

## The Foremost Teachers of the Kings of Ladakh

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It is stated that in the 10th century AD the settlement of Upper Ladakh began with Gya and that of Lower Ladakh with Wanla. The administrator of Upper Ladakh was Gyapa-cho, the chief of Gya, who was a descendant of Kesar Gyalpo, the hero of the Kesar saga. In Gya village, he built a castle and a small town with several watch towers. Similarly, Lonpo Bhagdar-skyab of Wanla built a small fortress at Wanla, and may also have built the castle of Khalatse, which is said to be the oldest in Ladakh. It is in this period that Lama lo tsa wa Rin chen bzang po carried on his religious activities in Ladakh with the support of his tutorial deity lHa rDo rje chen mo. Among the many notable religious constructions of Rin chen bzang po were the temples at Nyerma, Alchi, Mangyu and Sumda in Ladakh, as well as a similar number of temples in mNga ris bskor gsum and present day Himachal Pradesh. Rin chen bzang po received material support from rulers of both upper and lower Ladakh.

In the 14th century, the influence of the great Tibetan saint and reformer, Gyalwa Tsongkhapa reached Ladakh. Interestingly, Ladakhi scholars were also active in Tibet in those days. For example, one of the six chief disciples of Tsongkhapa was Sherab Zangpo (Shes rab bzang po), who was born in Stagmo, near Thikse. He was the founder of a Gonpa at Stagmo which is considered to be the first Gelugpa monastery in Ladakh. He also founded Diskit Gonpa in the Nubra Valley and received the patronage of the rulers of Zanskar where he introduced the order of Tsongkhapa at Karsha Gonpa. In this period, Sakya Siddhi Lama Drungpa Dorje came to Ladakh and founded the Sakya Gonpa at Matho. The two oracles of Matho, popularly called *Rongtsan dkar dmar*, the white and red *tsan*, travelled with the Lama from *Rongtsan khawa dkarpo* in the Kham region of Tibet and were appointed as religious guardians in Matho.

Lama lHa dbang bLo gros (1385-1438), a Gelugpa teacher from Tibet, visited Ladakh during the reign of King bLo gros mchog ldan. This *Pandita* received patronage from the Ladakhi king and founded several Gelugpa

establishments, including the Gonpas of Likir, Spituk and Stok. For the first time, a nunnery was constructed during the reign of this king. Tashi Namgyal (bKra shis rnam rgyal), the third king of the Namgyal dynasty, introduced the practice whereby every family with more than one male child should send one son, though not the oldest, to become a monk. Until the reign of Tsewang Namgyal (Tshe dbang rnam rgyal) (1530-60), the Gelugpa sect was dominant in Ladakh, thanks to the patronage of successive kings, but no king declared their Gelugpa Lama as 'foremost teacher'.

In 1560 King Jamyang Namgyal ascended the throne. He was a religious man and allowed other sects to flourish in the kingdom. Through the appointment of Lama Drungpa Dorje as (an exponent of the Sakya sect) as foremost teacher, a new chapter was added to the religious history of Ladakh. As the King was afflicted by leprosy he invited, on the advice of his ministers, a Drigung pa teacher, Lama Chos rje gdan ma Kun dga' grags pa, to perform prayers. Being a spiritual teacher, he succeeded in freeing the King from the disease and in appreciation he was given financial support for the construction of two Drigungpa Gonpas, Phyang and Lamayuru. Besides, the King extended a formal invitation to the Lama to become the foremost teacher in the kingdom. However, the Lama declined.

On a visit to Zanskar King Jamyang Namgyal met Lama Stag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho (1574-1651) who was on his way to the land of U rgyan. The King asked the Lama to assume the seat of foremost teacher, but as he was on pilgrimage to U rgyan, he would not accept. However, Lama Stagtsang Raspa did promise that he would visit Ladakh after completion of his pilgrimage.

By the time Lama Stagtsang Raspa returned from his pilgrimage, King Jamyang's illustrious son Sengge Namgyal (1590-1620) had ascended to the throne. Upon his arrival, the Lama was given a warm reception by the King who requested that he accept the position of foremost teacher, and this time the Lama agreed. A formal enthronement ceremony was held and the King bestowed many gifts: one hundred horses, one hundred yaks, one thousand sheep, one thousand goats, thirty kilograms of barley and wheat, a rosary of pearls, a rosary of turquoise, two hundred guns, two hundred spears and swords, fifteen shields, twenty-five pieces of brocade, ten pieces of silk, twenty-five pieces of fur, and twenty-five silk khatags of superior quality.<sup>1</sup>

The appointment of Stagtsang Raspa enhanced the prestige of the King, as

1. Tashi Rabgias. 1984. *Mar yul la dwags kyi sngon rabs kun gsal me long*. Leh: C. Namgyal & Tsewang Taru.

he was not only a spiritually superior Lama, but also had made the pilgrimage to U rgyan gLing. Some scholars believe that U rgyan gling is identical with present day Mecca, but others place the site in the Swat valley of Pakistan, the region which is said to have been the birthplace of Padma-sambhava.<sup>2</sup> Through his association with such a reputable Lama the fame of Sengge Namgyal spread all the way to the kingdom of Bhutan, which in those days was in the control of the 'Brug pa bKa' rgyud pa sect. Sengge Namgyal was on good terms with the Bhutanese ruler, Zhabs drung Ngag dbang rnam rgyal. The Ladakhi king wished to strengthen his ties with Bhutan and therefore offered some villages in mNga' ris skor.gsum to his counterpart, and sent one of his sons to Bhutan to become a 'Brug pa monk. The son became a respected teacher of the Drukpa Kargyud lineage.

Towards the end of the reign of Sengge Namgyal the Mongolian leader Gushri Khan bsTan 'dzin chos rgyal invaded Tibet and seized power from the Tibetan ruler, sDe pa gTsang pa, and established himself as ruler of the three provinces of Tibet. Later, power was conferred on the great Fifth Dalai Lama.<sup>3</sup> Sengge Namgyal was well aware of these developments in Tibet. Thanks to the support of the Mongols, the Dalai Lama made the Tibetan government the champions of the Gelugpa sect and the Drugpa Kargyud came under increasing pressure, also in Ladakh. The King asked Stagtsang Raspa to transfer Gelugpa monasteries in Ladakh to the Drukpa sect, but he rejected this proposal on the grounds that the Buddhist religion should not be sectarian.

The 'Tiger-like' Stagtsang Raspa and the 'Lion-like' Sengge Namgyal contributed a great deal to the development and propagation of the Drukpa sect in Ngaris and Ladakh. They founded the renowned Hemis Gonpa, Chemre Gonpa and Wanla Gonpa. Sengge Namgyal also had a monastery built at Tashigang in western Tibet. The King donated large stretches of fertile land to the Lama in different parts of Ladakh, including Nubra, Changthang, Purig, and Zanskar. It is said that Hemis Gonpa and Stagtsang Raspa also held land in Baltistan, and they also owned land in Srinagar. It is estimated that Hemis Gonpa possessed 1900 *kanals* of tax-exempted land.

Lama sTag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho was also an accomplished artist. The invention of the Mani wall is attributed to him in one of A.H. Francke's books. Under the guidance and supervision of the Lama, Sengge Namgyal built the mani wall at Basgo, which has a length of almost

2. Tashi Rabgias, op. cit.

3. L. Austin Waddell. 1895. *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism*. London: W.H. Allen.

500 meters.<sup>4</sup> Another mani wall was constructed by him at Lingshed.

During Stagtsang Raspa's lifetime Sengge Namgyal built the nine story lion palace of Leh, using traditional Himalayan Buddhist architecture. It is said that before the start of the construction work Stagtsang Raspa offered prayers on the site and that he blessed it on completion of the work. The front wall is designed in such a way as to represent the vest of Stagtsang Raspa. After the death of Sengge Namgyal, his son bDe ldan rnam rgyal (1620-40) came to the throne. Like his father, King Deldan showed respect for Lama Stagtsang. Deldan Namgyal built a three story statue of Lord Buddha at Shey in memory of his father. The temple was opened by the Lama. Finally, having made great efforts to strengthen the religion by constructing several Drukpa establishments throughout Ladakh, the Lama passed away on 29 January 1651.<sup>5</sup>

The activities of the Drukpa in Ladakh were watched with suspicion by the Central Tibetan government. They were particularly concerned about the fact that the Ladakhi kings allowed the Bhutanese to enter in the mNga' ris skor gsum area and feared that the alliance of the two Drukpa kingdoms could pose a threat to the Gelugpa dominated central Tibetan government. To counter the Drukpa influence, the Tibetans sent an army to Ladakh, headed by dGa' ldan tshe dbang, a Mongolian monk and staunch supporter of the Gelugpa dominance in Tibet. The goal of the invasion was to wrest the Ngaris territories from the control of the King of Ladakh and to put pressure on him to appoint a Gelugpa Lama as foremost teacher. As the Ladakhi king was reluctant to accept the demands, a force of 2,500 soldiers was sent into Ladakh and for three years, from 1681 to 1683, the Tibetans pillaged the country, attacking the Gonpas and the palace at Leh.

During this period, King bDe legs rnam rgyal was on the throne. To save his kingdom from Tibetan control he approached the Moghul governor of Kashmir for military aid. The Governor forwarded the request to the Emperor in Delhi, Aurangzeb, who agreed to assist Delegs Namgyal on condition that he accept Islam. The King accepted the terms and a Moghul army led by Fida Khan, son of the Governor of Kashmir, defeated the Tibetan invaders and forced them to retreat to Tashigang where they dug in and sued for peace. Delegs Namgyal converted to Islam and changed his name to Aqibat Mohammed Khan, and the Muslims of Ladakh were granted

4. Nawang Tsering Shaksपो. 1993. *An Insight Into Ladakh*. Leh: by the author.

5. Petech, Luciano. 1977. *The Kingdom of Ladakh C. 950-1842 A.D.* Roma: Instituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente.

land to construct a mosque. Until this day the most precious relics preserved in the Leh mosque are the staff and boots of the King's foremost teacher, Stag tshang ras pa Ngag dbang rgya mtsho, the first head of Hemis Monastery.<sup>6</sup>

After the King's submission to the Moghuls, Sangye Gyatsho, the regent of Tibet who ruled the country after the death of the Fifth Dalai Lama, became deeply concerned for the safety of the Buddhist religion in Ladakh. In the autumn of 1683, ignoring sectarian differences, he therefore raised the problem with the sixth 'Brug chen Mi pham dbang po (1614-1717), who was the head of the Drugpa sect and whose former incarnations had been the Patron Lamas of the Ladakhi kings. Promising the Drugchen a fair share of the booty collected in Ladakh by Galdan Tsewang, the regent sent the Drugchen to Tashigang to negotiate a peace treaty.<sup>7</sup> Upon his arrival at the border, he consulted with Galden Tsewang and they agreed that a peace treaty should include the condition that the King of Ladakh reconvert to Buddhism. The treaty indeed stipulated that the kingdom of Ladakh had to accept the religious supremacy of the Dalai Lama and honour his instructions and should treat the Gelugpa and Drugpa sects equally. In addition, the Ladakhi king was to surrender Ngaris and the areas of Guge, Purang, and Rudok to the Central Tibetan government. As a consequence of this treaty, Ladakh's influence in Ngaris declined rapidly, while its importance as an independent kingdom also waned with the rising power of its Muslim neighbours. In the religious sphere, relations with Bhutan remained intact. Chos rje Jam dbyangs pad dkar, an exponent of the Drugpa sect, visited Ladakh during the reign of bDe skyong rnam rgyal. He acted as foremost teacher to the King and several folk songs in his praise still exist.

The second incarnation of Stagtsang Raspa appeared in the form of a *siddhi* during the reign of Delegs Namgyal, but did not remain in Ladakh for long. The third incarnation was born as the only son of Deskyong Namgyal and Queen Nyi zla dbang mo of Lomanthang. The Prince entered Hemis as a novice and became known by the name of rGyal sras rin po che. His joining the monastery complicated the royal succession and a dispute arose. A Nyingmapa Lama from Tibet, Ka thog rig 'dzin tshe dbang nor bu visited Ladakh and managed to mediate and resolve the dispute among the King's

brothers. During the abbotship of rGyal sras rin po che Hemis monastery flourished. The number of monks rose and monastic discipline was enforced more strictly. Many of the silver stupas that are found in the monastery today were constructed in this period, as was the famous thanka of Padmasambhava. It is said that this thanka was made by the famous artist bZo pa pa le at the advice of rGyal sras rin po che. It is an embroidery of very fine Chinese brocades in various colours and is displayed only once every twelve years, in the year of the monkey.<sup>8</sup>

The fourth incarnation of Stagtsang Raspa was a yogin who remained in his native Tibet. The fifth incarnation, however, 'Jams dpal dge legs rgyal mtsan, visited Ladakh during the reign of Tse brtan rnam rgyal (1780-1790). He, too, was a yogin who spent most of his time in meditation at Got tsang and Hemis. As the historical record shows, with the exception of the first and third, the incarnations of Stagtsang Raspa were mostly yogins who devoted themselves to mediation. This left a vacuum for kings and queens to install their own princes and princesses on the throne, without great concern for the interests of the kingdom. Consequently, in 1842 Ladakh finally lost its freedom to Maharaja Gulab Singh (1792-1858), the founder of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. The King of Ladakh was deposed and a regent appointed in his place. However, the Dogras could not change the established religious set-up, and successive incarnations of Stagtsang Raspa continued to serve as foremost teachers to the Ladakhi royal family even after they lost political power. And while there are fourteen major gonpas in Ladakh and dozens of minor ones, all functioning under the supervision of Rinpoches of different sects, their status in accordance with the rules of the respective sect, the status of Stagtsang Raspa continues to be the highest by virtue of their position as foremost teachers of the successive kings.

6. Snellgrove, David L. and Tadeusz Skorupski. 1977. *The Cultural Heritage of Ladakh*. vol. 1. Delhi: Vikas.

7. Ramsay, H. 1890. *Western Tibet: a Practical Dictionary of the Language and Customs of the Districts Included in the Ladakh Wazarat*. Lahore: W. Ball.

8. It was in this year, on the tenth day of the fifth month that Padmasambhava was born in a lotus flower on a lake of milk in Dhana-kosh. In the eighth century AD rGyal sras rin po che also introduced the Hemis *tse bcu*, which is held every year to commemorate Padmasambhava's birth.