published many times and studied more than the others. The story of Raja Bhoj was translated in 1858 in Russian by Buryad Lama Galsan and published as a Mongolian legend. In 1867 German scholar B. Julg translated it into German and published it with the Mongolian text. It is interesting that both Galsan and Julg named their books as "Mongolian Tales."<sup>33</sup>(B.Dashtseren, 1997: 73)

All these demonstrate the striking influence of the Sanskrit Buddhist culture on the development of the Mongolian literature, culture and science. Regarding this the prominent Mongolian scholar, acad.prof. Sh. Bira once noted that "We now have an enormous quantity of Sanskrit literature translated, in some cases from Sanskrit itself, but mostly retranslated from the Tibetan, Uighur and Chinese languages by several generations of learned Mongolian Kelmerchi / translators. This literature having been brought into the consciousness of the Mongols, made out two peoples come spiritually and culturally closer together and become familiar with each other. As a result of the

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<sup>33</sup> B.Dashtseren, *The History and Culture of Mongolia*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1997, p.73.

great translated work in various fields of learning, the Mongolian language enriched itself with a vast terminology and rich phraseology.”

During the socialist period of Mongolia there was carried on a considerable work of collecting written monuments-xylographs and manuscripts in Oriental languages, including Sanskrit and Tibetan. As a result, a library rich for collections of ancient sutras - the State Public Library – was established. The State library has an astoundingly immense collection of Buddhist works in Mongolian and Tibetan languages. It has now become world’s richest collection of Mongolian and Tibetan xylographs and manuscripts, many of which are unique. Mongolian literature is rich in Buddhism and other works akin in spirit to that of India.

For a small country like Mongolia situated far from India, a task like translating numerous works of ancient Indian literature and science and their printing at a time when book printing was in its infancy, was amazing. Regarding this, a German historian and renowned oriental scholar Walther Heissig wrote: “During period of unrest and war it is always difficult to preserve records of the past. The history of Mongolia is a particularly warlike one. Nevertheless, it is becoming increasingly clear that the Mongols produced more historical works than any other Central Asian People.”<sup>34</sup> (B.Dashtseren, 1997: 23)

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<sup>34</sup> B.Dashtseren, *The History and Culture of Mongolia*, The Asiatic Society, Calcutta, 1997, p.23.