

ALEXANDER CSOMA DE KÖRÖS
AND CONTEMPORARY LADAKH WITH SPECIAL
REFERENCE TO ZANSKAR

NAWANG TSERING SHAKSPO (Leh)

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös was born in Transylvania in the year 1784. After twenty years of study at the college of Nagyenyed and then at Göttingen University, having command over thirteen languages, he set out in search of the ancient homeland of the Hungarians, Yugurs¹ on November 28, 1819. Finally, after travelling all the way from Europe to Asia, Csoma arrived at the ancient trade centre, Leh, the chief town of Ladakh on June 9, 1822, on his way to Yarkend. But here when he saw no hope of proceeding any further, he decided to go back to Srinagar and find a new route to his destination. Accordingly after spending a couple of days in Leh, Csoma returned to Srinagar on the same old road. Travelling for several days from Leh towards Srinagar, on July 16, 1822 at the village called Drass, he met William Moorcroft, a high official of the British Raj, who was on his way to Leh. When Moorcroft met Csoma, it seems he discussed with him the purpose of his visit and so on. After listening to Csoma, it appears that Moorcroft advised him to study the literature of Tibet, which according to him could help him to attain his objective. (Moorcroft also seems to have agreed to supply him with certain primary materials relating to the Tibetan alphabet which, at the time, was very rare for an European to find in his language. Besides, Moorcroft proposed to help Csoma in finding a suitable teacher and to give him a letter of introduction so that Csoma would not have to waste time in Leh.)

At that time it appears that Csoma's knowledge of Tibetan language was almost nothing. But nonetheless Csoma accepted Moorcroft's offer. So in the end after obtaining the necessary letters of introduction, Csoma left for Srinagar and Moorcroft to Leh. The last meeting of Csoma with William

¹ There are two places named Yugur. One is in the Sinkiang region of China. In the past in Ladakh we used to get felt mattresses made in Yugur. Yugur is also the ancient name of the Tibetan province of Guge in Western Tibet. Sengey Namgial of Ladakh ruled Guge in the 16th century and he has been described as Sengey Namgial, the ruler of Yugur in the autobiography of the 5th Dalai Lama the great.

For this information I am greatly indebted to Shri Tashi Rabgias.

Moorcroft took place in Srinagar on March 2, 1823. Csoma therefore left for Ladakh and arrived at Leh on June 1, 1823, along with the introductory note of Moorcroft in the name of Khalon Tsewang Tondup, the Prime Minister of Ladakh. When Csoma arrived for the second time in Leh, the Khalon and others received him well, gave him a passport, and about eight pounds of tea. Besides, in deference to the wishes of William Moorcroft, they wrote a letter of recommendation for Csoma to Lama Sangey Phuntsog of Zangla.

Now travelling from Leh along the central road popularly called, 'Junglam', Csoma reached his destination, Zangla on June 26, 1823 to learn the language and literature of Tibet. To get to Zangla, a small kingdom situated southwest of Leh, took nine days. In Zangla he met the teacher proposed by Mr. Moorcroft and the Khalon Tsewang Tondup and received royal patronage, allowing him to occupy a room in the palace. In this way his real task began. At the outset, Csoma thought that in about a year he would be able to collect enough material for a vocabulary to prepare a dictionary of the language of the people of Tibet and Ladakh, which in fact was literally the same. But when he started learning it in depth, Csoma found that the language and literature of the people of this part of the world was much richer than he had originally thought. He was thus left with no alternative, except to make an indepth study of the immense and rich literature forgetting his other plans.

Regarding Csoma's teacher Lama Sangey Phuntsog, very little documentary information is available. But from what we understand through interviews as well as reliable sources, he was an *amchi*, a local medical doctor by profession, enjoying a good reputation among the people of Zanskar and the upper class families (Skutaks) of Leh. Besides, he was a scholar having been to Tibet, and having had a chance to study the canons and works of other Tibetan scholars on various branches of knowledge. Besides, he himself was a well known writer of the time, having a wood carving script. It is said that some of his writings are still preserved in certain places in Zanskar. Regarding his family background Kaga Sonam Wangchok Lonpo of Karsha has said that Lama Sangey had houses and property at Tangkar, Steta and at Karsha. About his race, it is said that he was a decendent of an upper class family, popularly called Skutak in Ladakh. These facts are also revealed through his writings, currently preserved at Karsha and Steta. It is also said that Lama Sangey Phuntsog was an astrologer, possessing considerable literature on the subject. About his horoscope chart or Thanka which he used in his life-time it is thought that it came into the hands of an incarnation of the late Lama Staktsang Raspa of Hemis and later it passed into the hands of a Ladakhi astrologer and is said to have been preserved in Leh by an astrologer. It is also said that when Lama Sangey was staying at a place called Tangkar, belonging to Zongkhul Gonpa, he came in contact with Lama Kunga Chosleg, then the abbot of Zongkhul Gonpa, and became his disciple and the supporter

of the Gonpa. Around this time, Alexander Csoma de Kőrös visited Lama Kunga Chosleg, by the name of Sikander Beg.

On the other hand, it is said that Csoma's preference of Zangla was also due to the fact that the Zangla palace had had, from a very early period, a glorious history, having given birth to certain scholar Lamas, who not only became famous in Ladakh, but also received distinction in Tibet as well. In this connection, the names of two outstanding brother monks, belonging to the royal house of Zangla, Grupkhangpa dGelegs rGyatso and Drungpa rTagphugpa are worth mentioning. They were born around the 16th century and their biographies are available. However, they spent their whole life in Tibet and their status in the Lineage of the Gelugpa school is quite high. Besides, there are also some interesting stories about the Zangla palace where Csoma lived during his stay in Zangla. It is said that the palace was built on a rock which resembled an eagle, and inside the palace were two to three holy footprints of worship. Besides, the palace had a large treasure of thankas, statues and books. All these factors made Csoma stay in the Zangla palace for a long time.

Later Csoma visited Zongkhul Gonpa, the seat of great meditation teachers of the past. Here Csoma seems to have spent considerably longer time learning more about the religion under the aegis of Lama Kunga Chosleg, the abbot of the Gonpa. It was the place where Lama Kunga has written a book in reply, to Csoma's questions which appeared under the title "The Questions of European Skandar". In this work the Lama had dealt with three subjects: formation of the world, its existence and its ultimate destruction. I have, however, not been able to go through the book as yet. But when I was in Zanskar in the year 1983, I saw a copy of the book in the possession of Kaga Sonam Wangchok Lonpo of Karsha. Unfortunately until very recently the book was unknown to Ladakhi scholars. It was S. S. Gergan, who first mentioned this work in his history book saying that the original copy of the book was missing from the Gonpa, but he has since admitted being in possession of a copy of the book.

It is said that like his predecessors, Lama Kunga Chosleg also had a wife and two sons. Otherwise, in Ladakh an abbot having a family was quite unusual. But about Lama Kunga Chosleg, it is said that he became the abbot of the Gonpa by lineage, starting from his grandfather Ating Dupchen Ngawang Tsering (1717—1794), who was a great meditation guru and a scholar lama.

(About Dupchen Ngawang Tsering it is said that he was a poet of repute and wrote several books. Later his son Lama Jadpa Dorje, who became the abbot of Zongkhul Gonpa after his father, wrote the biography of Dupchen Ngawang Tsering and collected his compositions. Lama Jadpa Dorje too was a scholar besides being a reputed artist. His works survive in many Gonpas of Zanskar and in Stakna Gonpa of Leh. He was also an astrologer and master

of religion, and even today his writings can be found in Zanskar and Leh. After Lama Jadpa Dorje, his son Lama Kunga Chosleg became the abbot of Zongkhul and carried many sorts of renovation works alongwith his father Lama Jadpa Dorje. Regarding Lama Jadpa Dorje and Lama Kunga Chosleg it is said that near Sani they built a Gonpa called, "Gonchung Shila Tse", which is still in existence.)

As both Lama Sangey Phuntsog and Lama Kunga Chosleg were close friends of Csoma, it is probable that Csoma consulted both scholars to gain knowledge on various aspects of religion, medicine, astrology, astronomy and other branches of knowledge. According to Kaga Sodnam Wangchhook Karsha Lonpo, while Csoma and Lama Sangey Phuntsog were residing at Steta, they must have discussed topics like medicine and astrology, because as far as medicine was concerned, Lama Sangey Phuntsog appears to have been an authority on the subject. But in the field of religion, no one was more scholarly than Lama Kunga Chosleg, the abbot of Zongkhul Gonpa.

About Lama Kunga Chosleg, it is said that he visited various Buddhist holy places in India and Nepal during a winter. Unfortunately, during the winter of his pilgrimages to various holy places, a smallpox epidemic spread in Zanskar taking a large toll. It is also mentioned that in that epidemic, Kunga Chosleg lost his two sons. When Lama Kunga returned to Zanskar and heard the news he was greathy upset and apprehended a break in their lineage in respect to the succession of the Zongkhul abbotship. So there was no alternative except to pray for their salvation and to build Chortens in the area.

About Lama Kunga Chosleg, it is also said that beside being a scholar lama, he had superb handwriting, especially the writing of U-Chen, the capital letters. Besides, he had a good knowledge of the Chorten art which he developed throughout Ladakh. He is said to have written many texts, and one of his writings preserved in Phe village in Zanskar, says that once in Zanskar many people lost their lives due to famine.

In a later period of his life Lama Kunga Chosleg was on pilgrimage at Karja Phagspa, the present Lahul, and had disciples throughout Ladakh and Karja. Among his disciples the foremost was Lama Norboo of Karja. It is recorded that this Lama did some renovation works at Zongkhul Gonpa.

Thus, not much information is available about Csoma's stay in Zanskar. But it appears to us that he never got tired with that sort of life. However, about his stay at Zangla it has been said "that he lived in an apartment nine feet square, sitting on a sheepskin cloak to protect himself from the freezing cold, reading the Tibetan canon."

After staying around a year in Zangla, Csoma and his teacher Lama Sangey Phuntsog decided to shift their residence from Zangla to a more convenient place, which suited both of them. They felt a change was necessary after working so hard at one place. Later they decided to go to Kulu and Csoma

left Zangla after hearing that the Lama would follow him. Unfortunately, because of some problem with a businessman, the Lama could not leave Zanskar. However, Csoma was optimistic that the Lama Sangey would join him soon. Csoma thought this because of the Lama's family relationship with the chief of Lahul. But the Lama never turned up.

In the absence of the Lama, the real difficulties in completing the research project began. Since he saw no hope of the Lama coming he had to think of alternatives. He visited various Gonpas of the nearby areas in search of a suitable person who could work with him to give the final shape to the collected works. But here all his efforts were in vain and finally he had to reach the conclusion that he must travel back to Zanskar to find his teacher. He then set out for Zanskar carrying all the collected works, alongwith a helper. After travelling for several days from Kulu, finally Csoma arrived in Phugtal in Zanskar via Lahul. After reaching at Phugtal, Csoma decided to stay at Phugtal itself instead of going to Zangla again. Here Csoma had to make a great effort to get the Lama. And, after much effort the Lama finally got back in contact with him. After that they worked very hard to put the materials together in order as well as in adding new materials. In this way after working for more than a year Csoma succeeded in giving final shape to his long and demanding task, the Tibetan-English Dictionary, as well as a grammar of the Tibetan language.

The great Hungarian Csoma de Kőrös did good service to the promotion of Tibetan studies both in the Indian Himalayas and in the Western world. Therefore, with the passing of time, as more interest grows in the field of Tibetan Studies, the contributions of Csoma will become increasingly significant.