

CSOMA DE KOROS - A DEDICATED LIFE

—Hirendranath Mukerjee

About a century and a quarter ago, three young Hungarian fellow-students had solemnly vowed to devote their lives to the task of penetrating Central Asia in quest of the origin of their nation. Only one of them kept his word and lived and died for his vow. This was Csoma de Koros whose name has not received the recognition it so preeminently deserves, since few of those who have benefited from his life's unremitting toil have had, it is so sad to tell, even a word of thanks for the great master. His life opened up a vast new field for human inquiry. As Sir William Hunter has said: "Csoma, single-handed did more than the armies of Ochterlony to pierce the Himalayas and to reveal to Europe what lay behind the mountain-wall". His was a dedicated life—if ever there was one. Read even a bare summary of his life, and you cannot help the impression that here was a man who lived a life consecrated, never calculating, looking neither to the right nor to the left, but always fired, in the search for the knowledge, with the noble resolve "to strive to seek, to find and not to yield".

Alexander Csoma was born in the beautiful Transylvanian village of Koros in April, 1784. His family though poor, belonged to the *sekler* or military nobles who for many centuries had acted as the bulwark of South - Eastern Hungary against Turkish inroads. At the Gymnasium or Collegiate School of Nagyenyed, where he received his education, he had to cleanse the lecture-rooms in return for his board. He finished his Gymnasium course at 23 and was elected Lecturer of Poetry. Eight long years went by, before he could find leisure to pass his "examen rigorosum" qualifying him to continue his studies at a foreign University. He went to Gottingen where he studied English and Arabic. He was now offered tempting emoluments in the shape, for instance, of a first - class chair in his college; but he had not forgotten his vow. Turning a deaf ear to the rich offers he received at home, he started for the East in November, 1819. A certain Count, standing at his gate, saw the wayfarer pass by "clad in a thin, yellow, Nonkin dress, with a stick in his hand and a small bundle". His rigorous educational career had taught him to do without money. The athletic build of his body enabled him to bear severe labour. He had a sweet patience which endeared him to his Tibetan and Indian teachers. That was all the equipment he took with him in his quest. The next twenty-three years of his life he was to spend as a poor solitary wanderer in fulfilment of his vow.

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The task he had dreamt to accomplish was, however, foredoomed to failure. He believed the Hungarians of Europe to be of the same family as the Hungars, Yungars or Yugars of Mongolia. His original premise was thus a set of old errors; it is his eternal glory that he arrived at quite a different set of new truths. By his self-forgetting labours during the long disappointment of the search for the home of his race, he laid the foundations of a new department of human knowledge.

His journey was tedious and round about process. He reached Kabul after he had walked on foot for more than two years, in January, 1822. Near the Cashmere frontier, he met the English explorer, Moorcroft, and the two became friends, Moorcroft advised him to learn Tibetan and gave him his copy of Father Giorgi's "Alphabetum Tibetanum" - a voluminous, but extremely poor, compilation. Csoma seized it with glee. New realms of learning began to glimmer before his eyes and he determined to penetrate that land of mystery. The two friends parted, never again to meet. From June 1823 to October 1824, he studied Tibetan with a Lama in the monastery of Zangla. "In winter the doors were blocked with snow and the thermometer ranged below zero. For four months, Csoma sat with his Lama in a cell nine feet square, neither of them daring to stir out, with no light after dark, with only the ground to sleep on, and the bare walls of the building as their sole defence against the deadly cold."

In November 1824, he reached the British cantonment of Subathu, with a gist of the 330 volumes he had mastered and the beginnings of a Tibetan dictionary in his bundle. Lord Amherst, when he heard the stranger's account granted him a monthly allowance of Rs 50/- Csoma silently gave up his search for the home of his race in Mongolia, in order to fulfil his obligations to the Indian Government. He undertook to prepare a Tibetan grammar, a Tibetan English dictionary and a succinct account of Tibetan literature and history.

Again he went on foot into Tibet, where his former friend and teacher patiently wrote down for him many thousand words in Tibetan, with a list of all the gods, heroes, constellations, minerals, animals and plants. But his patience slowly wore off and he quietly left his strange pupil. Csoma, brokenhearted, had to come back with his work only half finished. To add to his disappointment, a Tibetan dictionary was in the meanwhile published from Serampur. The work was derived from a catalogue of words left by an unknown Catholic missionary. But the compilation was woefully unsifted and unsorted. Lord Amherst who had realised Csoma's worth, decided to trust the baffled scholar to the end and the Government of India, after waiting for six months of anxious suspense for Csoma, granted him a monthly allowance to finish his work.

Csoma reached the monastery of Kanum about the autumn of 1827, Dr. Gerard, the earliest medical explorer of the Himalayas, visited him there in 1829 and has left a touching picture of the hermit-scholar. As Sir William Hunter has remarked, "In addition to his physical sufferings, he had to wrestle with those spiritual demons of self-distrust, the bitter sense of the world's neglect and the paralysing uncertainty as to the value of his labours, which have eaten the heart of the solitary worker in all ages and in all lands". He returned to India in 1831, with a train of coolies bearing his precious manuscripts. Lord William Bentinck warmly received him, doubled then quadrupled, his meagre allowance, provided him with a room in the Asiatic Society's buildings and ungrudgingly paid from public coffers all the expenses for the publication of his work.

In January, 1834, his Dictionary and Grammar of the Tibetan language were published. These two books embody in them most valuable and permanent contributions to human knowledge. "They are", says Jaschke who, in the words of Hunter, has placed the capstone on the edifice "of which Csoma laid the foundation, "the work of an original investigator and the fruit of almost unparalleled determination and patience". A new and original work has now been placed before scholars in place of the old-world medley of Giorgi's "Alphabetum Tibetanum" and the illarranged vocabulary published from Serampur. Csoma ransacked the vast treasury of classical Tibetan and he reduced the language to a dictionary and a grammar which made it the rich property of all mankind.

In his numerous and valuable essays, he furnished a brilliant account of Tibetan literature. In 1834, the Asiatic Society made him an Honorary Member-a very rare honour in those days. For three years from now, he devoted himself to Sanskrit and its dialects, studying in Calcutta or travelling by boat or on foot through north-eastern Bengal. His monthly expenses came to Rs. 3/- for a servant and Rs. 4/- for all other outlay. He was now a finished Sanskrit scholar and served as Sub-librarian to the Asiatic Society. In the last stage of his life, Csoma placed his four boxes of books around him and it was within this little quadrangle that he sat, laboured and slept. But during all these years, he never for a moment forgot that the study of Tibetan did not form part of his original plan, which was to search out the origin of the Hungarians in Central Asia. He catalogued manuscripts and did much solid work for the Asiatic Society. But he could not rest before he fulfilled his vow and was silently preparing for the final enterprise.

In 1842, he was fifty eight. Like Ulysses, he felt how dull it was to pause. His life's work was still undone. Always in his mind

emerged the memory of that boysh vow, which had remained the central motive of his mature years and was to be the theme of his last conversation before death. Now he started for Central Asia, the land of his dreams. In February, 1842, he wrote a grateful letter of farewell to the Asiatic Society, leaving all his books, papers and savings at its disposal. He travelled on foot and reached Darjeeling on March 24, stricken with fever. The political agent, Archibald Campbell was a skilled physician and an enthusiastic oriental student. The pilgrim scholar was, however, never to reach Lhasa. No amount of medical assistance proved to be of any avail, and he died very peacefully at day-break on April 11, 1842, without a groan or a struggle.

His meagre savings were sent to his beloved country. But Csoma's bequest was for all the world - a contribution which may be called in the words of Ruskin, "a heap of treasure that no moth can corrupt and even our traitorship cannot sully". Far from the din and bustle of a warring world, the master lies in peaceful repose on a mighty slope of the Himalayas.

Here's the top-peak; the multitude below
Live, for they can, there:
This man decided not to live but know!
Bury this man there?
Here, here's his place, where meteors shoot,
clouds form,
Lightnings are loosened,
Stars come and go! Let joy break with the storm,
Peace let the dew send!
Lofty designs must close in like effects,
Loftily lying,
Leave him-still loftier than the world suspects,
Living and dying.