

SIGLINDE DIETZ: Die buddhistische Briefliteratur Indiens. (Asiatische Forschungen, Vol.84). Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1984. XV, 590 pages, DM 220. -

The author has succeeded in presenting us with a branch of Indian literature never before treated in such detail. The content of 12 letters is described and 9 letters never published before are critically edited, translated and carefully annotated.

The work is divided into three distinct parts: an intelligent, general introduction to this type of literature, with special reference to the letters edited; the edition and translation of the letters; and, finally, a part with several indices: list of citations, index of Buddhist terms, index of Tibetan and Sanskrit terms and a list of Indian and Tibetan names.

The edition of the letters spans a space of time from the 2nd to the 12th century A.D. As far as one knows, all letters - except the śiṣyalekha of Candragomin - have been lost in Sanskrit, but are preserved in Tibetan translation within the four Tanjur editions. As the dates of translation show, several texts were translated during the earliest period since the spread of Buddhism to Tibet, but most of them at a later date (10th to 12th century). This indicates that this type of literature was very popular in Tibet and also flourished in India at this time.

The author discusses every letter as regards the sender, addressee, the historical context, the circumstances of writing, content, sources of quotations, and the translator.

The introduction to the letter as literary genre is exemplary. The author gives an account of the development of Indian letter writing and its aim. Structure and content show the particularities of a letter (lekha) as compared with the Parikathā (religious discourse) and Nirdeśa (elucidation): although addressed to a private person the letters (lekha) are not private letters, but circulars. Most of them are addressed to a king who is responsible for their circulation. The themes of the letters are Buddhistic, the admonitions with regard to religion, morality and politics are adapted to the average person. Every hearer or reader is personally addressed. Therefore, the language contains many verb forms such as hortative, gerundive, rhetorical question, polite entreaty, etc. Every letter concludes with the admonition to accept the instructions, and with good wishes. Apart from fulfilling a didactic function the letter thus constitutes a special type of literature: the non-canonical spread of Buddhist doctrines.

An excellent sourcebook for this hitherto neglected branch of Indian literature, of relevance also for historical and political research.

Dieter Back