

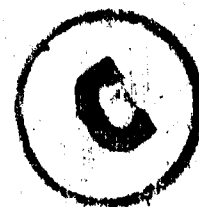
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INDIAN HISTORICAL
RECORDS COMMISSION

16th Session.

1939

Calcutta



INDIAN HISTORICAL RECORDS COMMISSION

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SIXTEENTH SESSION

SPEECH OF THE PRESIDENT

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Member, Royal Historical Society of England ; Honorary Fellow, Royal Asiatic
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YOUR EXCELLENCY,

On behalf of the members of this Records Commission, I thank Your Excellency for your kindness in opening our present session. We ~~met~~ in Calcutta again after a lapse of sixteen years and we are glad to get from Your Excellency the same encouragement that we then received from your illustrious predecessor the Earl of Lytton.

This Commission was appointed by the Government of India as a small and mainly official body, consisting of the Record Keepers of the Central Government and of the three Presidencies, with three historical experts from outside. Its original functions were similarly limited to advising the Government of India about the preservation, calendaring and printing of its records and making rules for giving the public access to them. But in a short time it was found necessary to expand both the body and the scope of the Commission. We have since then taken in a larger body of the ~~public~~ under two new classes of members, called corresponding and co-opted, and we have also enlarged our programme of work.

Of the historical records relating to India, those in the English language and held by the British Government form only a fraction and that fraction relates to a very late period, roughly from 1757 onwards (if we except some Factory correspondence as distinguished from State-papers). But even after the year 1757, large areas of our country continued to be outside the purview of our Government records, because it was fully sixty years after Plassey that British paramountcy was established and thirty years more before the Punjab and the North-Western Frontier came within the ambit of the British Indian Empire. Large bodies of records for this intervening period are in private possession or in the hands of the Indian States. As for the period preceding the rise of the British Indian Empire, all the records are in Persian, Marathi, Rajasthani and other Indian languages and none of them can be found in the archives of our own Government. It, therefore, became the aim of this Commission to tempt private collections of records out of their hiding places and make them available

for historical study, and also to attract representatives of the Indian States to our meetings and interest them in the modern treatment and public use of historical records. A wider circle of scholars has been drawn to us by our practice of inviting learned papers for being read at our public sessions. The only condition we lay down is that the papers must describe unknown or hitherto unpublished records, or piece together and interpret freshly such records as are already known. This strict limitation of scope marks our Commission off from the Oriental Conference, the Modern History Congress and similar annuals that are springing up.

The title of our body naturally suggests a comparison with the Royal Commission for Historical Records in Great Britain, but we must modestly deprecate any such comparison. The long and noble series of publications of the British Commission (which has now become a centenarian) represents not only the wealth and antiquity of the Government archives there, but also the immensely rich and voluminous treasure of historical documents preserved by the noble houses that have helped to make British history by centuries of public service. The great historian of the Papacy, Leopold Von Ranke, tells us that though the Vatican records were closed to him for being a Protestant, he found very important masses of records in the houses of the Italian nobility whose ancestors had been officers of State. Similar records for the pre-British period of Indian history now survive only in the Indian States, the rulers of most of which were servants of the Mughal Empire.

The Jaipur State in Rajputana owns an unimaginably vast and valuable mass of records relating to the Mughal Empire and going back to the beginning of the 17th century and often covering the other provinces of India as well. These records have been recently explored and arranged under orders of the present enlightened Maharajah Sawai Man Singhji. All scholars interested in India's past will join with me in soliciting the Jaipur Darbar to print the cream of these records, as the late Gaekwad Sir Sayaji Rao had printed his ancestors' historical papers, both in Marathi and in English.

Apart from the Indian States, this Commission can legitimately claim that its past work, outside the Central Government's records,

has been of no mean order. Our persistent representation led the Bombay Government to print the Peshwas' records (written in the Marathi language) in 45 volumes under the competent editorship of Rao Bahadur G.S. Sardesai. And the same Government has continued the good work by undertaking to print the English records relating to Maratha history. As illustrations of the wide range of our search and its happy results, I shall only mention that our corresponding member from French India discovered and gave to the world through this Commission, the last will of the famous Venetian traveller Niccolao Manucci and that of M. François Martin, the founder of Pondicherry. Many valuable Portuguese records have been made known to us by Chevalier P. Pissurlencar of Goa, another esteemed colleague of ours.

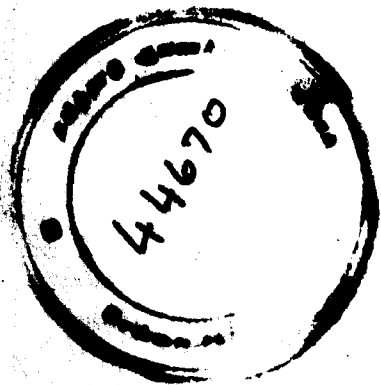
Time will not permit me to refer to the work of our members from British India, but it is my sad duty to mention the name of Sir Evan Cotton whose death is an irreparable loss to British Indian historiography and who used to enrich our publications with papers of enduring value and unimpeachable scholarship. The strange story of the part played by the Armenian race in the moulding of Indian history was patiently unfolded by Mr. Mesrob Seth, another member whose recent death we must deplore.

Apart from discharging its duty as a consulting body for records in relation to the Government of India, this Commission has long been recognised as the connecting link between the Government of India and the wider public interested in Indian history. It is our duty to voice the feelings of the students of history in respect of the Government of India records. An increasingly large number of Indian scholars—mostly advanced students who may be trusted to possess some sense of responsibility—are undertaking researches into their country's past on the solid basis of the authentic records of the British period, which are preserved in the Imperial Record Office of Delhi and the India Office Library of London. Our students complain that it is easier, quicker, and less harassing to secure the transcripts of any document from the India Office than from Delhi; only it is far more costly. The problem has taken an acute shape from the recent outbreak of war and the consequent interruption of Indian students' work at the British universities and the suspension of typing and photographing at the British Museum and the India Office.

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We students have no concern with such records at Delhi as are needed for administrative purposes and are officially called "Current." Nor are we keen on getting access to confidential papers in which important State secrets lie buried. But surely there is a time after which a seed loses its germinating power, and a historical secret ceases to be an official secret and becomes a public gossip. Is it not safer that after that sterilising lapse of time, the old secret should become an ascertained public fact, correctly founded on documentary evidence? In England all historical documents have been thrown open to scholars if they are at least 70 years old. Here in India we have been crying for the same liberality in respect of documents 120 years old, but without success.

May I, as a member of this Commission ever since its foundation and a worker in touch with historical research students in all parts of India, urge that historical records (as distinct from "live" State secrets and current administrative files) are not a miser's hoard to be kept buried in dark cells, but a literary heritage for all succeeding generations, and that the best use to which they can be put is to publish them? The Federal Government has not the money to edit and print all, or even an appreciable fraction, of its valuable historical records. Why not let our scholars take this legitimate duty of civilised countries off the shoulders of the Government of India, by themselves doing the publication in their works?



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