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INDIAN HISTORY CONGRESS, 1939
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BY

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BY

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I am very grateful to the organizers of the Indian History Congress, Calcutta, for having conferred upon me the honour of presiding over this section, keenly conscious as I am that there are many scholars working in this field who are more worthy of filling this place. I have been an humble camp-follower for many years now in this division of our army of historical workers; and my election to this place is, in my view, only an illustration of that sense of democratic equality that prevails among all our scholars alike, great and small, experienced and raw.

It has been a most healthy feature of our activity that the scope of this Congress, which was limited at its birth to the recent centuries of India's growth, has since been extended to cover its whole legitimate field at its widest extent. Much of the work of our scholars has been carried on in the different parts of our land and in foreign centres of learning under conditions of varying difficulty and with different degrees of fruitful and permanent results. The sifting of data, the tentative inference of conclusions, the equipment of historical criticism and the final shape of presentation accompanied by a due regard to the nature and character of the material used and to the genius of the period, topic or movement taken up for study, have been, on the whole, done with a fair amount of success and an appreciable crop of excellent harvest. The credit for these results should, in large measure, go to those venerable pioneers in this field, to whom we all owe so much and some of whom have been fortunately spared to us and are still active. Their task was in the beginning a most difficult one, as it involved a heavy uphill strain for them to take up their due share in work that was almost completely monopolised till about half a century back by European scholarship. The collaboration of Indian effort in this field has been particularly fruitful, because the task of interpretation of phases of institutional and cultural growth of Modern India and even of the right exposition of the interaction of military and political forces, foreign and indigenous, that India has been subjected to in the last three or four centuries, has been rendered more real and more rational by the addition of indigenous talent to European effort in research, collation and conclusion.

II

The history of our land in the British period possesses a significance for the understanding of the present-day problems which cannot be easily underestimated. There are possible in this period, perhaps, more numerous and markedly divergent points of view, though a smaller number of gaps, and more urgent and vital problems awaiting solution that are of significance to the present and future of our land than in similar periods of the past. The amount of material at the disposal of the student is staggering in quantity and perplexing in its range and in the difficulty of coordination that it presents. The dross of romanticism and sentimentalism which can easily permeate research in more antique epochs, indeed affects this period in a far smaller measure; but there is also operating the more serious, if more insidious, danger of the researchers trying to read, either by reason of unconscious bias or by force of convinced determination and subconscious analogy, a great deal more in the strictly assessed objectivity that should mark rightfully the study of the causes of the decay of the Muslim and Maratha powers and the rise and establishment of the British, in preference to other, European domination. As Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan has pertinently remarked elsewhere, the difficulties of the student of Modern Indian History consist not so much in the collection of material as in its selection. The facilities provided by the rich treasure-houses of archives in the capitals of those European States which have indulged in Eastern enterprise, have been made increasingly available not only to those scholars who have the resources and the facilities to study at those places themselves, but also to others lacking the ability to study on the spot by means of printed lists of calendered documents, photo-prints of manuscripts and other facilities of recent invention which reproduce, cheaply and in *facsimile*, manuscripts old and new, These new processes have the additional advantage of enabling even distant places of learning situated in remote corners of our land to secure copies of all valuable manuscripts and records treasured in the different museums and record-offices both in India and abroad.

It is difficult to get, at one view and by a mere first effort, a true perspective of the trend of growth in the last two or three centuries. The enormous quantities of record and manuscript material pertaining to the growth of the power of the European Companies are to be explained in a considerable measure by the meticulous and almost Venetian supervision attempted to be exercised by the home authorities over their servants and settlements in India. In addition to these records, there have been accumulated a staggering amount of pamphlet literature embodying the swaying passions and prejudices of the men who played a part in the drama of Eastern enterprise and the collections of letters received and copies of letters despatched which it was usual for men in high offices in those days to keep for themselves.

III

The decaying days of the Mughal Empire have been examined and interpreted by a band of scholars headed by the veteran, Sir Jadunath Sarkar, with some amount of appreciable fullness, with reference to North India, to those regions in which the Maratha power extended its sway and even to Rajputana, the history of whose States has been increasing attention at the hands of scholars. With reference to the Deccan, the foundation on a firm basis of the Hyderabad State by Nawab Asaf Jah and its continuous vitality since its inception have been noticed by its own historians, while the record treasures in the Daftar houses in the State have also been utilised by them. With regard to South India the situation is far more complex. From almost the beginning of the 17th century, the penetration of the Muslim power into the interior of South India and the establishment of the factories of the different European nationalities, coupled with increasing loss of vitality that marked the rule of the indigenous princes and the spread over the land of a quasi-feudalism that fostered no institution in particular except that of the tax-collector and his whip and ate away all the old native machinery of local administration—these render the drawing up of pictures, on a rational and conspective basis, of the history of South India very difficult. It was largely due to the pioneer efforts of the early British historians and writers of South India, of whom Col. Mark Wilks is the most shining example, that some systematic attempt came to be made in the matter of the interpretation of the currents and cross-currents that continued to agitate the face of the land till the first decades of the 19th century. Of Wilks it was said, shortly after his work on "Historical Sketches of the South of India" was published (1810-4) that "the book will prove to the world that the East India Company had long possessed among its most active and laborious servants men, whose genius, talents and acquirements would confer distinction" upon any country however enlightened." It was he who projected for the first time a comprehensive account of the recent history of South India, studied with primary reference to Mysore, on the basis not only of official information and records of which he himself was a perfect master, but also of memoirs and materials culled from the family papers preserved by the nobles of the land and from quasi-historical pieces of work of the kind that were then available among the indigenous chroniclers. One such example of the latter class of writers was furnished by a Tamil Chronicler, Narayanan, who wrote the "History of the Karnataka Governors" about 1803 and who said in the preface of his work that he based his account on large books of History (*Tavarikh*) such as Ferishta and submitted what he wrote for verification to the Muhammadan *amirss* of the age and others well learned in Tamil, who were then living at Arcot, like the Company's *sadar* at Vellore. His account has remained long buried deep in the midst of the manuscript treasures accumulated by Colonel Colin Mackenzie and stored away in the Government Manuscript Library in Madras, having been only brought to full light and utility by scholars like the *doyen* of South Indian historians, Diwan Bahadur Dr. S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar, who have discovered in it a considerable amount of corrective to the prevailing notions about the Mughal siege of

Gingee and the subsequent establishment of Mughal sway in the Carnatic on either side of 1700.

Similar value attaches to material accumulated by the *raayasams* (Indian letter-writers) of the English Company at Madras belonging to the Paupiah family and to the observations recorded by the Pondicherry *Courtier* and Dubash, Ananda Ranga Pillai. The harnessing of such indigenous historical output as has been made by writers of note of a former generation like J. H. Nelson, who found the manuscript material of Ponnuswami Thevan of Ramnad, invaluable for the compilation of his well-known work "The Madura District, A Manual" (1869), and Lakshmana Rao, the factotum and *diwan* of Sir Thomas Munro and of Colonel Read (who were in charge of the Baramahal District on its acquisition by the Company), and who left an interesting account of the circumstances that led to the different experiments at land revenue settlements made in that district and that finally culminated in the triumph of *ryotwar* in the greater part of the Southern Presidency. Proper work in these fields and the right methods of the tapping of material, a great quantity of which still lies buried away from the ken of the researcher, should enable the remedy of the defects pointed out by Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan in his valuable Presidential Address to the All-India Modern History Congress at its First Session in Poona, namely, that the first half of the 18th century has so far remained comparatively unexplored and that there has been a lack of really sound books on the administration of the Company in Madras and Bombay in that century, which was marked, so far as the rebirth of India was concerned, only by confusion and anxiety outside the Company's territorial limits and by peaceful and quiet developments inside them. Dr. Krishnaswami Aiyangar has been the guide and the norm for many workers in this field; and I have, in an humble manner, written a history of the city of Madras, constructed mainly from a study of contemporary material, both official and otherwise, and made a critical study of the historical material embodied in the Diary of Ananda Ranga Pillai, the *Courtier* of Pondicherry. The great doings of Lawrence and Clive, of Coote and Pigot and of their co-workers who really laid the foundations of British supremacy in South India have been portrayed in standard works, like those of Orme, Cambridge, James Mill, Forrest and Wyllie-to mention only a few spread over several generations. But, perhaps, an obvious defect in them has been a comparative neglect of indigenous sources leading to a lack of sufficient appreciation of this category of material and of the contributions of Indian agency towards the achievements of their own heroes. The tendency to overlook the importance of, and sometimes even the part played by, the Indian coadjutors and co-operators of these men who had attained to historic fame, has been attempted to be rectified by the comparatively late efforts of scholars who have been working out, among their other tasks, the part played by Nawab Muhammad Ali and his followers in the Carnatic and by the Nawabi officials in Bengal in that formative epoch. Indigenous, illustrative and supplementary sources available for this line of work are accumulating in the hands of scholars and throwing light upon the merits and doings of the enemy personages that confronted and tried to stem the tide of English expansion-like Hyder Ali, Mir Qasim, Nana Fadnis and Ranjit

Singh-and even the less significant and potent forces like the *poligars* who resented and strained against the rapid descent of the Bramah-press of the British over them.

Throughout the 18th century and down to, the close of it, no power that flourished in South India, including even the British, was sufficiently conscious of its stability to devote a, substantial portion or its attention and resources to the improvement of administration. Thus the progress of administrative reform and reconstruction that began in Bengal comparatively early in the growth of the British power, was consequently somewhat belated in the Madras Presidency, though the problems that awaited solution here were in certain respects even more complex than those that cropped up in Bengal and in the territories that were annexed to that Presidency in course of time. The Madras administrative system as it grew up thus, first tentatively and hesitatingly and later with conscious effort, depended primarily for its lever of improvement on the condition of the *ryot* and particularly on the margin that was left to him for recovery from the effects of famine and for his maintenance over and above the expenses of production. Thus the reform of the land system occupied an important place, while the development of recognised laws and law courts, though an equally important necessity, held a somewhat secondary place. A centralised government and administrative system necessitated the suppression of centrifugal elements like the *poligars* who had become so widely spread and whose status in the political system of the country and its evolution were far different from those of their compeers in Bengal and Oudh. It was early seen that conditions in Madras were fully different from those that were applicable to Bengal and to the old North-Western Provinces beyond it. The *ryorwarii* system found its champion in Munro, who became almost the foster-father, if not the actual parent, of many of the most notable and enduring features of the present-day Madras district administration. It is unfortunate that, of Munro and his achievement, we should still have to be content with the existing biographies of Gleig, Arbutnot and Bradshaw. The genesis and growth of the Madras administrative system constitute a fruitful tract for the exploration of the researcher and await his clearing and culture. Indeed, Madras was in a thoroughly unwholesome condition even in the beginning of the 19th century; and its administration was even then marked by rife faction and a spirit of defiance of authority bred of a long period of lax and corrupt administration and intemperate attacks on Government that were rarely curbed with severity. Similar in a large measure were the features of the Bombay administration even during the Governorship of the illustrious Elphinstone. Episodes connected with crises that were not infrequent phenomena in these times have formed the subjects of monographs and treatises and would still offer a fertile quarry for the efforts of the student of local history on an intensive scale. The interest of the student in the history of the Madras Presidency is marked in yet another field. It was now that the famous Colonel Colin Mackenzie made his career so useful for the present day in research and reconstruction of history and accumulated his historical and antiquarian treasures that can well claim to be the most extensive and the most valuable collection of historical documents relating to India that ever was made by any individual in Europe

or Asia. Mackenzie might well be regarded as having been the British pioneer to kindle the lamp of historical and antiquarian research in the South Indian mind; and he is also noted as the founder of peripatetic parties for the search of manuscripts and the discovery of archaeological finds that have developed into a potent instrument of recovery of literary and architectural material in our land.

The value of the Mackenzie Collection was first perceived by Colonel Mark Wilks and was later amplified by the efforts at their classification and calendaring made by successive generations of scholars, both European and Indian, and comprehending such names as H. H. Wilson and W. Taylor on the former side and headed on the latter side by Venkataboriah-who opened a "new and rational" avenue to Hindu knowledge to Mackenzie himself-and stretching down to the present-day scholars led by the veteran Dr. Krishnaswami Aiyangar who has been persistently endeavouring, during a period of three decades, to persuade our administrations-central, provincial and Indian-to make their collections of records available in the fullest measure for the public and for the research worker. His attempts have served as the starting point of a persistent demand that the Mackenzie Manuscript; should be published *in extenso* or in *precis* in some convenient form or other so as to serve the purposes of the scholar. He has been urging it on the Indian Historical Records Commission for the last ten years and more.

IV

Prof. Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan has brought prominent attention to bear upon the dangers that confront the worker in the matter of a correct and impartial evaluation of the achievements of the builders of the British dominion, as well as of the British administrative system. He says that the task in these cases is infinitely difficult; and he would urge all who work in the field, great and small, to be animated by a supreme desire for truth. From the days of Caraccioli down to the recent biography of Mervyn Davis, the whole chain of writers on Clive can be brought forward in illustration of the striking flux and changes of sympathy and opinion that beset the Muse of History in her never-ceasing advance. Similarly, with regard to the discreditable period of British rule in Bengal and Madras which lasted on down to the administration of Warren Hastings and persisted even for some years longer in the Southern Presidency, the student should guard himself against the dangers of pamphlet literature of all views thrusting itself forcefully upon his attention. The enigmatic figure of Warren Hastings serves even now to cast a spell upon biographer and reader alike. Compared with the charm that has always attached itself to the ever-widening literature on Warren Hastings and despite its varying value, the books published on Cornwallis, Wellesley and Lord Hastings fade into relative dullness and prolix rigidity.

The British power, as it grew up in the first half of the 19th century, lacks even to-day a comprehensive and classic writer who may take his place by the side of Orme and Mill. The available sum total of books on this period has still many gaps alike in military

operations, administrative development and biographical sketches, though several writers from Kaye downwards were particularly attracted by this period and field. Fierce controversies have reigned over particular topics like the Afghan wars, Bentinck's reform measures and the causes of the outbreak of the Great Mutiny as well as the methods of its suppression.

The publication, of the Record Offices in India and in Britain and of numerous papers of private families like the Ellenborough papers have enlarged the sources available for the student of recent Indian History. As we advance in point of time, one of the principal sources of information, in the shape of the proceedings of the Political Department of the Government of India, becomes increasingly inaccessible; but till almost the end of the pre-Mutiny period the danger most to be guarded against by the student is falling a prey to the oft-staggering quantum of the material and giving undue value to some kinds of even contemporary publications, pamphlets and secondary works.

V

An insidious danger that even now, after this lapse of time, lurks in the interpretation of the phenomenal Success of the British in building up their Indian Empire lies in the tendency that has marked a large proportion of Indian writers to find extra-historical and quasi-providential reasons for the appearance and vitality of such a phenomenon. The classic historian, Polybius, in the preface to his *Oecumenical History*, apostrophizes his readers in this vein, when describing what struck him as the 'wonderfully rapid' establishment of Roman ascendancy over the Greek world. He wrote thus :-" What mind, however commonplace or indifferent could feel no curiosity to learn the process by which almost the whole world fell under the undisputed ascendancy of Rome within a period of less than fifty-three years, or to acquaint itself with the political organization to which this triumph-a phenomenon unprecedented in the annals of Mankind-was due? What mind, however infatuated with other spectacles and other studies, could find a field of knowledge more profitable than this?" (*Historiae*, Book I). As Polybius was brought up in a social *milieu* in which there was a long tradition of public service, so a similar environmental influence has been marking the mental and spiritual tone of the bulk of our *intelligentsia* and our historical writers in particular. This has been specially insidious in its effect in making them live and write with an almost English mentality and with a disproportionately stressed admiration for English political and administrative ideals. Such a deficiency has led to some degree of a lack of really accurate subjective treatment of the topics treated as ascertained first hand and to their presentation with a facility that seemed quite natural in the 19th century, but now appears somewhat obsolete in these resurgent days of nationalistic feeling. These deficiencies operated even on the minds of the Hindu historians of the age of Muslim domination, as remarked by Sir H. M. Elliot in his preface to the *Bibliographical Index to the Historians*

of *Mulwmmedan India*, VoL I (1849), where he regretted that the average Hindu historian of Muslim rule completely displayed "a lack of the feelings, hopes, faiths, fears and yearnings of his subject race and showed nothing to betray his religion or nation except perhaps a certain stiffness and affectation of style which shows how ill the foreign garb befitted him." Are we not even now, one may ask very pertinently, wedded in our writings to the self-same style and manner of appreciation and taking over the phrases and formal language of our British rulers? It is the duty of every historian and writer to avoid making his work "a mere charnel house of facts;" and perhaps it should be indeed a justifiable desire on his part that in Modern India, wherein has been steadily growing an increasingly vigorous, intellectual, political and religious life, thoroughly impelled and influenced by British political practice and ideology and literature, there may well be some measure of this tendency prevailing. The growth of Indian nationalism has accentuated this bias, which has, however, strangely enough, worked bothways. One set of our writers, who certainly are wider than the circle of authors of books intended for use in our schools and colleges, are dominated by an apprehension of the possible repercussion of their views on the administration and deny themselves the full freedom of expression which is their right. In the words of two eminent historians, they have been "accustomed to interpret everything from the standpoint of the administration asking themselves this question: "Will this make for easier and quieter government;" and might too easily succumb to the touchy fear contained impliedly in the saying "he that is not for us is against us."

The above feature has produced a great evil which is in marked contrast to the earlier and freer writings of the historians of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus the historians above quoted conclude :-"The writer of to-day inevitably has a world outside his own people, listening intently and as touchy as his own people, as swift to take offence. This knowledge of an overhearing, even eavesdropping, public, of being in *partibus infidelium*, exercises a constant silent censorship, which has made British-Indian History the worst patch in current scholarship. Orme, Elphinstone, Montgomery Martin, Marshman, Thornton, Keene, Beveridge, Mill and Wilson, and most of the earlier historians of separate episodes are vivacious readers and kept the subject alive." [*Rise and fulfilment of British Rule In India*, by E. Thompson and G. T. Garratt (1934), p. 665]

One other complication that marks the position of the student- at the present time, besides the danger of falling into a tilted national or racial bias is the accumulating harvest of scholarship of a kind showing itself in the shape of books centering round great personages and marked by a tendency to weave destiny round them, instead of allowing the story of their destiny to unfold itself. Such a type is symbolised in R. J. Minney's *Clive* in which, while there is the obvious element of examination of the right kind of source-material like relevant private letters and papers, despatches and documents and records in the India Office, the British Museum, etc., and which is marked by otherwise faultless array of historical and biographical equipment, this tendency is present in a marked degree.

VI

British Indian History should be primarily based on an interpretative hypothesis, 'which presumes an endeavour to arrive at a scientific explanation of every phenomenon. The materials available for it are quantitatively staggering, but must be subjected in their qualitative selection to strictly scientific tests, including a scrutiny as to their possession of indicative quality and therefore of scientific value. The British environment, material and administrative in its physical aspect, cultural, ideological and literary in its moral and spiritual aspect, has got to be carefully evaluated with particular reference to the effects caused by changing conditions and by the circumstantial pressure of contacts, conflicts and rivalries clue to their impact on the variegated mass of the Indian peoples. The problem before the historian of British India is to make history as much as possible of a reality, concrete and alive, combining in it both the actuality of the field of treatment and a justifiable and well-founded morality of analysed conclusions and always taking care to avoid the narrative degenerating into romance of one kind or another. Such a happy mean has been attempted to be reached by the tall historians of our land, who have been inculcating a spirit of their own moderation, sobriety and caution coupled with a living touch that should run through their writings and to such we owe a great duty, the most valuable essence of which lies in trying to follow their methods and their ideals with necessary modifications. Of these great men still spared to us, mention should be first made of the venerable Dr. S. Krishnaswami Aiyangar of Madras, who has been the fountain-head of a welling stream of historical scholarship and research, comprehending all the processes from the spade-work of quarrying the material to the artistic varnish and fretwork coming at the end. In the north, we have the veteran Sir Jadunath Sarkar, who has made the history of North India in 17th and 18th centuries his own in a peculiar measure and who is the unfailing nourisher of several centres of historical studies working under his guidance and inspiration. Equally eminent and fertilising have been the services of Professor Sir Shafaat Ahmad Khan, who has built a particularly valuable school of historical research with special reference to Modern India. Among other leaders and schools of historians of this period may be mentioned the indefatigable workers in the resuscitation and publication of Maratha documents of which Rao Bahadur G. S. Sardesai is the typical exponent and the B. 1. S. Mandali is the model organ; besides the groups of workers in the histories of particular nationalities and areas like the Sikhs, Assam, etc.

Under the lead of men like these, scholarship has spread to every University centre and place of learning and made itself many-sided in its scope and reach. If the far-reaching vistas or work and harvest opened out by these workers have proved beautiful and attractive, it is not merely on account of the themes and their inspiration, but also because the history of our people in the recent centuries has been largely the maker and the inspirer of our present-day life, while powerful extraneous forces have been reacting upon our growth and civilization. One caution, however, has got to be added

and was expressed in a wonderfully apt manner by that great patron and promoter of higher learning, Sir Asutosh Mookerjee, who, in the course of his address to the Orientalists assembled in this noble University in 1922, expressed himself as follows :- "Let me, therefore, appeal to you with all the emphasis at my command, not merely to content ourselves with the investigation of the facts of Indian History, but also to make a supreme effort to ascertain their real significance, so as to illustrate that search after truth is after all far more ennobling than quest after facts. You will then have justly earned the everlasting gratitude of every man and woman in this vast continent, for you will have discovered and thereby helped us to eradicate the deadly causes of this intellectual stagnation."

The new school of Modern Indian Historiography that is developing, has naturally been claiming attention at the hands of public authorities and help from them in the matter of increased availability of the records and of their contents and also the starting, as part of their necessary equipment, of a clearing house and mutual exchange of such material, which can best be conducted by a permanent or quasi-permanent institute of scholars, expert in calendaring and sifting work and working in co-operation with bodies like the Indian Historical Records Commission and this Congress. The assignment to Modern Indian History of its due place in the proposed scheme of a comprehensive national history of India on the lines of the Cambridge Historical Series which is to be thrashed out in its preliminary details at this Congress, will be greatly facilitated by the supplementary efforts of such a body. As Dr. Bal Krishna suggested in his Presidential Address of the Modern History Section of the Allahabad-Session of this Congress, the plan of having a Federal Research Institute, which should accumulate copies of records from European centres and a library of printed records and books available in any form, may serve as a distributing agency for research material that may be required by scholars working in the different parts of the country and on different topics; such an institution will give " an extraordinary urge to the creation of a vast historical literature of permanent value to this country and the world at large."
