

THE UNIVERSAL MAN

— Nirmal C. Sinha

Alexander Csoma de Koros was born in 1784. This year India and Hungary celebrate the Bi-Centenary of Csoma de Koros with same pride, same warmth and same zeal. And scholars and intellectuals of many countries share the sentiments of Indian and Hungarian scholars and intellectuals in remembering Csoma de Koros. Why?

Was Csoma de Koros a Hungarian or was he an Indian? Or was Csoma a stateless academician? Was Csoma a Buddhist or a Christian? Answers to these questions may take much longer space than my humble homage can demand. For a short sketch of the life and work of Csoma we reprint in this issue of **Bulletin of Tibetology** a paper written by a Calcutta undergraduate, at the age of 19, in the **Presidency College Magazine**, nearly 60 years ago. This is with the knowledge and permission of the author who was my senior by several years in the same College. I esteem this article, written in 1926 by an undergraduate, as the best introduction to Csoma in English language. I admit my weakness for memories of my College and I admit in clear terms below that my knowledge of Csoma began with my knowledge of Calcutta in or around 1840.

About 1840, an adventurous youth from a middle class family of Central Bengal (Nadia District) came to settle in the northern suburbs of Calcutta. The family was impoverished first due to the East India Company's land tenures and later due to the trade policy sanctified by the Charter Act of 1833. The family had collateral relations with Kaliprasanna Singha, the well-known progressive of Calcutta, and had some contacts with the House of Tagores. Eminent men of letters and leading figures in education and culture of Calcutta were thus not unknown to the impoverished migrants to East India Company's metropolis.

Born 70 years after Csoma passed away in Darjeeling (1842), I cherish the foggy memories of the fabulous life of a saintly stranger in Calcutta, cloistered in the library of the "Society", as the Asiatic Society was known at the time of our family's emigration to the metropolis. I was hardly ten when I saw the portrait of Csoma in some books preserved in the house and also heard about Csoma and other 'Calcutta greats' from Satyendranath Tagore (poet's elder brother) and his very learned wife when visiting them with my grand parents. My childhood memories were sharpened and activated when a decade later I read Hirendranath Mukerjee's article in the College Magazine. Tibetology was a far cry then and a subject as mystic as occult to me. I remembered Csoma then as I do remember him still today as much greater than a great scholar or a pioneer academician.

II

I have no claims to call myself a Tibetologist. I happen to be a student of Indian history as recovered from the sands and snows of Inner Asia. I do not consider myself competent to speak or write at length about Csoma's pioneer work in the subject now called Tibetology. I would prefer to focus attention on certain features of Csoma's work in which he landed himself by mere accident. Buddhism or Tibetan learning dragged Csoma away from his programmed pilgrimage to reach the homeland of Magyars and found in him the pioneer exponent for the world outside.

I just sum up here the principal and pioneer services of Csoma in the field of Oriental learning, particularly Buddhism and Tibetan literature. Csoma was the first non-Tibetan scholar to attempt a systematic probe into the vast canon, Kanjur and Tanjur. His analysis of the contents of Kanjur, even though incomplete, was the model for later investigators. Csoma's **Dictionary** (Tibetan-English) was the first dictionary of Tibetan language in modern sense and guided not only Jaschke, Sarat Das and other modern non-Tibetan scholars but was also consulted with profit and respect by modern Tibetan scholars like Geshe Chhoda. Csoma's **Grammar** of Tibetan language was also a pioneer venture, still in demand like his **Dictionary**. Csoma's special notices of the diverse contents of Tibetan literature, e.g. medicine and geography to mention only two, revealed the locked treasures of a hitherto obscure literature. Above all, and what is prized by Indian intelligentsia since 1840-50, Csoma discovered the lost treasures of Sanskrit learning preserved in Tibetan literature.

Rajendra Lal Mitra, Sarat Chandra Das, Hara Prasad Shastri and Rahul Sarkityayan followed the trail blazed by Csoma. Renaissance in India, under British imperialism, owed no doubt considerably to the discovery of our glorious past in India and abroad. As Gurudev Tagore and Pandit Nehru owned in clear terms, India's glorious past was preserved for posterity in Tibet, and the recovery of this past was an inspiration for our future. Csoma, the Hungarian become an Indian, is gratefully remembered in India as a great pioneer in recovering our glorious past.

III

The memory of Csoma de Koros in the old families of Calcutta was that of a shy scholar who was at home with Fakirs, Lamas and Pandits. His blue cloak was as much like the Armenian priest's as like the Ladakhi monk's. Csoma was almost the pet in the scholarly circles of East India Company's metropolis. A good number of European

adventurers had come, lived and worked in Calcutta in the first half of the nineteenth century. Nearly all were interested in some material gain or political objectives. Csoma was the most noted exception. The natives of Calcutta knew well that the strange stranger was not the agent of the East India Company or of any other company or concern. Political, racial or religious considerations never entered into his life and thought. Here was indeed the image of "universal man" as in the vision of the Vedic seers and as in the imagination of the great sons of Calcutta from Rammohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore.

In conclusion, I would describe Csoma de Koros as the Buddhist par excellence. His love and dedication for Buddhist learning are facts. It is also a fact that denominationally he was not a Buddhist. Consciously or unconsciously, Csoma had complied with Buddha's command to disown the Atman. A shy scholar with no iota of pride in the great work he was doing Csoma had liquidated the ego as Buddha would have expected of an Arhat. No Lama or Thera could do better.

[**Life and Works of Alexander Csoma de Koros** by Theodore Duka (published in 1885) as well as the **Dictionary and Grammar** by Alexander Csoma de Koros (published in 1834) are now available in photo-mechanic reproductions from New Delhi.]