The Sacred Letters of Tibet
TIBET IS another arena of confluence of two ancient cultures. Tibet adopted government organization and social standards from China. But its spiritual guidance came from Buddhism. Devanagari script was adapted to the Tibetan language and Sanskrit scriptures were translated into Tibetan, the oldest of the Sino-Tibetan family of languages.

Tibetan tantrism developed along its own unique path. At least four scripts came into use. Its written form is so special that the script came to be called the only script that was beautiful whether written or printed. The seed-syllables and the mystic monograms are not only potent with spiritual energy but also calligraphers delight.

‘Om mani padme hum’, the mantra of liberation, not only reverberates every conceivable religious space, but decorates in writing in myriad forms. What follows is a glimpse of this esoteric dimension of writing.
Tibet adopted government organisation, social standards, ink and paper from China but looked toward India for spiritual guidance.

Tibet was inspired by Buddhism and adapted Sanskrit for scriptures.
The Indian Contribution

Both the original script, Brahmi, and the religion, Buddhism, travelled from India and took root in Tibet, eventually to evolve as mystic mantras and tantric Buddhism respectively.
Tibetan, a Sino-Tibetan language, now spoken by about 6 million people, was not a written language till Buddhism was introduced to Tibet in the 7th century.
To propagate Buddhism and to read its scriptures in Sanskrit, a script based on Devanagari was devised.
Variants of Script

Over the period a number of styles came into use.
Below is written ‘Om Mani Padme Ham’, the most important mantra, in the main styles

- **Uchen**, a book script for Buddhist texts, often carved in wood for printing
- **Lentsa**, a special type of script used for seed-syllables and mystic monograms
- **Drutsa**, a decorative script for title pages of books and for documents;
- **Ume**, a cursive hand script
The Alphabet

It consists of 30 consonants and 4 vowels for writing the dialect and 6 extra letters for writing Sanskrit loan words.

The Tibetan script is syllabic, that is, each letter is a consonant plus a vowel.
The Alphabet
(only Uchen shown)

Vowels

For Sanskrit words

Consonants
Writing Medium

Initially manuscripts were written on special paper or birch bark. The paper was coated with black ink and the text written in gold or silver ink.
Later the text was engraved on wooden blocks, and an impression was taken on paper.
Carving and printing came to attain such a perfection that Tibetan script is considered to be the only script of the East that is beautiful whether printed or written.
Sacred mantra

Tibetans considered that every letter is a sacred symbol worthy of veneration.

A written mantra is as potent as a spoken one.
The most important mantra is *'Om Mani Padme Ham'.*

The universal chant of this mantra of liberation resonates through the Tibetan mountains, villages and temples.
The breakthrough of seeing the absolute in the relative beyond time, space and individuality
Sacred mantra

'Om Mani Padme Ham'
Written and placed inside prayer wheels held in hand
Sacred mantra
In Prayer Wheels

'Om Mani Padme Ham'
written and placed inside
large prayer wheels
Prayer Wheels

'Om Mani Padme Ham'
Sacred Monograms

Sacred monograms are unique to Tibetan tantrism. These are compound letters made in the form of a single character, a distinct calligraphic feat. These are composed in Lentsa style.
Sacred Monograms

‘Om Mani Padme Ham’ composed as a monogram
Sacred Monogram

All-powerful ten

All-powerful Ten is the best known monogram. It comprises ten letters represented in a stylized version of Lentsa.
All-powerful Ten

The symbol consists of an ornamental ring of fire, Circle of Wisdom, then the main symbol which combines seven individual syllables, on top are a crescent, a disc and a curved shape. Each symbolises one of the ten perfections (paramitas).
All-powerful Ten - Identified

Anusvara

Tilakam Visarga

ha'm
ma
va
ya

ksha
la
ra
This is another page from the glorious history of sacred calligraphy that portrays vitality. We may wonder whether Buddhism was unconsciously seeking eternal beauty in the Letter, while consciously following the Spirit.