

Extinct Languages and the Reconstruction of Ancient Indian History with Special Reference to the Bon Religion

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Abstract

This paper tries to reconstruct the history of ancient India with special reference to the borderlands of north-western India that lie adjacent to Tibet and are represented largely through Buddhist frames. This paper argues that in the writing of Tibetan history, the Bon religion has been regularly referred and the same can be employed in the case of the Indian borderlands of Tibet. Though the Zhang Zhung language of the Bon religion is extinct, the material culture and the residual practices can help us not only the reconstruction of the religion but also in the Zhang Zhung language.

Keywords: Zhang Zhung, Bon, Tibet, India, extinct language

Ancient India is largely identified in the proto-historic period with the Indus Valley civilisation and in the early historic period with the Vedic and post-Vedic civilisation centred in northern India. During the early medieval period, the history of India becomes more expansive with the abundant number of literary sources. Among literary resources, that comprise of the texts, inscriptions and other materials, predominantly written in Prakrit, Sanskrit and the other regional vernaculars (Sircar, 1996) that have been regularly used in the writing of history. We hit a blank when we come to the peripheral regions of North-Western India as these regions that are inhospitable and mountainous flanked by the Himalayas are often ascribed as regions with nomads who do not have literary culture and therefore, we do not have any tangible histories of these regions and have to depend on myth, oral histories and so on as historical sources (Singh, 2018). Ladakh, the western Himalayan regions of Lahaul and Spiti in modern day Himachal Pradesh fall into this bracket (Singh, 2018). It is here that the idea of using certain extinct languages would give agency to the region and also bring out its real personality that has been suppressed under the present methodological approach relying on texts only.

This paper is concerned with trying to problematise the approach to the borderlands of north-west India by trying to employ the notion of borderlands (Singh, 2018) as an analytical category and

also read the region by trying to use the extinct languages as sources for which there is a great potential (Saxena, 2011).

In the classical Sastric texts composed in Sanskrit, like the Smriti literature, we find the concept of India or Bharatavarsha as the region of India whose borders extend as far as the black gazelle roams and as far as the munja grass grows (Sastri, 1970). Beyond these regions were the regions of the nomadic people who were variously classified in Indian history as the mlechchas or the unclean people and, when they became victorious as the fallen kshatriyas and included people like the Kushans, the Parthians, the Indo Greeks, the Sakas, the Huns and so on. In the Indian representations, these people do not have any literature and are therefore degraded to the status of nomadic people without any civilisational traits, but their martial prowess is acknowledged (Thapar, 1978).

On the other hand, the Chinese sources from the classical period also have a similar problem with the borderland peoples and relegate them to the level of barbarians (Liu, 2017). In contrast to these representations, we find that from the last century or so, many new works that combined archaeology, linguistics and anthropology have brought together a holistic understanding of the borderlands of north western India.

One of the most important contributions is the work titled *Himalayan Histories: Economy, Polity, Religious Traditions* (Singh, 2018) that gives recognition to these regions and treats them as entities with distinct personalities and not just as borders. (Singh, 2018)

Tibet is predominantly identified with the Buddhist religion just as ancient India is identified with the Vedic religion and the heterodox religious traditions. In this process, many other religious traditions have been left out, and in today's understanding, such religions would have been labelled as folk religions.

One of the problems with folk religions is that they do not have a written tradition and therefore have become hidden from history. Through fieldwork, there is an exercise to rehabilitate the folk religions and the folk traditions in many parts of India and China. In the case of north-western India, we see that the Bon religion was a fully developed religion with an elaborate pantheon of deities and developed traditions (Karmay & Watt, 2007). The end of the Bon religion did not lead to the demise of this religion as there were survivors who remain to this day in the form of Bon monasteries (Karmay & Watt, 2007).

On the other hand, the Buddhism of Tibet is at a considerable distance from the Buddhism of Sri Lanka or Laos, Thailand, Cambodia or Vietnam or even of the Mahayana Buddhist societies like China and Japan (Jr & Jr, 2013). This is very intriguing to any outsider for whom the standard Buddhism would mean the domesticated and textual tradition epitomised by the dominant constructions in Theravada which is itself problematic as in the case of Thailand (Kitiarsa, 2005). Therefore, the Buddhism of Tibet includes the tantric tradition of India and the Bon religious

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tradition which has not died out but has become absorbed into the Buddhism of Tibet and it is often referred to as the Tibetan assimilation of Buddhism (Kapstein, 2002). Therefore, we find the residual traditions of the Bon religion clearly expressed in Tibetan Buddhist religious practices and also in cultural practices. One of the glaring examples is that even after 1000 years of Buddhist religion in Tibet, the peasants even to this day use the Bon cosmology and not the Buddhist cosmology (Ramble, 2013) and this shows the surviving power of indigenous tradition.

Coming closer to north-west India, we see that in the regions bordering India Tibet and Iran, which form the westernmost extremities of Tibet and Tibetan culture area, there is the region of Tajikistan, which is part of the Persian cultural region and also a borderland where the Persian, the Indian and Tibetan traditions and the other Central Asian traditions met and interacted. It was here that we find the origin of the Bon religion in the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung, which is supposed to be to the west of Tibet (Norbu, 2013). This is supposed to be the Kingdom which included many parts of Ladakh and north western India. The region included the various sites in Lahaul and Spiti that have been the subject of enquiry by Indian historians only recently (Martin, 2001). Such a development had happened primarily because of the non-recognition of the extinct language of the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung (Norbu, 1989). The story would become clear and also be on a sound historical footing if we examine the early history of Tibet and some of the landmark events in reading this period.

According to traditional Tibetan historiography, Tibet was ruled by 41 Kings, but the historians thought it essential to remember the names of only three important things which were known as the Dharma kings as the followers of the Buddhist religion (Smith, 1996). The reason is obvious as these historians were Buddhist monks, and therefore, they were faithful to their religion and wrote from Buddhist bias. Most of the kings were followers of the Bon religion, and the last great ruler of this religion was killed, and the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung was absorbed into Tibet (Smith, 1996). This was because the first great empire builder of Tibet Songtsen Gampo had a sister who married the King of Zhang Zhung. But Sadmakar, the wife of the last ruler of Zhang Zhung and sister of Songtsen Gampo, was more loyal to her brother than to husband and tricked her husband into an ambush after which he was killed (Laird, 2007). Finally, the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung ended and is absorbed into early Tibet (Laird, 2007).

Having outlined the history of some of the landmark events in the formation of early Tibet, we see that it is not a straightforward story but is complicated by the necessity to read the Bon religion and also the history of the Kingdom of Zhang Zhung (Norbu, 2013).

The language of Zhang Zhung has also become extinct and herein lies the problem. It is not the only language in this region that has become extinct and compounds our problem of understanding the history of the Indo Tibetan borderlands. The Tocharian language is also a linguistic puzzle in this region as it belongs to a different linguistic group that goes against the general trend of this region (Akiner & Sims-Williams, 2013). In artistic representations also, the Tocharian people are represented as belonging to a different phenotype with red hair (Pulleyblank,

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1966). As the Tocharian language has been reconstructed, there is more clarity on the interaction between different ethnic groups during the early period till the eighth century of the common era in this region (Hummel, 2000).

Zhang Zhung is only revealed in a few representations on caves and rocks and is being historically reconstructed since the 1960s when one of the most important texts named the *Treasury of Good Sayings* as available in Zhang Zhung language (Martin,2013). This served as a virtual Rosetta Stone which has included both the Zhang Zhung language and the old Tibetan language (Norbu, 2013).

When we talk about the Zhang Zhung language and the scope for the historical reconstruction, we are reminded of some of the important landmarks in the field, so clearly articulated by Dan Martin in his article titled Knowing Zhang-Zhung: The Very Idea (Martin, 2013). Here Martin talks of three important contributors whom he calls as the three H's and one S meaning the four personalities Helmut Hoffmann, Erik Haarh, Rolf Stein, and Siegbert Hummel (Martin, 2013). Their works mainly deal with the origin of the Zhang Zhung language, its characteristics, form and relation with the Bon religion.

The 1960s was the golden age of Zhang Zhung studies with the publication of not only a glossary but also a dictionary of the Zhang Zhung language and the Zhu glossary. Later work was also continued by people like John Vincent Bellezza who painstakingly undertook fieldwork and also pointed to the existence of many established archaeological sites in Central Tibet and in Western Tibet before the rise of the Tibetan Empire in the seventh century CE (Belazza, 2008). The major site activities of all this region were Western Tibet and the region beyond to the west (Thar, 2009). We have now a clear understanding of certain aspects:

1. There were settlements before the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet, and these have been confirmed by archaeological excavations (Belazza, 2008).
2. Most of the settlements are in western Tibet and the regions of the borderlands Tibet and Persia and North-western Himalayan India (Kuznetsov, 1978).
3. The connection between Zhang Zhung language and the Bon religion is very clear and established based on language and material culture (Martin,2013).

When we come to the regions of western Himalayas, we are confounded with a large number of people who do not have literate culture, and it is here that a study of the Bon religion and the Zhang Zhung language would help us to uncover some of the lost histories. It is surmised that the regions of Kinnaur where the Kinnauri languages are spoken are related to Zhang Zhung language (Bellezza, 2014). Another path breaking connection was unravelled with the rise of the study of the Zhang Zhung language and its relation with another tribal group known as the Rang who inhabit the Indo Tibetan border lands in the region of the modern state of Uttarakhand predominantly found in

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Dharchula in the district of Pithoragarh (Martin, 2013). There are many studies done on the Rang people, and most of the conclusions that were posited have become historically erroneous, and prompt us to look beyond the superficial layers revealed in these conclusions.

To begin with, these people known as the Rang, to quote Dan Martin in linguistic terms, are part of the "The West Himalayish or Kanauri subgroup [which] comprises several languages of Northwestern India. Included (from west to east) are Chamba Lahuli, Patani or Manchati, Tinan or Ranglo, Bunan or Gahri, Kanauri or Kinnaurik, Kanshi, Rangkhas, Darmiya, and Chaudangsi/Byangsi... Zhangzhung is now generally agreed to fit here (Martin,2013). Those last-mentioned languages, those of the more eastern side, include speakers of not only Darma, but the quite closely related dialects/languages known as Chaudangsi and Byangsi. The speakers of all three languages are known as the Rang People, or as they say: Rŭng Mŭng” (Martin,2013).

This has solved two important problems, one of them being the Tibetan origin of these people and the second being that of the Hindu Rajput origin of these people. The earlier scholars recommended the Tibetan origin of these people based on the shared Mongoloid phenotype and also because of the cultural traits like the use of butter tea and many other Tibetan aspects. It should be remembered that they were traders who actively traded using Indo Tibetan caravans. Such caravan trade was a regular feature till 1962. Their trade to and fro Tibet helped foster and exchange of culture and language. It is from these regions that aspects of material culture flowed to their homelands and became internalised in everyday usage leading scholars to conclude the story of the Tibetan origin (Bellezza, 2008).

With regard to the Hindu Rajput origin one can easily notice that the Rang people are devout Hindus, and on account of their ascendancy in the Hindu social order of which they were only part of a geographical periphery with no political competitors, their absorption into the larger Hindu fold was mainly due to their contact with the neighbouring Himalayan kingdoms of Kumaon and largely on their terms. As the ruling dynasties of India claimed a Kshatriya status the Rang people immediately articulated it in the form of the Rajput caste (Dash, 2006) that was the ruling caste in the Himalayan regions. This is further compounded by the fact that the Rang people also had domestic servants, and therefore, this higher status also served to reinforce their superordinate position (Dash, 2006).

One of the critical points is that we get from both these examples is that the settlement of people in this region was ancient and before the seventh century CE or the establishment of the Yarlung dynasty that started ruling in Tibet from the seventh century CE onwards. What it also points is that after the decline of the Bon religion many of the people did not transit to Buddhist religion as it is generally assumed. But they also followed different traditions that led to many hybrid processes as seen in the case of the Rang people.

Many of the equivalentents in the Zhang Zhung language have been rendered into the Bon religion, and this gives the characteristic of the early Tibetan culture (Śar-rdza, 2005). This can also

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be extended to the study of medicine as was proposed in the famous text, the *Treasury of Good Sayings*. Archaeology has not only extended the reach of the Bon religion to meet the borderlands of north-western India but also led to the region of Mustang in Nepal as revealed by the recent archaeological findings (Bellezza, 2014). This, therefore, reveals that the spread of Bon religion and, by extension, residues of the Zhang Zhung language went as far as the central Himalayas that would geographically look like an arc stretching from the north-west to the central Himalaya is bordering India.

In the westernmost extremities, we have clear ideas of the independence of the Zhang Zhung language and culture as revealed by some of the early maps. These maps are not in a modern cartographic tradition but is in the form of a diagram with Olmo Tazig. The diagram depicts the four regions in the four cardinal directions and also the four Rivers. The four regions are India to the south, Persia to the west, Tibet to the east and the northern lands (Ramble, 2013).

According to traditional Tibetan legends, the founder of the Bon religion did not enter Tibet but lived in the land west of Tibet and is today known as the Bonpo Buddha different from the historical Buddha also known as Sakyamuni Buddha (Karmay & Watt, 2007). Tonpa Sherab, who was also the Bonpo Buddha, came to Tibet following a rainbow searching for his horses in pursuit of the thief and this was supposed to be his only visit to Tibet (Kværne, 1995). However, the gods and goddesses of the Bon religion hail from not only Tibet but also from a very wide geographical expanse as far as the early Persian regions and have become incorporated into the Bon religion.

While the origins of the gods and goddesses of the Bon religion have been worked out to some detail, their travel to all the regions where we have the Bon culture is not fully worked out. When we see that the prevalence of these gods and goddesses are there as far as the eastern Himalayas, one can only say that all this has travelled because of the Zhang Zhung language and culture and its prevalence (Kværne, 1995). Current linguistic evidence using methods of co-relation between the words of the Zhang Zhung language and the different dialects of the Himalayan regions in both the Western Himalayas like Kinnauri, Rang and also in the central Himalayas like Lepcha lead us to the point that these were actually transactions in terms of language and culture through contact that has survived even after centuries of dominant cultural influences (Nagano & LaPolla, 2001).

We may, therefore, point out that using the archaeological evidence, particularly the carvings on rocks in the western Himalayas, that depict the animals and also the inverted swastika, the latter being an integral part of the Bon religion establishes the spread of Bon religion in clear archaeological terms (Singh, 2018). Combining this with language and religion, we see that both of them are located in a substratum with Tibetan being at the top as the Tibetan language was also the official language of the Tibetan Empire and later of the Buddhist religion. Spread of the Tibetan language was not wholesale, and in many of these regions had to encounter many of these words of the Zhang Zhung language that were incorporated leading to hybrid situations (Kværne, 1995). In terms of religion also we see that many of the gods and goddesses of the Bon religion have travelled

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and became elaborated as part of the Bon religion and later even part of the Buddhist religion in the Tibetan context. The explanation for this is given not on religious terms only but on linguistic terms after an analysis of the Zhang Zhung language terms for white and luminous to represent the early god like Okar who was later transformed from a god of the Bon religion to that of the Tibetan Buddhist religion as the white Tara (Kværne, 1995).

Most of our confusion regarding the Zhang Zhung language comes on account of two factors on being the anti-Bon religious attitude Buddhists took in Tibet after the conflict between the Bon and the Buddhist religions beginning from the eighth century CE (Laird, 2007). The second part of the problem is also because of the European understanding of Tibet and Central Asia using Buddhist frames without acknowledging the Zhang Zhung language and culture. Therefore, we have demonstrated in this paper that a study of the extinct Zhang Zhung language would not only give a personality to the western Himalayan borderlands and establish their historicity from early period but it would also help us to finetune our understanding of the early history of Tibet based on linguistic evidence backed up by archaeological and historical evidence.

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