



Language as a Bridge to Dharma: Csoma de Kőrös's Linguistic Contributions to Buddhist Studies

Pooja Nehra, Research Scholar

Faculty of Fine Arts, Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Dr. Vidhi Khandelwal, Faculty of Fine Arts

Swami Vivekanand Subharti University, Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India

Meerut, Uttar Pradesh, India, Email: drvidhik@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines the pioneering linguistic contributions of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), the Hungarian pilgrim-scholar regarded as the “Father of Tibetan Studies.” Through his Tibetan–English Dictionary (1834), Grammar of the Tibetan Language (1834), and cataloguing of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, Csoma provided the first systematic tools for accessing Tibetan Buddhist texts. His works functioned as bridges between East and West, enabling Buddhist philosophy to enter Western scholarship and shaping the development of modern Indology and Buddhist studies. Employing a historical-textual methodology, the study evaluates Csoma’s motivations, methods, and limitations within the intellectual context of the nineteenth century, while comparing his approach to later developments in Buddhist translation and linguistics. The discussion highlights Csoma’s enduring legacy as both a scholar and a “Hungarian Bodhisattva,” emphasizing his role in globalizing Buddhist thought and offering lessons for contemporary translation studies, comparative linguistics, and interreligious dialogue.

Keywords: Alexander Csoma de Kőrös; Tibetan Buddhism; Linguistics; Translation Studies; Dharma Transmission; Buddhist Philology; Comparative Religion; Intercultural Dialogue

1. Introduction

Language has always been central to the preservation and transmission of Buddhist teachings. The Buddha himself emphasized the importance of communicating the Dharma in the language of the people, thereby ensuring accessibility and continuity across diverse cultures and geographies. Over centuries, Buddhist scriptures were translated into Pali, Sanskrit, Tibetan, and Chinese, each translation shaping the interpretation and practice of the Dharma. In particular, the Tibetan canon became a repository of Buddhist philosophy, psychology, and ritual practice, yet its linguistic complexity limited access for non-Tibetan scholars.

By the early nineteenth century, Western scholarship on Buddhism was still in its infancy. While scattered reports from missionaries and travelers provided glimpses into Tibetan Buddhism, there was no systematic linguistic framework to engage with its canonical texts. The absence of dictionaries, grammars, and catalogues posed a significant challenge for scholars seeking to understand Buddhist thought directly from primary sources.



It was in this context that **Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842)** emerged as a pioneering figure. His meticulous study of the Tibetan language, including the compilation of a Tibetan English dictionary and grammar, marked a turning point in Buddhist studies. By constructing linguistic tools, Csoma not only made the Tibetan Buddhist canon accessible to Western scholarship but also laid the foundation for modern Buddhist philology and comparative religion. His work represents language as a true bridge to the Dharma linking East and West, tradition and modernity, spirituality and scholarship.

2. Objectives

This study seeks to analyze the significance of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös's pioneering work in the field of Buddhist studies by focusing on his linguistic contributions. The specific objectives are:

- a. **To examine Csoma's linguistic contributions** – through his compilation of Tibetan–English dictionaries, grammar, and textual catalogues that laid the foundation for systematic Tibetan studies.
- b. **To evaluate how his work made Buddhist texts accessible** – by providing the first structured linguistic tools that opened the Tibetan Buddhist canon to Western scholars and facilitated cross-cultural understanding of the Dharma.
- c. **To reflect on his legacy for modern Buddhist studies** – highlighting his enduring role as a bridge between Eastern wisdom and Western scholarship, and assessing the continuing relevance of his methodology in contemporary Buddhist philology and translation studies.

3. Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions:

- a. What were the key linguistic contributions of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös to the study of Tibetan Buddhism?
- b. In what ways did Csoma's dictionaries, grammar, and catalogues make Buddhist texts more accessible to scholars and practitioners beyond Tibet?
- c. How has Csoma's work influenced the development of modern Buddhist studies, translation practices, and cross-cultural scholarship?
- d. What limitations existed in Csoma's approach, and how can they be addressed through contemporary research methodologies?

4. Hypothesis

This research is based on the hypothesis that **Alexander Csoma de Kőrös's linguistic works served as a vital bridge to Buddhist Dharma by providing the first systematic tools for accessing Tibetan Buddhist texts, thereby shaping the foundations of modern Buddhist studies and influencing the global understanding of Buddhism.**

5. Literature Review

The literature on Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and his role in Buddhist studies spans biography, linguistics, philology, comparative religion, and translation studies. While his pioneering efforts are acknowledged, the scholarship is fragmented, leaving unexplored dimensions of his contributions.

5.1 Previous Scholarship on Csoma de Kőrös- The earliest accounts of Csoma's work appeared in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (1834–1836), where he published his Tibetan–English Dictionary and Grammar, along with an analysis of Tibetan annals. Elek Baktay's seminal biography, *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös: The Hungarian Bodhisattva*, portrays him as a scholar-saint, emphasizing the spiritual dimension of his pursuits. Later studies, such as Uray-Köhlmi's *Biography and Bibliography* (1984), provide more academic assessments of his work, while Balogh (2008) highlights



Csoma's legacy within the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. Éva Verhás (2014) further situates him as the founder of Tibetan studies, bridging European Orientalist scholarship with Tibetan Buddhist traditions.

5.2 Works on Buddhist Translation and Linguistics- Buddhism's spread has always depended on translation. From Sanskrit and Pali to Chinese and Tibetan, each translation shaped interpretation. Scholars such as José Cabezón and Roger Jackson, in *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*, emphasize how linguistic tools define textual accessibility. Similarly, Apple (2014) situates translation as both linguistic and cultural mediation in Buddhist studies. Csoma's Tibetan–English dictionary and grammar, though limited, marked the first systematic effort to engage with Tibetan canonical texts. Donald Lopez critiques Orientalist scholarship but acknowledges Csoma's unique position as an ascetic, independent scholar outside colonial projects. Harrison's annotated translations (1990) and Skorupski's work on Buddhist translators (2002) provide frameworks for understanding the complexities Csoma faced in rendering Buddhist concepts.

5.3 Position of Csoma in Comparative Religious Studies- Beyond philology, Csoma's cataloguing of Tibetan Buddhist texts offered European scholars their first reliable map of the canon, influencing comparative studies of Buddhism, Hinduism, and Christianity. Richard Gethin notes that textual traditions remain central to Buddhist understanding, and Csoma enabled direct access to Tibetan sources. His life also marks an early step toward interreligious dialogue in Europe, demonstrating the potential of linguistic study to foster mutual understanding across traditions.

5.4 Gaps in Existing Research- Despite extensive biographical and philological studies, interdisciplinary gaps remain. First, Csoma's linguistic works are rarely examined in relation to Buddhist hermeneutics or contemporary translation theory. Second, his divergence from Orientalist norms is underexplored. Third, his relevance to modern debates on translation, digitization, and intercultural communication is often overlooked. Finally, little attention has been paid to how his personal meditative practice may have informed his academic work.

This review demonstrates that while Csoma is celebrated as a pioneer, there is a need for deeper interdisciplinary analysis that recognizes his work as both a scholarly and spiritual bridge to the Dharma.

6. Methodology

The present research adopts a **historical and textual methodology** to analyze the linguistic contributions of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and to assess his role in making Buddhist texts accessible to modern scholarship.

6.1 Historical and Textual Analysis

The study situates Csoma within the broader intellectual and cultural context of the early nineteenth century, when Western encounters with Tibetan Buddhism were still rare and poorly understood. Primary historical sources, such as Csoma's *Essay towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English* (1834) and his *Grammar of the Tibetan Language* (1834), form the central focus of analysis. These are examined alongside his other contributions published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, which provide insight into his philological methods and his understanding of Tibetan Buddhist texts.

6.2 Study of Csoma's Dictionaries, Grammars, and Translations

A critical review of Csoma's lexicographical and grammatical works is undertaken to evaluate their accuracy, limitations, and utility in the field of Buddhist studies. The Tibetan–English dictionary and grammar are analyzed not only as linguistic tools but also as cultural bridges that enabled access to



Tibetan canonical literature for non-Tibetan scholars. The study compares Csoma's translations and textual catalogues with later assessments by scholars such as Uray-Kóhalmi (1984) and Verhás (2014), who evaluated both the strengths and shortcomings of his approach.

6.3 Comparative Analysis with Later Buddhist Linguists

Finally, Csoma's methodology is compared with subsequent developments in Buddhist linguistics and translation studies. Works such as those of Cabezón and Jackson on Tibetan literary genres, and Apple's studies on Buddhist translation, provide a framework for assessing how Csoma's early efforts anticipated, diverged from, or influenced later scholarly practices. By employing a comparative lens, the research highlights the enduring significance of Csoma's contributions in establishing Buddhist philology while also identifying areas where modern methods surpass his pioneering but limited resources.

This threefold methodology historical analysis, textual study, and comparative evaluation ensures that Csoma's work is contextualized, critically assessed, and situated within the larger trajectory of Buddhist linguistic scholarship.

7. Discussion

7.1 Csoma de Kőrös: Life and Vision

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös (1784–1842), often celebrated as the “Hungarian Bodhisattva,” was a pioneering figure whose life embodied a unique synthesis of spiritual aspiration and scholarly rigor. Born in Kőrös, Hungary, into modest circumstances, Csoma pursued an education at the University of Göttingen, where he studied Oriental languages, including Arabic and Persian. His early fascination with the East reflected both the Enlightenment's intellectual curiosity and the Romantic longing for origins and authenticity. Yet for Csoma, the pursuit of knowledge was inseparable from a spiritual quest: he believed that the roots of the Hungarian people lay in Asia, and this conviction drove him on his lifelong pilgrimage eastward.

In 1820, Csoma embarked on his journey through Asia, eventually reaching Ladakh in the Western Himalayas. There, he immersed himself in Tibetan culture and monastic learning, living under austere conditions, often relying on meager food and support from monasteries. His ascetic lifestyle marked by minimal possessions, rigorous self-discipline, and immersion in Buddhist texts echoed the qualities of a renunciant or pilgrim, rather than those of a mere philologist. His motivations transcended the purely academic: Csoma sought not only to uncover the linguistic and historical connections of his homeland but also to enter deeply into the spiritual and philosophical heritage of Buddhism.

The *Bodhisattva* title, later bestowed upon him posthumously by the Japanese Buddhist Society in 1933, highlights this dual identity. Unlike many European Orientalists, whose interest in Asian traditions was mediated by colonial or missionary agendas, Csoma's work emerged from a personal dedication to learning, a humility in relation to his Tibetan teachers, and a recognition of the Dharma's universal significance. His vision was thus both scholarly and spiritual: to create a linguistic bridge that would open Buddhist wisdom to the wider world.

7.2 Linguistic Tools for Buddhism

7.2.1 Tibetan–English Dictionary



Csoma's most enduring contribution to Buddhist studies was his *Essay towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English*, published in Calcutta in 1834. This monumental work represented the first systematic attempt to render Tibetan vocabulary accessible to Western scholars. Organized with painstaking detail, the dictionary not only provided definitions but also cross-references to Buddhist canonical terms, thus functioning as both a linguistic and doctrinal tool.

At the time of its publication, Western knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism was fragmentary and heavily reliant on hearsay. Csoma's dictionary changed this landscape by offering a structured gateway into Tibetan texts. Although later scholars, such as Sarat Chandra Das and subsequent Tibetanists, criticized its limitations such as incomplete coverage, occasional inaccuracies, and reliance on a restricted set of manuscripts the dictionary nevertheless established a foundation upon which future scholarship was built. Its historical importance lies not in perfection but in innovation: Csoma transformed Tibetan from an inaccessible script into a language with lexicographical order, making possible the comparative study of Buddhist doctrines across traditions.

7.2.2 Grammar Works

Alongside his dictionary, Csoma produced *Grammar of the Tibetan Language* (1834), a pioneering study that outlined the structure of Tibetan syntax and morphology.¹ This work was not merely descriptive but methodological: it sought to provide non-native learners with a system through which they could engage Tibetan texts directly. By codifying Tibetan grammar in terms familiar to European philology, Csoma created a tool that could be adopted by scholars with no prior exposure to Tibetan culture.

Csoma's grammar was deeply indebted to his monastic teachers in Zanskar and Ladakh, yet it was also shaped by his European intellectual training. In this sense, it represents a cross-cultural synthesis an attempt to render Tibetan thought comprehensible within the frameworks of Western linguistic science. Later grammars, such as those by Heinrich August Jäschke and Franz Kühnel, built upon Csoma's foundations, refining his work with broader manuscript bases and more sophisticated linguistic theories. Still, Csoma's grammar remains significant as the first text that attempted to "translate" Tibetan grammar into the lingua franca of nineteenth-century European scholarship.

7.2.3 Cataloguing Buddhist Texts

Beyond lexicography and grammar, Csoma also undertook the monumental task of cataloguing Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. His "Analysis of the Tibetan Annals," published in *Asiatic Researches* in 1836, provided one of the first systematic accounts of the Tibetan Buddhist canon, including the *Kangyur* (translated words of the Buddha) and *Tengyur* (commentarial works). This cataloguing was groundbreaking for two reasons. First, it mapped the vast Tibetan canon for the first time, giving European scholars a sense of the scope and diversity of Tibetan Buddhism. Second, it highlighted the textual and doctrinal continuities between Indian and Tibetan Buddhist traditions, emphasizing the centrality of translation in transmitting the Dharma.

In this work, Csoma acted as both archivist and mediator. His catalogues offered not only bibliographic data but also thematic orientations, pointing scholars to the philosophical, ritual, and literary dimensions

¹ Alexander Csoma de Kőrös, *Grammar of the Tibetan Language* (Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1834).



of Tibetan Buddhism. For many decades, these catalogues remained the principal source of information on Tibetan Buddhist literature available to the West. Even today, they are regarded as landmarks in the history of Buddhist philology.

7.3 Language as a Bridge to Dharma

One of the most profound aspects of Alexander Csoma de Kőrös's work lies in his role as a linguistic mediator who made Buddhist teachings accessible to the modern world. In Buddhist tradition, Dharma has always been transmitted through language oral recitation, memorization, translation, and textual codification. Each phase of transmission required not only fidelity to meaning but also creativity in adapting language to new cultural contexts. Csoma's work stands as a modern parallel to the great translation movements of the past, such as those of Kumarajiva in China or Rinchen Zangpo in Tibet. By compiling a Tibetan–English dictionary and grammar, Csoma provided European scholars with their first tools to penetrate the Tibetan Buddhist canon directly. Before his contributions, the West's understanding of Buddhism was shaped largely by second-hand missionary reports, travelogues, and fragmentary Sanskrit studies. These accounts were often colored by exoticism, misconceptions, and religious polemics. Csoma's work disrupted this pattern by enabling direct engagement with Tibetan texts. His cataloguing of the *Kangyur* and *Tengyur* gave scholars a roadmap into Buddhist philosophy, psychology, cosmology, and ritual practice.

The impact of this work cannot be overstated. For the first time, Western scholars could access Tibetan Buddhism not as hearsay but as a living intellectual tradition. Later figures, such as Eugène Burnouf in France and Max Müller in Britain, built upon the philological foundation Csoma established. Burnouf's *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien* (1844) drew indirectly on Csoma's insights, while Müller's editing of the *Sacred Books of the East* was made possible by the opening Csoma created. Thus, language here functioned not only as a medium of communication but also as a bridge between civilizations.

Furthermore, Csoma's linguistic tools facilitated comparative Indology. By providing access to Tibetan translations of Indian Buddhist texts, his work helped scholars reconstruct parts of Indian intellectual history that were otherwise lost in the subcontinent due to the decline of Buddhism. The Tibetan canon preserved Sanskrit works that had disappeared from India, and Csoma's efforts allowed these texts to resurface in modern scholarship. His contributions thus extended beyond Tibet to the broader history of Buddhist and Indian studies.

7.4 Challenges and Limitations

While Csoma's achievements were pioneering, they were not without limitations. His work was shaped by both the restrictions of his time and the intellectual frameworks of nineteenth-century Europe.

7.4.1 Restricted Resources and Limited Access- Csoma carried out his research under extremely challenging conditions. Living in remote Himalayan monasteries, he relied on a handful of manuscripts and the oral guidance of Tibetan lamas. His dictionary and grammar, though monumental, were based on limited textual sources and lacked the comprehensiveness of later compilations, such as Sarat Chandra Das's *Tibetan–English Dictionary* (1902). Moreover, Csoma had little opportunity to compare variants of texts or access the full Tibetan canon, which remained largely inaccessible due to geography, politics, and language barriers.



7.4.2 Eurocentric Framing of Buddhist Knowledge

Another limitation was the Eurocentric intellectual framework that shaped Csoma's presentation of Tibetan Buddhism. Like many Orientalist scholars of his time, Csoma approached Buddhism primarily as a textual and historical phenomenon, often neglecting its living ritual and experiential dimensions. His emphasis on lexicons, grammar, and catalogues reflected a European philological model, which, while useful, risked reducing the Dharma to an object of study rather than a path of practice.

Some critics argue that Csoma's works reflect a tendency to frame Buddhist knowledge in terms intelligible to Western categories, rather than allowing Tibetan categories to speak for themselves. For instance, his translations often sought equivalences between Tibetan and European concepts, even when no true equivalence existed. These choices inevitably shaped Western understandings of Buddhism, sometimes distorting or oversimplifying complex ideas.

Nevertheless, such limitations must be understood in context. Csoma worked without precedent, with minimal resources, and under personal hardships. His Eurocentric framing was not a deliberate act of distortion but a reflection of the only intellectual tools available to him. The fact that he was able to produce foundational works despite these limitations is a testament to his perseverance and intellectual vision.

7.5 Legacy and Relevance Today

7.5.1 Csoma as the "Hungarian Bodhisattva"

In 1933, the Japanese Buddhist Society honored Csoma as a *Bodhisattva*, a title rarely bestowed upon non-Buddhists. This recognition reflects the unique spiritual dimension of his scholarship. Unlike other Orientalists, Csoma lived as a pilgrim-scholar, embracing ascetic simplicity and devoting his life to the Dharma without personal gain. His humility, perseverance, and devotion to truth earned him admiration across cultures, cementing his place not only in academic history but also in Buddhist memory.

7.5.2 Role in Globalizing Buddhist Thought

Csoma's contributions played a decisive role in the globalization of Buddhist studies. By creating linguistic tools, he enabled Buddhist thought to cross cultural and geographical boundaries. His works laid the foundation for the academic discipline of Tibetan studies and contributed to the comparative study of religions. Today, Tibetan Buddhism is not only a subject of academic interest but also a living tradition with global reach, followed by practitioners worldwide. Csoma's pioneering work in the nineteenth century helped make this possible.

7.5.3 Lessons for Cross-Cultural Academic Dialogue

Csoma's life also offers important lessons for cross-cultural dialogue today. His scholarship was marked by humility, respect for his Tibetan teachers, and willingness to learn from within the tradition rather than imposing external frameworks. In an era where academic research often risks cultural appropriation or superficiality, Csoma's model of deep immersion and intellectual humility remains inspiring. His example underscores the importance of engaging with religious traditions both critically and respectfully, recognizing their intrinsic value while also situating them within global scholarship.

8. Conclusion

Alexander Csoma de Kőrös remains a towering figure in the intellectual and spiritual encounter between East and West. His pioneering works the *Tibetan-English Dictionary*, the *Grammar of the Tibetan Language*, and his cataloguing of Tibetan Buddhist texts were not merely linguistic tools but bridges that opened the Dharma to a global audience. Through these contributions, Csoma made it possible for



European scholars to engage with Buddhist philosophy directly, bypassing the distortions of hearsay and missionary reports. His efforts anticipated the academic discipline of Tibetan studies and continue to shape the ways in which Buddhism is studied and understood today.

The significance of Csoma's work extends beyond the realm of philology. By situating language as the medium through which Dharma could travel across cultures, he contributed to what we now recognize as interfaith dialogue and cross-cultural communication. His life exemplifies the possibility of approaching another tradition with humility, perseverance, and openness qualities that remain vital for contemporary scholarship in a pluralistic world.

Looking forward, Csoma's legacy offers rich possibilities for future research. First, his pioneering but incomplete linguistic works invite re-examination in light of modern translation theories, which emphasize not only fidelity but also cultural context. Second, comparative linguistics can further explore how Tibetan translations preserve aspects of Indian Buddhist texts otherwise lost to history. Finally, Buddhist hermeneutics can benefit from renewed attention to the ways in which Csoma's approach combined philological rigor with lived immersion in Buddhist communities. These directions suggest that Csoma's work is not a closed chapter of history but an ongoing source of inspiration for scholarship, translation, and interreligious understanding.

In sum, Csoma de Kőrös stands as both a scholar and a pilgrim, whose life demonstrates that language is not only a tool of knowledge but also a bridge of compassion and wisdom. His contributions continue to illuminate the path for Buddhist studies and for humanity's broader search for dialogue across cultural and spiritual frontiers.

Bibliography

Apple, James B. *Translating Buddhism: From Tibetan to Modern Scholarship*. Albany: SUNY Press, 2014.

Baktay, Elek. *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös: The Hungarian Bodhisattva*. Budapest: Corvina Press, 1968.

Balogh, Tibor. *Sándor Kőrösi Csoma: A Pilgrim Scholar from Hungary*. Budapest: Hungarian Academy of Sciences, 2008.

Burnouf, Eugène. *Introduction à l'histoire du Bouddhisme Indien*. Paris: Imprimerie Royale, 1844.

Cabezón, José I. *Buddhism and Language: A Study of Indo-Tibetan Scholasticism*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1994.

Cabezón, José I., and Roger R. Jackson. *Tibetan Literature: Studies in Genre*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996.

Csoma de Kőrös, Alexander. *Essay towards a Dictionary, Tibetan and English*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1834.

Csoma de Kőrös, Alexander. *Grammar of the Tibetan Language*. Calcutta: Baptist Mission Press, 1834.

Csoma de Kőrös, Alexander. "Analysis of the Tibetan Annals." *Asiatic Researches* 20 (1836): 439–512.

Das, Sarat Chandra. *A Tibetan–English Dictionary with Sanskrit Synonyms*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1902.

Gethin, Richard. *The Foundations of Buddhism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.



- Harrison, Paul. *The Samādhi of Direct Encounter with the Buddhas of the Present: An Annotated English Translation of the Tibetan Version*. Tokyo: International Institute for Buddhist Studies, 1990.
- Jäschke, Heinrich August. *A Tibetan–English Dictionary*. London: Trübner, 1881.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and “the Mystic East”*. London: Routledge, 1999.
- Lopez, Donald S. *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Nattier, Jan. *A Few Good Men: The Bodhisattva Path according to The Inquiry of Ugra*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003.
- Skorupski, Tadeusz. *The Buddhist Forum: Buddhist Translators and Translation Studies*. London: SOAS, 2002.
- Uray-Köhalmi, Katalin. *Alexander Csoma de Kőrös: A Biography and Bibliography*. Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984.
- Verhás, Éva. “Alexander Csoma de Kőrös and the Birth of Tibetan Studies.” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 67, no. 2 (2014): 211–229.