Report for the International Conference and Exhibition on

ATISA AND CULTURAL RENAISSANCE
16th – 18th January 2013

The three day event was organised by the IGNCA on Atisa Dipankara Jnanasri, the last among the great Indian teachers who went abroad for dissemination of the teachings of the Buddha. He is an important figure to understand the global vision of India and mind ground of Tibet which has been conditioned by him for last nine centuries and will continue to be the leading light for the people who have taken up Buddhism in a big way.

The event was inaugurated by Prof. Dinesh Singh, VC, Delhi University, as the Chief Guest, HH Taisitupa Rimpoche, Founder and Head of Palpung Sherabling monastery, HP, was invited as the guest of honor, keynote address was delivered by Prof. Kaie Mochizuki from Japan, a renowned professor at Faculty of Buddhism, Minobusan University, Dr (Mrs) Kapila Vatsyayan, a renowned international scholar and founder Trustee of the IGNCA addressed the gathering, Ms. Dipali Khanna, Member Secretary, IGNCA welcomed the guests and Prof. Shashibala, coordinator of the conference and curator of the exhibition presented the opening remarks.

Ms. Dipali Khanna, the supporting force behind the project, said that rekindling the memories of Atisa and rededicating his message is not important just for the nation but for the whole humanity. It is more relevant today than ever before. HH Taisitupa Rimpoche said that the great master is the guiding light for humanity. He congratulated the IGNCA for organising the conference, inspiring many to be Dipankaras of future spreading the essence of Buddhism, the timeless teachings. Prof. Kaie Mochizuki gave the keynote address. Dr. Kapila Vatsyayan highly appreciated the search for scholars, invited from all parts of the world to explore and reinvestigate the message that is valuable for the whole humanity. She said that human instrumentality can be the carrier of values and wisdom in moments of political turmoil. It teaches the contemporary world a lesson that deeper levels of communication are beyond diplomacy. Talking about the significance of the event she said that Tibet has preserved the lost Indian heritage, through texts and history. Identifying the role of Atisa is an indicator also of the search for knowledge and crossing borders.

Prof. Dinesh Singh VC, Delhi University held that through this conference the message of the Buddha preserved in Tibetan tradition will reaffirm faith, renew our resolve and find the clear path for well being and hope that the message the Buddha will be reborn. It had declined with our great universities. When the universities declined, India went into decline. The challenge for the modern universities is to implant the message into the minds of the young, ensuring that the message of the great followers of the Buddha like Atisa, has to be kept alive. The broken moral law has to be reestablished through such conferences.

Undergraduates and post graduates from the Universities were invited to imbibe in them the message of Atisa. The conference has opened up new avenues for the Delhi University to work in collaboration with organizations like the IGNCA, to play a role in reaffirming our faith by inspiring our young minds.

It was said by Prof. Susanne von der Heide, that the conference was unique in terms of content and intent. Unlike usual conferences organized by universities or research organizations, it had an interdisciplinary approach. Researching the search and spread of the message of Atisa, scholars, high ranking monks, spiritual leaders, archeologists, art historians, journalists, novelists, explorers, film makers, young minds from universities and people who are hungry for knowledge were invited to participate. Giving a feed back about the event she said according to her experience only IGNCA with this kind of vision and projects can do what is the need of the day.

Thirty research papers were presented during the academic sessions by sixteen scholars from abroad and fourteen from India. The sessions were scheduled in chronological and philosophical order. The first two sessions were dedicated to the life, mission, ideals and journeys of Atisa. During the third the scholars spoke on historical documents valuable for tracing the history of Atisa and Vikramasila University. Atisa had gone to Indonesia to study under the then world renowned Buddhist teacher Dharmakirti, stayed there for twelve years and carried several important theories, traditions and styles to Tibet. So the fourth session was dedicated to Indonesia, similarities in stupa symbolism and depictions of Atisa in Tibetan art. Scholarly presentations, analyzing critically and discussing the texts written or translated by Atisa were done during three following sessions: Kadampa and Madhyamic philosophy, his method of consecrating the images, Tara Ritual, Tantric leaneages of Atisa, Lokottaragama-satptaka-vidhi, Charya-sangraha-pradipa etc.. Some research papers were presented on the surviving legacy of Atisa through varied sources, documented from museums in the US, newly discovered caves in Dunhuang, China, Tibetan collections from Mongolia and archeological findings from Tholing, where Atisa was given the first royal reception. The high ranking monks and scholars spoke on the contribution of Atisa to modern Tibetan traditions, his role in reviving the Dharma, how he led Tibet on the path of awakening, his contribution to the world as timeless guiding light and his doctrines and practices. A large number of people joined as observer participants.

The valedictory session was chaired by an eminent scholar Prof. Lokesh Chandra. HH Taisitupa Rimpoche and Reverent Lochen Tulku were invited as guests of honor. Prof. Lokesh Chandra said that organizing a conference on Atisa means celebration of global vision of India, the grand ambience of its mind and sharing of ideas at international level. The conference reminds us of the role of Gupta kings in dissemination of Buddhism. The conference is a tribute to Atisa who united Tibet as a state when it was fragmented politically and was on wrong path spiritually. He conditioned Tibet for last nine centuries. Prof. Lokesh Chandra further talked about the contribution of Atisa to the world. He gave a vision for comprehensive understanding of the role of sutras in history and told how they can be a leading light in a big way, today when we have a quest for moral values. HH Taisitupa Rimpoche blessed all the scholars and all those who were actively working and supporting the conference.

An exhibition on the life and legacy of Atisa, curated by Prof. Shashibala was an attraction for the people coming from different types of backgrounds, as it was the first time people had an opportunity to know about the Indian teacher who has been revered abroad for around a thousand years and forgotten in India. It was based on documentation done by explorers, archeologists, art historians and geographers from many countries: Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Nepal, remote areas of Tibet and museums. Fifteen students from JNU were appointed as scholar guides and trained to guide the visitors to the exhibition. Their performance was excellent. Twenty students

from different departments of Delhi University joined as volunteers. They assisted during the conference and also had a chance to listen to the presentations and discussions, and interact with the scholars.

Demonstration of the unique arts of making butter sculptures, offerings and sand mandalas by the monks from Palpung Sherabling monastery in Himachal Pradesh attracted Delhiites in large numbers. The dance performance on Atisa and Twenty One Taras was highly appreciated by the audience. Documentary film, combining history, geography, arts, architecture and the spiritual path of Atisa, by Christel Pilz was an excellent presentation. Another film on remote areas of Tibet, especially Tholing, screened in the evening was contributed by a Chinese geographer, Sunmin.

Press coverage by most of the leading daily papers of Delhi like Times of India, Hindustan Times, Deccan Herald, Business Standard, the Hindu etc. and several websites, is an indicator of the grand success of the conference, exhibition, demonstration of arts, and cultural performances.

Many suggestions came from the participating scholars for future conferences, organizing trips to the path of Atisa, and making documentary films for Indian TV, spreading the message of loving kindness, peace and compassion. In the words of the leader of the Chinese delegation as she spoke during closing ceremony: this is not the closing but beginning of a new era in terms of Indo-Chinese cultural relations. It has opened up new horizons for researchers, academicians and thinkers. We are receiving requests for research papers from many who were keen to join but could not. The exhibition can be sent to several places in India and abroad. The IGNCA may make a documentary on the great teacher as there are people who have documented in Tibet and have agreed to contribute their still and video recordings to the IGNCA. The scholars from Dunhuang Academy showed their keen interest in academic exchanges and cooperation. A scholar from Indonesia is keen to organize a follow up conference there.