

# Notes & Topics

## OBITUARY : ATHING LIBING

Athing Sonam Tabden of Libing passed away on 12 May 1969 in Gangtok, He was a Founder Member of the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology; he was a member of the General Council since November 1962.

Sonam Tobden was born 73 years ago at Libing (near Gangtok) to an ancient family who had migrated from Tsang to Denzong nearly two and a half centuries ago. The family held an esteemed place in the history of Sikkim. The famous Tokhang Donyer Namgyal, known as Pagla Dewan, was the younger brother of Sonam Tobden's grand-father 'Englishmen who met him (Pagla Dewan) on the whole did not take to him, though they acknowledged his undoubted qualities, He was certainly the most able and forceful figure in Sikkim Politics, and until his death in 1888, even though he was permanently exiled to Tibet in 1861, his influence in Sikkim remained strong'. (Alastair Lamb) Hooker's *Himalayan Journals* record the reasons for British antipathy to Pagla Dewan's family who however continued in Denjong. Sonam Tobden chose modern English schooling and worked as an officer in Sikkim Government between 1923 and 1925. Meanwhile Sir Charles Bell had noticed his abilities in speaking English as well as different dialects of Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet and had urged upon the highest authorities in British Government for Sonam Tobden's appointment as Translator-Interpreter notwithstanding the ban on the family. It is said that Sonam Tobden entered the British service on his own condition "that he would not provide any intelligence on Sikkim to them". Sonam Tobden joined as a junior non-gazetted hand in 1925 and retired in 1959 as an honoured member of the Indian Foreign Service; in 1947 he opted into the service of India. It is said that in serving the several governments he never transgressed from the path of loyalty to either. His death was mourned by friends both in Sikkim and India.

The Namgyal Institute of Tibetology was closed for the day. His services to this Institute both in organizational and academic spheres are known in connected circles. Considerably before the establishment of this Institute (1958), Sonam Tobden was known for his mastery of diverse Tibetan dialects, his on-the-spot knowledge of Tibet (Central, Western, South-Eastern), Bhutan and Nepal besides his own Sikkim, and his encyclopaedic information about the monasteries and ancient families of Central Tibet. Sir Basil Gould and Mr. Hugh Richardson found him indispensable

in compiling the famous *Tibetan-English Wordbook*. The Tibetan Government found him a good guide about modern knowledge and modern world and honoured him with the title of Depon (1942).

I add my personal tribute. I had known him intimately for more than thirteen years and had enjoyed his affection and esteem. All through these years the Athing was patient and kind in sharing with me his knowledge, learning and wisdom in my efforts to read the history of Tibet and Tibetan-speaking countries.

Nirmal C. Sinha.

### SINO-TIBETAN INROADS INTO NORTH INDIA

This number of the *Bulletin* carries two articles covering the subject of inroads into north India from the Trans-Himalayas. The two articles reached us in a chronological sequence and were booked for printing accordingly. If the two articles contradict or corroborate each other on any point, this is entirely a matter concerning the contributors and the editors of the *Bulletin* have no opinion on this.

For a non-specialist of the *Bulletin*, I add my individual opinion about the veracity and authenticity of Chinese annals. The Han notions of (i) China as the centre of the world and (ii) non-Han peoples as barbarians will be found in a precise form in C. P. Fitzgerald : *The Chinese View of their Place in the World* (Chatham House Essay 1965). Regarding the Chinese usage "tribute" for any presents or communications from any non-Han visitors like the merchants of Tashkent, the Lamas of Tibet or the ambassador of United Kingdom, J. K. Fairbank and S. Y. Teng: "On the Ching Tributary System" in *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* (1941) may be seen. The references to "tribute bearers" and "barbarian ambassador" in Chinese annals are not admitted in modern terms by the Sinologists today.

Nirmal C. Sinha.