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Genden Choephel — the 'Mad Monk'

Shortly after the military occupation of Tibet by the People's Liberation Army of China, the unorthodox Tibetan monk **Gendun Choephel** passed away. He supposedly concluded on the political events in Tibet by saying: "Now we are fucked!". Sethu Das of Design & People pays tribute to Genden Choephel, the controversial but one of the most important Tibetan intellectuals of the 20th century.



"AS for me — I have little shame. I love women. When both in the mind of a man and woman desire sexual union, what chance is there for clean behaviour?"

Reads like a passage from the Kamasutra? You are not fully wrong. The controversial statement comes from Genden Choephel, a little-known Tibetan monk and a great traveller who wrote *Treatise on Passion* — a sort of a Tibetan version of the Kamasutra from Calcutta in 1939. Genden Choephel goes on stating in his guide that "If natural passions are openly banned, unnatural passions will grow in secrecy. No law of religion, no law of morality can suppress the natural passion of mankind."

I was first introduced to Genden Choephel and his world of writings by Hortsang Jigme, a contemporary Tibetan writer and a former member of the Tibetan Government in Exile who escaped the Chinese rule to seek asylum in India. Hortsang Jigme comes from Amdo, North East province of Tibet where the controversial monk was born in 1903. He too believes that the then Tibetan Government failed to understand the rebel but blindly trusted Great Britain's intelligence reports on Genden Choephel's secret attempts to overthrow the Tibetan Government and his association with comrades from the Soviet Union.

Born in Rabkong, Genden Choephel studied at the famous Rabrang monastery. As an unorthodox monk who rejected orthodox tenets of Buddhism, he was forced to abandon his monastic life at a very early stage. A master of debates, the young monk was often found taking solitude in the corners of his monastery reading scriptures. Probably what shaped Genden

Choephel's strange personality at a later stage was his association with Rahul Sankrityanan, an Indian scholar and a freedom fighter and an American missionary who taught him English. The personal bond he had with Rahul Sankrityanan helped Genden to travel extensively in India and in Ceylon for about twelve years — in search of ultimate truth. Genden Choephel's journeys in search of truth were at a time when Tibet had its doors closed to ideas and thoughts from outside. Travelling widely as a painter, writer and as a 'Holy man from the Himalayas', Genden found his answers on the newly-introduced trains in India and in the streets and brothels of Calcutta.

How was the writing of Genden Choephel perceived back in traditional Tibet — almost eight decades ago at a time when any writing other than that of Buddha was considered to be the work of the devil? Ruled traditionally by spiritual and religious leaders, Tibet was closed to open and western thinking. Filled with criticism, bitterness and sorrow, Genden Choephel's writings were ignored and seen with skepticism by his own people. Genden Choephel continues to be unpopular to many inside and in exile even to this day.

In 2003 I travelled to Kalimpong to see the Tibet Mirror newspaper office from where once Genden Choephel wrote his revolutionary essays aimed at "overthrowing" the government back in Tibet. Though I could hardly meet with any of Genden Choephel's real friends or his admirers, through broken window panes and scattered furniture I could see the ruins of a small office which was once a gathering place for activists and intellectuals — including this young revolutionary from Amdo. The Tibet Mirror newspaper published under the editorial leadership of Babu Tharchin was founded in 1925 with the aim of educating and uniting Tibetans from all regions. The newspaper compiled news from Ladakh, Sikkim, Tibet and Kalimpong. It was published at a time when there was no single newspaper back in independent Tibet. You may note that even 55 years after the so-called Chinese 'liberation' of Tibet from backwardness and feudal system, there is no single independent newspaper in Tibet except those controlled by Xinhua, the propaganda unit of the People's Republic of China which deploys more than 10,000 people worldwide.

After travelling in India and Ceylon, Genden Choephel returned to Tibet in 1946 with scores of books he had written - travelogues; history of India, Tibet and Ceylon; Tibetan translation of Gita and Ramayana and erotic guidebooks. Not knowing what exactly was happening in his country, Genden Choephel was arrested in Lhasa and later imprisoned for three years by the Tibetan Government for conspiring and associating with foreign elements to "overthrow" the government in Tibet. It was probably an act without foreseeing a much bigger threat — the Cultural Revolution led by Mao's red guards which eventually overthrew the government in Lhasa.

Genden Choephel passed away in 1951 in Lhasa showing a new path the modern Tibet could adopt. A life which almost ran parallel to that of Milarepa, the mad, mystic yogi of Tibet, Genden Choephel pays tribute to Milarepa in one of his poems:

*"Thus storm fiends, snow and icy frost blending
Came cold and sharply upon him descending.
On his half nude form these shapes did alight.
And tried with his single thin garments to tight.*

*But Milarepa, the Snow-mountain's child
Feared no their onslaughts, so cruel and wild.
Though they attacked him most fiercely and grim,
He only smiled — they had no power over him."*

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