

# Exploring Mongol -Tibetan Relations: The Contribution of Buddhism

*Sharad K. Soni\* (India)*

## Abstract

Buddhism has long been a key factor in bringing the Mongols and Tibetans close so much so that the Tibetan form of Buddhism or Lamaism represents the Mongolian culture and way of life even today. This article, therefore, seeks to explore the contribution made by Buddhism to the development of relations between Mongols and Tibetans not only in historical perspective but also in contemporary times. Since the whole discussion on relations between the two sides revolves around highlighting the Buddhist factor it throws light on the roles played by Mongol Khans and Tibetan Buddhist monks apart from monasteries in spreading Buddhism among the Mongols. It also reflects on the decline of Buddhism in Mongolia during the Communist rule that resulted in the overall set back to the Mongol-Tibetan historico-cultural and religious ties. The post-Soviet period that saw the revival of Buddhism in Mongolia finally sums up the very essence of Mongol-Tibetan relations.

**Key words:** Mongolian Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism (Lamaism), The Dalai Lama, Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, Priest-Patron (*Choe-Yon*), State Preceptor (*kuo shih*), Phags-Pa Lama, Gelugpa, Sakyapa, Nyingmapa, Re-Buddhaization

\**Dr. Sharad K. Soni* is Assistant Professor of Mongolian Studies at the Centre for South, Central, Southeast Asian and Southwest Pacific Studies, School of International Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi (India). He can be contacted at [sharadksoni@gmail.com](mailto:sharadksoni@gmail.com)

This article is a revised version of a paper entitled "Some Reflections on Buddhist Factor in Relations between Tibetans and Mongols" presented at 4<sup>th</sup> International Conference "Buddhism and Nordland 2010", held on 23-25 September 2010 at Tallinn University, Tallinn, Estonia.

## Introduction

Mongolia shares close cultural linkages with Tibet and the other Himalayan regions, through centuries of missionary and trade exchanges across China. The common tradition shared by Mongolian Buddhism with Tibetan Buddhism dates back to the period when the Mongolian Khans dominated much of Asia, i.e., 13th century onwards. The fact that the Third Dalai Lama was a Mongolian, and Tibet was one of the very few places to survive the onslaught of Chinggis Khan itself tells the story of cordial relations between Mongols and Tibetans which found its expression due to the Buddhist factor. This has been attested by not only several scholars of Mongolian and Tibetan Studies but also the Buddhist masters and monks. Evidently, on 2 December 2010, addressing a group of Tibetan journalists in the small hilly town of Dharamsala (India), Telo Rinpoche, revered as Shadjin Lama (Head Lama) of the Russian Federation's Republic of Kalmykia, described the cultural and religious ties with Tibetans as a top priority.<sup>1</sup> While speaking about the millennia-old cultural and religious ties between Tibet and Mongolia, he also highlighted the ensuing decline caused by Communist rule in Russia and the recent revival of relations with the disintegration of the former USSR. In his words, "Our ties with Tibetans has been growing strongly as streams of monks and students are sent to study Buddhism and Tibetan medicine in monasteries and educational institutions of the Tibetan refugee community."<sup>2</sup>

Earlier in November 2007, Some 400 people, including media delegation, from Mongolia and the Mongol culture areas of Buryatiya, Kalmykia and Tuva gathered in Dharamsala to celebrate a five-day joint festival of Buddhists.<sup>3</sup> The basic idea behind holding this festival was to strengthen and relive the ancient historical, cultural and religious ties between Tibetans and the Mongol world as the Dalai Lama was admired for his contribution to keep the Buddhist culture and practice alive in these areas. This is further evident from the fact that the age-old religious and cultural ties between Tibet, Mongolia and the Buddhist regions of Russia received an extra edge following the eighth visit of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia that took place on 7-10 November 2011. Though this visit was pronounced as the religious affair, it was also associated with a significant event in the Mongolian Buddhist community. On 2 November 2011, the ninth

---

1 "Cultural ties with Tibetans is our priority, says Russian Buddhist leader", 5 December 2010, at <http://www.buddhistchannel.tv/index.php?id=42,9725,0,0,1,0>. The Republic of Kalmykia, a federal subject of the Russian Federation, is the only nation of Europe which is ethnically of Mongol origin with Buddhism as its national religion.

2 *Ibid.*

3 Phurbu Thinley, "First Mongolian and Russian Buddhists festival kick starts in Dharamsala", 7 November 2007, at <http://www.phayul.com/news/article.aspx?id=18498&article=First+Mongolian+and+Russian+Buddhists+festival+kick+starts+in+Dharamsala>

Jebsundamba Khutuktu was enthroned in the Mongolian capital Ulaanbaatar as the head of Gandantegchenlin monastery which is the Center for Mongolian Buddhists and the largest monastery in Mongolia.<sup>4</sup> It is to be recalled that the previous eighth Jebsundamba Khutuktu, who was known as the Bogd Gegeen or Bogd Khan, ruled Mongolia from 1911 following independence from China until the 1921 Mongol revolution. In 1924, the position of Bogd Khan was abolished after Mongolia achieved its statehood and declared itself a People's Republic. The official duties of the ninth Jebsundamba Khutuktu's are "to act as the spiritual head of Mongolian Buddhism and to continue with the preservation and revival of Mongolian customs and traditions."<sup>5</sup> As the spiritual head of the Mongolian Buddhism the ninth Bogd Khan is the equivalent of the Dalai Lama in Tibet, though his ranking is below in title.<sup>6</sup>

Given the fact that Buddhism in Mongolia has lately been gaining firm ground through several important activities, it needs to be examined in the context of Mongol-Tibetan relations. Therefore, the central idea of this article is to explore how Buddhism has contributed to develop Mongol-Tibetan relations for quite a long time now.

## Mongol-Tibetan Linkages in Historical Perspective

Buddhism as a common socio-religious factor in Mongol-Tibetan linkages is said to have arrived in Mongolia as early as the third century B.C. with silk traders travelling from India but later it "developed spiritual links with Buddhism in Tibet as both followed similar lineage".<sup>7</sup> The background story of the spread of Buddhism in Mongolia reveals that unlike Tibet where Buddhism arrived in the 4<sup>th</sup> century AD (367 AD),<sup>8</sup> it is difficult to precisely determine the exact date of the emergence of Buddhism in Mongolia. However, according to the Mongolian Buddhist tradition, the Mongols came into contact

---

4 The ninth Jebsundamba Khutuktu or Bogd Khan was born in Tibet in 1932 and was identified as the incarnation of the eighth Bogd Khan when he was just 4 years old. In 1961, he fled to India. In 1992, the Dalai Lama formally approved him as the incarnation of the eighth Bogd Khan and in 2010, he obtained Mongolian citizenship. See Julian Dierkes, "Dalai Lama on Surprise Visit to Mongolia", *Mongolia Today*, 8 November 2011, at <http://blogs.ubc.ca/mongolia/2011/dalai-lama-surprise-visit/>

5 Chris Devonshire-Ellis, "Mongolia Enthrones Its Dalai Lama", 5 December 2011, at <http://www.2point6billion.com/news/2011/12/05/mongolia-enthrones-its-dalai-lama-10484.html>

6 *Ibid.*

7 "Buddhism in Mongolia: Threat and Revival", at <http://www.4ui.com/eart/173eart2.htm>

8 It was the period of the reign of the 28th Tibetan King Lhatho Thori Nyantsan and the credit goes mainly to the Buddhist missionaries from *Liyul* (Khotan), the ancient cultural centre in Central Asia, now located in the Xinjiang Uighur Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China. However, it was only in the 7th century AD that Buddhism firmly established in Tibet.

with Buddhism in three different phases. The first phase was the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD when Buddhism spread among the Mongols through the Turkish and Uighurs of Central Asia.<sup>9</sup> The second phase that witnessed the spread of Buddhism took place during the period of the Great Mongol Empire and Chinggis Khan's successors. The final phase of the spread of Buddhism among the Mongols started with the visit of the third Dalai Lama, Sonam Gyatso in 1578. But, except in the last phase, all other Tibetan Buddhist monks in the court of Mongol Khans remained more as political representatives than as religious figures.<sup>10</sup>

The most spectacular period of Mongols' contact with Buddhism, particularly the Tibetan form of Buddhism (Lamaism) came in the second phase. In the beginning of the 13th century, Chinggis Khan conquered Tibet. As the leader of the biggest ever empire in the Eurasian history Chinggis Khan was known for his religious tolerance, having brought Nestorian Christians, Moslems, Manicheists and Shamans within his realm. Following his death when trouble occurred in Tibet, his grandson Godan Khan was sent to reconcile things. Although doing this with a trail of destruction he made friendship with Sakya (Sa skya) Pandita, the patriarch of the Sa skya sect of Tibetan Buddhism. In 1247, Godan Khan invited Sakya Pandita to his court, which was perhaps the first Mongol contact with central Tibet.<sup>11</sup> Since then the special Tibetan lama-patron relationship or "priest-patron" (*Choe-Yon*) relationship started.<sup>12</sup> However, it was during the reign of Godan's successor Khubilai Khan, the founder of the Mongol Yuan dynasty (1260-1368) that the larger wave of Buddhism made its entry to Mongolia from Tibet.<sup>13</sup> Buddhism received state patronage under Khubilai Khan who continued the "priest-patron" (*Choe-Yon*) relationship with Sakya Pandita's nephew Phags-pa Lama Lodoijalsan. Having converted himself to Buddhism as far back as in 1242, Khubilai rewarded this religion by placing the Tibetan Buddhist monk Phags-Pa Lama as the "State Preceptor" (*kuo shih*).<sup>14</sup> Significantly, from the Phags-Pa Lama he accepted the concept of a ruling duality

9 O. Nyamdavaa, *Mongolia-India Relations, 1947-1999*, New Delhi: Bhavana, 2003, pp.21-22.

10 Paul Hyer, "The Dalai Lamas and the Mongols", *The Tibet Journal*, vol.6, no.4, 1981, p.3.

11 Turnell V. Wylie, "The First Mongol Conquest of Tibet Reinterpreted", *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol. 37, no.1, 1977, p.105.

12 Sharad K. Soni and Reena Marwah, "Tibet as a factor impacting China studies in India," *Asian Ethnicity*, vol. 12, no.3, 2011, p. 288.

13 Sharad K. Soni, "The Siberian Republics of Tuva: Linkages with Mongolia", in Suchandna Chatterjee and others, eds., *Asiatic Russia: Partnerships and Communities in Eurasia*, Delhi: Shipra, 2009, p.110.

14 For more on Khubilai's religious policy and his relationship with Phags-Pa Lama, see Sh. Bira, "Qubilai Qa'an and Phags-Pa Lama," in Reuven Amitai-Preiss and David O. Morgan, eds., *The Mongol Empire and its Legacy*, Leiden: Brill, 1999, pp.240-249.

in which two spheres- the sacred and the secular, operated coterminously.<sup>15</sup> Though the concept of the dual principle ended with the downfall of the Yuan dynasty, its ideal was preserved in both Mongol and Tibetan literature.

The period that followed not only saw an interchange of scholars and monks between Mongols and Tibetans, but also it was the Mongol ruler Altan Khan who gave the title Dalai (meaning "ocean of wisdom") to the Tibetan Lama Sonam Gyatso in 1577, thus began the lineage of Dalai Lamas of which the present title-holder is the 14th. In fact, the landmark event in the mass conversion of Mongols to Tibetan Buddhism took place during this visit of the third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso to the Mongol court. And hence the period marked the beginning of a golden era in Mongolian Buddhism. After then, Buddhism became a prevalent religion in Mongolia, penetrating almost every sphere of Mongolian life. By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> century, with the two-fold support from the Mongol nobles and the Tibetan Lamas, the Mongols were completely converted to Buddhism. According to Lattimore, "like the Great Chinggis, Altan Khan wished to avoid the adoption of Chinese culture because it would not unify his marginal state but assimilate and subordinate it to China, Lamaism [Tibetan Buddhism] was just what he needed".<sup>16</sup> Later the great-grandson of Altan Khan was chosen to be an incarnation of the Dalai Lama, thus further strengthening the ties between the Mongols and Tibetan Buddhism.

The other significant point to be raised here is that although *Tishi* (Imperial Tutor) had been appointed from the Sakya School, there was no trace of the establishment of a monastic institution in the Mongol land by the Tibetan Buddhist monks. However, in 1586 the second visit of the third Dalai Lama Sonam Gyatso under the patronage of Abadai Khan of Khalkha Mongols changed the whole scenario as in 1587 he established the first Buddhist monastery in Mongolia called Erdene Zuu (Hundred Treasures) in the vicinity of the modern town of Kharkhorin and appointed a Tibetan monk Lama Yonten Gyatso as its representative who came to be known as Maidari Khutukhtu.<sup>17</sup> Within ten years, the third Dalai Lama's religious activities had firmly established Tibetan Buddhism among the Mongols. This gradual conversion of the warrior Mongols into peaceful ones was indeed attributed to the teachings of Tibetan Lamas. Further, the reincarnation of the fourth Dalai Lama Yonten Gyatso who was a Mongol prince (great grandson of Altan Khan) helped strengthen the religious activities between Tibetans and Mongols initiated by the third Dalai Lama. His rebirth as a Mongolian not only made the cultural bond more

15 While Khubilai himself retained the task of ruling the secular sphere, the position of ruler of the sacred sphere was given to the Phags-Pa Lama. See Larry Williams Moses, *The Political Role of Mongol Buddhism*, Bloomington: Indiana University, 1977, p.78.

16 Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China*, Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1988, p.85.

17 Ardy Verhaegen, *The Dalai Lamas: the Institution and its History*, New Delhi, 2002, p.53.

effective but also removed the doubts of Tibetanization of Mongols. However, after he declined to accept the Ming emperor's invitation to visit Nanjing and bless a Buddhist in 1615, the Emperor imposed the condition that the Dalai Lama's representative in Urga (modern Ulaanbaatar) should be reincarnated only in Tibet.<sup>18</sup> After his demise in 1617, the fifth Dalai Lama and the thirteenth Dalai Lama were the only major Tibetan Buddhist masters who had been acknowledged in terms of contribution made to the development of Mongol-Tibetan relations.

After a long gap since the visit of the third Dalai Lama, the visit of the thirteenth Dalai Lama to Mongolia in early 20th century was considered to be the most significant development in the Mongol-Tibetan relations. His visit was not the intentional but circumstances of the day led him to travel to Mongolia following Colonel Younghusband's military expedition of Lhasa in 1904. Yet, his stay in Urga was severely opposed by both the Manchu emperor as well as the living Buddha of Mongols, Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu as the latter remained feared of getting reduced his popularity. On the other side, the Manchu officials anticipated that Dalai Lama's stay might lead to the mass gathering of Mongols which could subsequently pave the way for the Pan-Mongolism sentiment. Finally, the Dalai Lama left Urga in 1906 and toured Kansu and eastern Qinghai in the Tibetans, Mongols and Mongour regions for more than two years. His stay in these regions reestablished the Mongol-Tibetan relations which had begun with the third Dalai Lama.

## Role of Mongol Buddhist Monasteries

Scholars like Sechin Jagchid have rightly observed that religion sometimes has a more powerful influence on human life than the law does have.<sup>19</sup> It is more so because the conversion of a nation to a certain religion implies that its people will accept the principles of that religion as basic ingredient to their pattern of life. It has been revealed that the Tibetan schools of Buddhism passionately continued their missionary work among the Mongols.<sup>20</sup> For many centuries, Buddhism in Mongolia flourished, excelling in art, philosophy and science. It became one of the most important decisive factors of

---

18 Helmut Hoffmann, *The Religions of Tibet*, Westport, Connecticut, 1979, p.174.

19 Sechin Jagchid, "Tibetan Buddhism, The Mongolian Religion", at [http://www.innermongolia.org/english/tibetan\\_buddhism.htm](http://www.innermongolia.org/english/tibetan_buddhism.htm)

20 Agata Bareja-Starzynska and Hanna Havnevik, "A Preliminary Study of Buddhism in Present-Day Mongolia", in Ole Brunn and Li Narangoa, eds., *Mongols from Country to City: Boundaries, Pastoralism and City Life in the Mongol Lands*, Copenhagen: NIAS Press, 2006, p.215.



Mongolian nomadic identity and also Buddhist monasteries turned into the unique cultural centres of the society. In both the Mongol and Tibetan societies, the monastery was the heart of ancient educational institutions. The monasticism was encouraged on large scale among both the Tibetans and Mongols and that too especially after the establishment of the institution of the Dalai Lama. Tibetan Buddhism remained the main religion and the most important religio-cultural links between the Tibetans and Mongols, though after the success of 1921 Mongol revolution under the direct impact of Bolshevik revolution, relations between the two sides came to a halt for more than seven decades.

Among several monastic institutions, the largest monastic institution in the Mongol history was Gandantegcheling monastery, founded by the fourth Jebtsundamba Khutuktu in 1838. Jebtsundamba lineage can be traced back to the renowned artist monk Zanabazar, Ondor Gegeen (1636-1723), who became the first Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, the spiritual head of Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia. While he was just at the age of four, the Dalai Lama as well as the Panchen Lama recognised him as 'living Buddha' as he was widely considered as the reincarnation of Tibetan Buddhist master Taranatha, and became the head of Gelugpa sect in Mongolia. The foundation of Erdene Zuu and Shankh monasteries in Mongolia were also attributed to the first Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu. The Mongolian script of *Soyombo* and Quadratic were invented by Zanabazar to study Buddhism through the Mongolian language itself. As the spiritual head of Mongolia and endowed with the supreme power of visualization he was considered as a highly learned master of various fields of knowledge relating to Buddhism. Indeed Tibetan Buddhism primarily developed among the Khalkha Mongols in the present day Mongolia (formerly Outer Mongolia) because of the extent of knowledge of Buddhism there and its political links, i.e., the prestige it had among the household of the First Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu, who belonged to the lineage of Chinggis Khan. Consequently, a unified system of leadership was established in the ecclesiastical world of Outer Mongolia, and that the dynamics of religious and political unification became the key factor in shaping the history of Mongolia.<sup>21</sup>

After the Jebtsundamba Khutuktu, the second most revered monk was Zayapandita (1642-1715) in the Mongolian Buddhist tradition. Zayapandita Luvsanperenlei (Lobsang Thinley) who founded the monastic city of Zayaiin khuree in Tsetserleg, Arkhangai aimag was instrumental in the peaceful settlement of internal rivalry between Galdan Boshigt (Oirat Mongol) and Ondor Gegeen, Zanabazar (Khalkha Mongol). Until recently the fifteenth Zayapandita Luwsandanzanpuljinjigmed (Lobsang Tenzin Phuljung

---

21 Sechin Jagchid, "Tibetan Buddhism, The Mongolian Religion".

Jigmed) was the abbot of the Gandantegcheling monastery, the main seat of Mongolian Buddhist worship and learning as well as the head of the Mongolian Buddhist Centre in Ulaanbaatar. Among the Mongolian Lamas, Damtsigdorj also known as Damtshig Dorjee (1781-1848) was much regarded for his scholastic grandeur who also founded his own monastery of Bragiriin khiid on the bank of the river Ong. As regards the spread of Buddhism in Trans-Baikal region, it was only in the eighteenth century that the strong influence of Buddhism started to be felt. The region included the present Russian Federation Republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva.

In Mongolia, monasteries kept quite big libraries where not only Buddhist texts, but also several books related to the traditional science and history were preserved. At the end of the 19th century there were 583 monasteries and temple complexes with 243 incarnate lamas living in the Mongol territories, including Inner Mongolia. The Buddhist lamas, at that time, were said to have controlled about 20 per cent of Mongolia's wealth.<sup>22</sup> Throughout the Buddhist history of Mongols the foremost ceremonial language in almost all Mongolian monasteries has been Tibetan. All the religious terminology and texts are based on Tibetan language and the same language is recited during the ceremonies even today. At this juncture it is also important to emphasize on the Tibetan Buddhist texts translated into Mongolian, which are stored in the monasteries located in Mongolia.<sup>23</sup> The Mongols had successfully undertaken the task of translating the Tibetan Buddhist texts much before these were begun to be translated into Western languages. Following are the list of some of the main Buddhist texts translated from Tibetan into Mongolian:

1. Shantideva's Engaging in Bodhisattva Behavior (Tibetan- *Byang-chub sems-dpa'i spyod-pa-la 'jug-pa*, *Sanskrit-Bodhisattvacaryavataara*) was the first Buddhist text translated from Tibetan into Mongolian. It was arranged by the Uighur translator Chokyi-ozar (*Chos-kyi 'od-zer*), during the reign of the Mongol Yuan Emperor Khaisan Külüg (1308-1311).
2. Tibetan Kangyur (*bKa'-'gyur*) - the collection of Buddha's words ;V began to be translated by the Mongols during the period of Altan Khan (1507-1582) and was finished in 1628-1629 under the patronage of the last Great Mongol Khan, Ligdan Khan (1603-1629).
3. Tibetan Tengyur (*bsTan-'gyur*)—V the collection of the Indian treatises—V was

22 "Religion in Mongolia", at <http://www.mongoluls.net/mongolian-religion/monrelihis.shtml>

23 For more details including guidelines for translation of Tibetan works as well as Mongolian translation of Buddhist texts, see Changkya Rolpay-dorjey, "Guidelines from the Mongolian Experience for Translating Tibetan Buddhist Texts", translated and introduced by Alexander Berzin, December 2006, at [http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approaching\\_buddhism/modern\\_adaptation/recommendations/buddhism\\_west/guidelines\\_from\\_mongolian\\_experienc.html](http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/archives/approaching_buddhism/modern_adaptation/recommendations/buddhism_west/guidelines_from_mongolian_experienc.html)



translated into Mongolian between 1742 and 1749 under the patronage of the Fourth Manchu Qing Emperor, Qianlong (1735-1796) and the super vision of his Tibetanized Mongolian tutor from Amdo, the Second Changkya Khutukhtu, Rolpay-dorje (1717-1786).

4. As part of the translation project, Changkya Khutukhtu also supervised the compilation of a large Tibetan-Mongolian lexicon, *A Lexicon Resource for the Learned* (*Dag-yig mkhas-pa'i 'byung-gnas*), which was completed in 1741-1742. The Tibetan-Mongolian lexicon contains eleven chapters, listing technical terms used in texts concerning (i) prajnaparamita (ii) madhyamaka (iii) abhidharma (iv) vinaya (v) Indian tenet systems (vi) tantra (vii) logic (viii) Sanskrit grammar (ix) architecture and artisanship (x) medicine and (xi) archaicisms and their modern equivalents.

## Buddhism in Mongolia during and after Soviet Period

The turn of the twentieth century witnessed rapid changes in Eurasia- first the downfall of the Manchu-Qing dynasty in China and later the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, which put the entire region in such a situation that also posed serious challenges to the very existence of the Mongols as a nation, and hence raised concerns about the fate of the religion. The fact that by this time Tibetan Buddhism had already mingled with traditional Mongolian culture and had become an integral part of the Mongolian national character further made the issue more complex. What was witnessed was that following the death of the Eighth Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu and the founding of the Mongolian People's Republic (MPR), a new era began in the country through the so-called socialist revolution.

As such Buddhism saw its worst set back during the period of Soviet dominance, despite its being "a highly developed system of philosophy,"<sup>24</sup> which used to be so important in the life of the Mongols that in 1918 there were an estimated 115,000 monks.<sup>25</sup> Even in 1937 the number of monks was calculated at 110,000 with 700 monasteries remained operated. Yet, Buddhism has had a long history in Mongolia with ups and downs at different points of time, which also reminds us about the tragic fact that during the late 1930s nearly all Buddhist monasteries and temples were destroyed or secularized and a large number of monks were killed on accusation of being counter

24 Lokesh Chandra, "Buddhism in Mongolia", *Himalayan and Central Asian Studies*, vol.5, no.1, January-March 2001, p.4.

25 Ivan M. Maiskii, *Mongoliya Nakanune Revolutsii* [Mongolia on the Eve of the Revolution], Moscow, 1959, p. 247.

revolutionary elements. According to Dashpurev and Soni, within two years of worst ever purges carried out between 1937 and 1939 under the leadership of Kh. Choibalsan, who was popularly known as Little Stalin, almost 12,000 Buddhist monks were killed in Mongolia.<sup>26</sup> However, during the Second World War, following changes in the Soviet policy against religion, the Mongolian government too allowed the revival of Buddhism but under strict official guidelines. Tibet, on the other side, saw its own problem with China particularly from the 1950s onwards. All this contributed much to the decline of Mongol-Tibetan religio-cultural ties, which saw the restoration only after Mongolia embarked on democratization process after the Soviet collapse.

In the post-Soviet period, as part of the democratic reforms Mongolia adopted a new Constitution in 1992 in which freedom of religion has been guaranteed, and the separation of religious and secular institutions has taken place. The Constitution deals with the emblems of national identity, and that these national emblems, which consist of the State Emblem, the Banner, the Flag, and the Seal, are described in terms that refer both to the traditional religion as well as Buddhism. Buddhism, thus, saw the first instance of its revival under the government norms, as it is considered to be of prime importance in the Constitution so far as socio-cultural and religious life of the Mongols is concerned. This followed the restoration of nearly 200 monasteries and temples throughout the country. Several thousand monks are registered now, and there are ongoing teaching activities mostly carried out by the Mongolian and Tibetan teachers trained in India, Nepal and elsewhere.<sup>27</sup> More specifically, over 3000 monks are now registered and teaching activities are being carried out, mostly by the Tibetan teachers from the Tibetan exile community in India.<sup>28</sup> Besides, not only rebuilding of monasteries but also construction of new ones can be seen everywhere in the countryside. In this direction International Buddhist institutions have helped considerably, particularly in disbursing the necessary financial support to revive the Buddhist traditions. On the other hand, there are instances that Mongolian people constantly donate money for the restoration of old monasteries, temples, and stupas, like Darhan temple, apart from building such new establishments throughout the country.<sup>29</sup>

Today Buddhism appears to be in the heart of every aspect of Mongolian culture and the revival of this great heritage is warranted for the future peace and happiness of

26 See D. Dashpurev and S. K. Soni, *Reign of Terror in Mongolia, 1920-1990*, New Delhi: South Asian Publishers, 1992, p. 42.

27 For more details see Ts Batbayar and Sharad K. Soni, *Modern Mongolia: A Concise History*, New Delhi: Pentagon Press, 2007, 3rd revd. edn., p.139.

28 See "Introduction to Mongolia" at <http://www.jetsundhampa.com/pages/mongolia.html>

29 Batbayar and Soni, p.140.

Mongolia. Even the cult of Chinggis Khan has its association with Buddhism because "Chinggis Khan was recognized by Mongolian Buddhists as the reincarnation of the *Bodhisattva Vajrapani*."<sup>30</sup> This is evident from the fact that after the expansion of this cult, "Chinggis Khan was worshipped as a Chakravartin, the Buddhist universal ruler."<sup>31</sup> A unique feature of Buddhism in Mongolia is reflected in the incorporation of new elements particularly since 1990, i.e., the establishment of nunneries, the involvement of monks and nuns in social welfare, and the lay involvement in the leadership of the monasteries.<sup>32</sup> Besides, the Gelugpa order of Tibetan Buddhism which has been dominating in Mongolia over centuries has been continuing as the main tradition. Yet, attempts are being made to revive Sakyapa and Nyingmapa orders as well. As such Buddhism once again started playing a key role in relations between Mongols and Tibetans.

## Conclusion

Though the contribution of Buddhism to the development of Mongol-Tibetan relations has been enormous, one may ask the key question as to why the Mongols, at the peak of their power, adopted Tibetan Buddhism as their religious faith. The answer essentially lies in historical and cultural factors, as Sechin Jegchid sums up:

*The Mongolian Khan's choice of this religion [Buddhism] seems to have been based on cultural similarities between the Mongols and the Tibetans, and their mutual distance-geographical and cultural-from the Chinese. Both Mongolia and Tibet are high plateaus of Inner Asia, and their open steppes and cold, arid climate make them well-suited to nomadism. On account of similarities in their geographic circumstances, both Tibet and Mongolia developed a similar cultural style: Nomadic pastoralism. It was thus, easier for the Mongols to mingle with semi-nomadic Tibetans than with purely agricultural Chinese, who were far different in their social and cultural institutions.*<sup>33</sup>

It is clear from the foregoing discussions that the spread of Buddhism in the Mongol region took place in three phases. And it was during the third phase that the teachings

---

30 Bareja-Starzynska and Havnevik, p.225.

31 *Ibid*.

32 *Ibid*, p.229.

33 Sechin Jagchid, "Tibetan Buddhism, The Mongolian Religion".

of the Gelugpa order became dominant among the Mongols. The new doctrine has had positive influence on the masses in terms of religion and culture leading to the Mongol monks to go for study in Tibet. They used Tibetan language in ceremonies, rituals, etc., and there is hardly any difference between the Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhism. The Lamaism (Tibetan Buddhism) has, therefore, always been the key aspect of linking all the Mongols together, even the Mongol ethnic groups living in diasporas in the Russian Republics of Buryatia, Kalmykia and Tuva. With the foundation of monasteries and missionaries mostly by the Gelugpa order, Tibetan Buddhism in Mongolia reached at its height. But the establishment of the Mongolian People's Republic in 1924 gave way to the socialist revolution which diminished the monastic institutions as well as the concept of Pan-Mongolism. What Rupen observes is that "both religious leaders- the Dalai Lama in Tibet and the Jebtsundamba Khutukhtu in Mongolia became political symbols of independence, and their fate became the political fate of their countries."<sup>34</sup>

However, beginning late 1970s until 2006 the seven times visits of the fourteenth Dalai Lama to Mongolia provided a fresh impetus to revitalization of Buddhism on the one hand and on the other, renewal of historico-cultural and religious bonding between Mongols and Tibetans. More recently, after a gap of almost five years the eighth visit of the Dalai Lama to Mongolia took place in 2011 which was described as a "purely religious" and the one that characterized the very essence of Mongol-Tibetan relations. To quote the Dalai Lama: "Mongolian culture is a culture with a close relationship to Tibetan religion. The Mongols have, over centuries, believed in Buddhism. It does not matter if religion is cherished or not: what matters is to defend these customs, traditions, culture and art."<sup>35</sup> In a nutshell, it can be concluded that with the unique historical process of re-Buddhaization that has been taking place since the 1990s together with the modernization of Mongolia along the road of democracy and market economy, Buddhism appears to be making its worthy contribution to not only reformulating and rebuilding the national identity of the Mongolian people but also bringing the Mongols and Tibetans more close.

---

34 Robert A. Rupen, "Mongolia, Tibet, and Buddhism or a Tale of two Roerichs", in Alex McKay, ed., *The History of Tibet, Vol. III, The Modern Period: 1895-1959: The Encounter with Modernity*, London: Routledge Curzon, 2003, p.471.

35 See Udo B. Barkmann, "The Revival of Lamaism in Mongolia", *Central Asian Survey*, vol.16, no. 1, 1997, p.77.