Notes & Topics

OBITUARY: ATING LERING

Ating Sonam Tsebden of Liting 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 Tsebden was born 73 years ago at Liting (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 Tshang Namgyal, known as Paga Dewan, was the younger brother of Sonam Tsebden’s grandfather. "Eng. Alexander, who met him (Paga Dewan) on the whole did not take to him, though he 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, Hookers Himalayan Journals)

Back to modern English schooling and worked as an officer in Sikkim Government between 1923 and 1928. 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 Tsebden’s appointment as Translator-Interpreter notwithstanding the ban on the family. It is said that Sonam Tsebden entered the British service on his own condition "that he would not provide any intelligence on Sikkim to them". Sonam Tsebden joined as a junior non-patented hand in 1925 and retired in 1950 as an honorary member of the Indian Foreign Service, in 1947 he opted into the service of India. It is said that in serving 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 the institute both in organizational and academic spheres are known in connected circles. Considerably before the establishment of this Institute (1959), Sonam Tsebden 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 Govern-
ment found him a good guide about modern knowledge and modern
world and honoured him with the title of Deson (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 Tshering 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 1955). regard-
ing the Chinese usage “tribute” for visits of 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
Studies (1941) may be seen. The references to “tribute bearers” and
“barbarian ambassador” in Chinese annals are not admitted in modern
times by the Sinologists today.

Nirmal C. Sinha,

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