

PREFACE

Among the most ancient in the world, the Gilgit manuscripts are the oldest surviving manuscript collection in India. Greatly significant in the area of Buddhist studies, they contain both canonical and non-canonical Buddhist works that have enormous relevance in the evolution of Sanskrit, Chinese, Korean, Japanese, and Tibetan religio-philosophical literature. Opinions vary on exactly when they were written, but there is some consensus that the period was between the 5th and 6th centuries CE.

The manuscripts were discovered in three instalments in the Gilgit region in what is described as Pakistan-occupied Kashmir. Their discovery was first announced by Sir Aurel Stein, who reported in *The Statesman* of 24th July 1931, that some boys watching flocks in a hilly area in Naupur village, about two miles west of Gilgit Cantonment, had found a circular chamber within a Buddhists stupa filled with hundreds of small votive stupas and relief plaques common in Central Asia and Tibet. Within these, some ancient manuscripts were discovered in a wooden box. The grazers took these to the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir. The fact the manuscripts have survived is partly because they were written on the bark of the Bhoj tree that does not decay or decompose, and partly due to the near-freezing temperatures of the Gilgit region.

The corpus of the manuscripts contains inter alia, sutras from the Buddhist canon, *Samādhirājasūtra* and *Saddharma-puṇḍarīkasūtra* (popularly known as the Lotus Sutra). Written in the Buddhist hybrid Sanskrit language in the Gupta Brāhmī and post-Gupta Brāhmī scripts, they cover a range of subjects, such as religious rituals, iconometry, folk tales, medicine, and several related areas of life and knowledge. Their importance lies in the fact that they are perhaps the only corpus of Buddhist manuscripts that have been discovered in India. The language is similar to the early Mahayana texts and a mixed Sanskrit of a peculiar type, using largely Sanskrit words with Prakrit inflections and Prakrit words with Sanskrit inflections.

Dr. Lokesh Chandra, Director of the International Academy of Indian Culture, and an eminent scholar of Buddhism and cultures of South and South East Asia, first published a facsimile edition of the voluminous Gilgit manuscripts in New Delhi in 1974. According to him, the text has reference to three Buddhist synods (meetings of religious heads). This suggests a date sometime around or after the reign of Emperor Kanishka (78?-128? CE), as according to Sanskrit texts, the third synod was held during Kanishka's reign. Apart from the literary significance these manuscripts also provide examples of decorated books. Two of the earliest Sanskrit manuscripts that form part of the Srinagar Collection, were nestled between wooden book covers, painted on both sides, with the lotus scroll decorating the outer side. These painted covers fill a knowledge gap of Kashmir art of this period since they are the only authentic specimens of Kashmir paintings.

The manuscripts were discovered in three stages. The major portion, as mentioned earlier, was discovered by cattle grazers in 1931, and sent to Srinagar. These were examined by archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein, and 11 folios retrieved by local inhabitants were sent to the British Museum; most of them now housed in the National Archives of India. The second lot was discovered by Pandit Madhusudan Kaul in 1938, and a third lot was mentioned by Prof. Giuseppe Tucci in 1956.

The major portion of the Gilgit manuscripts, called Vijananidhi or manuscript treasure, became the possession of the National Archives, underwent a preliminary conservation process followed by lamination, and has since been kept with highly restricted access. The National Archives of India, attached to the Department of Culture, is the repository of non-current records of the Government of India holding them in trust for the use of administrators and scholars.

Some portions of the manuscripts are in the Jammu and Kashmir State Government libraries and research department, and fragments are also in the collection at the British Library and the Department of Archaeology in Karachi, Pakistan.

Though the grammatical and literary aspects of the text are more of historical interest, what is more interesting is how this information throws light on the social fabric. While they are of immense significance to the scholarly community and practicing Buddhists, they are also invaluable to historians and linguists who might illuminate aspects related to the history of the period.

A crying need in our country and in other parts of the world is to make historical documents accessible. We are indeed fortunate that these wonderful manuscripts can now be viewed and studied more freely thanks to the dedicated work of the Institute of Oriental Philosophy (IOP) that has helped to produce a new facsimile edition of the manuscripts.

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate the Soka Gakkai International (SGI) President, Dr. Daisaku Ikeda, who is also the founder of the IOP and all others who were directly and indirectly involved in the publication of this valuable contribution to the study of Buddhist texts. I would also like to thank all those at the IOP led by the Director, Dr. Yoichi Kawada, who have successfully brought about this publication through the coordinated efforts of the many people concerned.

It is hoped that this landmark achievement will herald the start of a trend of thinking about creative and innovative ways of making our rich cultural heritage not just accessible but also meaningful to many.

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