Alexander Cosma de Koros was born in 1784. This year India and Hungary celebrate the Bi-Centenary of Cosma 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 Cosma de Koros. Why?

Was Cosma de Koros a Hungarian or was he an Indian? Or was Cosma a statesman or academician? Was Cosma 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 Cosma we reprint in this issue of Bulletin of Tibetology a paper written by a Calcutta undergraduate, at the age of 15, 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 Cosma in English language. I admit my weakness for his memoirs of my College and I admit in clear terms below that my knowledge of Cosma 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 Cosma passed away in Darjeeling (1842), I cherish the fugitive memories of the fabulous life of a saintly stranger in Calcutta, cloistered in the library of the Society", in 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 Cosma in some books preserved in the house and also heard about Cosma and other "Calcutta greats" from Satyendranath Tagore (poet’s elder brother) and his very kind and dear wife when visiting them with my grand parents. My childhood memories were sharpened and activated when a decade later I read Hirondath Mukerjee’s article in the College Magazine. Tibetology was a far cry then and a subject as mystic as occult to me. I remixed Cosma 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 sand and snows of Inner Asia. I do not consider myself competent to speak or write at length about Gomma’s pioneer work in the subject now called Tibetology. I would prefer to focus attention on certain features of Gomma’s work in which he landed himself by mere accident. Buddhism or Tibetan learning dragged Gomma away from his program to pilgrimage to reach the homeland of Magars and found in him the pioneer exponent for the world outside.

I must sum up here the principal and pioneer services of Gomma in the field of Oriental learning, particularly Buddhism and Tibetan literature. Gomma 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. Gomma’s Dictionary (Tibetan-English) was the first dictionary of Tibetan language in modern sense and guided not only Jhabte, Sarat Das and other modern non-Tibetan scholars but was also consulted with profit and respect by modern Tibetan scholars like Geshe Chhodra. Gomma’s Grammar of Tibetan language was also a pioneer venture, still in demand like his Dictionary. Gomma’s special notices of the diverse contents of Tibetan literature, e.g. medicine and geography to mention only two, revealed the hitherto obscure literature. Above all, and what is prized by Indian intellectuals since 1840s, Gomma discovered the lost treasures of Sanskrit learning preserved in Tibetan literature.

Rajendra Lal Mitra, Sarat Chandra Das, Hara Prasad Shastri and Rahul Sarkar tried followed the trail blazed by Gomma. 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 Nibba owned in clear terms, India’s glorious past was preserved for posteriority in Tibet, and the recovery of this past was an inspiration for our future. Gomma, the Hungarian became an Indian, is gratefully remembered in India as a great pioneer in recovering our glorious past.

III

The memory of Gomma de Korna in the old families of Calcutta was that of a shy scholar who was at home with Kulirs, Lamas and Pandits. His blue cloak was as much like the Armenian priest’s as like the Ladsa-khi monk’s. Gomma 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. Cosma 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 Rammohun Roy to Rabindranath Tagore.

In conclusion, I would describe Cosma 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, Cosma 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 Cosma had liquidated the ego as Buddha would have expected of an Arhat. No Lama or Thera could do better.

[Life and Works of Alexander Cosma de Koros by Theodore Duka (published in 1885) as well as the Dictionary and Grammar by Alexander Cosma de Koros (published in 1844) are now available in photo-mechanical reproductions from New Delhi.]