

Notes

The College of Fort William: ‘Oasis of Learning or Colonial Bridgehead?’

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As a result of the internal feuding of the Indian potentates, to which the British added their share of divisive power-playing, the British had become, by the end of the eighteenth century, the most powerful geopolitical force and the commanding player on the chessboard of subcontinental politics. The rise of the British, from an enterprising commercial entity to a position of power and sovereignty created and demanded that they retain a paramountcy over their Indian rivals and foes and not remain merely *primus inter pares*.

Certain prerequisites were demanded by circumstances to foster, promote and generate the idea of British domination in the Indian subcontinent. These included a combination of a civil and military hierarchy as would be conducive to the control of a vast and discontented local population and to the furtherance of their own annexationist aspirations. The British employees of the East India Company were poorly equipped to handle the gigantic task of governing a large, unruly population scattered over a territory as extensive as Europe.¹ The British possessions in Bengal, Bihar and Orissa were of key importance being rich in resources, human and natural, besides providing the tantalising bridgehead to further expansionist designs.²

Lord Wellesley, appointed Governor-General in 1798 [after Lord Cornwallis] was flushed with the pride of victory as he had defeated the most formidable opponent of British colonial expansionism viz. Tipu Sultan and put an end to his life. Wellesley proposed to his Council that a College be established to carry out war ‘by other means’. In his Minute of 18 August 1800, he spelled out the plan of ‘an experimental institution

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¹ A. Aspinall, *Cornwallis in Bengal*, Manchester, 1931, pp.1-3

² P.J. Marshall, *The New Cambridge History of India, Bengal: the British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740-1828*, Cambridge, 1987

of higher learning'.³ Reduced to basics, this was to be chiefly an academy for teaching local Indian languages to self-seeking and incompetent employees of the East India Company.⁴

The 'College' of Fort William was not the first educational institution inaugurated by the British in India. Earlier, Warren Hastings had laid the foundation of the Calcutta Madressah in 1780. The name indicates that the Islamic sciences were taught here to prepare Muslim young men to accept responsible positions under the aegis of the British. In 1791, the British Resident in Benares, Jonathan Duncan, established the Hindu College to encourage Hindus to participate in British administration.⁵

In 1784, after the arrival of the celebrated Orientalist and linguist, Sir William Jones, the Asiatic Society was founded and stress was laid on the need for the British to learn Indian languages.⁶

Wellesley, suffering from delusions of grandeur, categorically stated that the East India Company had long outstripped its role as a commercial entity and that its employees were now the de facto 'ministers and officers of a powerful sovereign'.⁷ There is no disguise of the imperial intentions here. Thus the College was not meant to be primarily an 'Oxford of the East' but to be an instrument for the aggressive advancement of British state power in the subcontinent.⁸

The British missionaries working in Bengal jumped indecorously on the Wellesleyan band wagon and in a shrill chorus called for the setting up of academies for learning Indian languages. These missionaries had as their primary purpose the conversion of the population of India to Christianity and they desperately needed British official and financial support for this. The names of Carey, Marshman and Ward, a 'holy trinity' of the Serampore Mission are most prominent in this venture. They wrote several pamphlets pointing to a happy conjunction of mutual interests in this regard.⁹

³ David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance, the dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835*, Berkeley, 1969, p.47

⁴ Syed Waqar Azim, *Fort William College; tarikh aur tehrik*, Lahore, 1987, p.20

⁵ Obayda Begum, *Fort William College ki adabi khidmat*, Lucknow, 1983, pp.23-25.

⁶ Sisir Kumar Das, *Sahibs and Moonshees: an account of the College of Fort William*, Calcutta, 1978, p.2.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

⁸ David Kopf, *op.cit.*, pp.45-49

⁹ A.F. Salahuddin Ahmad, *Social Ideas and social change in Bengal 1818-1835*, Leiden, 1965, p.130

There is no doubt that Wellesley felt the College to be his brainchild and he took personal interests in the various academic appointments. For Persian, the Professorship went to Francis Gladwin, translator of Sa'di's *Gulistan*. For Arabic, John Baillie was appointed. The absence of available Muslim legal texts was felt and Baillie wrote his *Digest of Mohammadan Law* to fill the need. Dr John Gilchrist, a physician who had served in India since 1782, author of a *Hindustani Grammar* and a *Hindustani Dictionary* was made professor of Hindustani or Urdu.¹⁰ The Serampore missionaries were also given posts in teaching Indian 'vernaculars' such as Bengali, Gujerati and Tamil.¹¹ Each professor was assisted by a group of *munshis* or secretaries who worked as translators, critics and instructors. Initially there were five Professors and fifty *munshis*.

All employees of the East India Company resident in any Presidency were eligible to enroll. There were 64 students in the first year after the College started functioning.¹²

During the first decade of its existence, the staff of Fort William College worked with ardour and enthusiasm pursuing literary and linguistic research, composition and lexicography in a vast array of languages unknown in Europe. They produced translations, grammars, dictionaries and textbooks to be used by students, teachers and the general public. The need for printing presses and type fonts for the various Indian languages was satisfied by the concerted efforts of the Serampore Mission. These persons and the members of the Asiatic Society placed their equipment and expertise at the disposal of the College and worked together on joint projects.¹³

Linguistic studies led to the production of literary examens. Between 1808 and 1811, six volumes of Miscellaneous Works of Prose and Verse [in Persian] were published. These had selections from the Persian classics such as the *Gulistan*, *Bostan*, *Sikandernamēh* and *Shahnameh*. The Sanskrit Department issued a prose translation of the *Ramayana* in three volumes. The Bengali Department printed the Bengali versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. The Urdu Department printed an Urdu version of Sa'di's *Gulistan* [done by Mir Shar Ali 'Afsos'].¹⁴ Dr Gilchrist produced 16 Urdu works during his

¹⁰ David Kopf, *op.cit.*, pp.51-55

¹¹ Sisir Kumar Das, *op.cit.*, pp.11-21

¹² Dr Samiullah, *Uniswen sadi mein Urdu ke tasnifi idare*, Sultanpur, 1988, p.33

¹³ David Kopf, *op.cit.*, pp.67-71

¹⁴ Sisir Kumar Das, *op.cit.*, pp.71-73

short tenure with the college.¹⁵ His efforts at the development and promotion of Urdu are of great value and scholars in Pakistan speak approbatively of his achievements. Among the well-known writers who associated with Dr Gilchrist, the following are of note:

1. Mir Amman
2. Hyder Bux Hyderi
3. Mir Sher Ali 'Afsos'
4. Mirza Lutf Ali
5. Khaliluulah Khan 'Ashk'
6. Mir Bahadur Ali Husseini
7. Mazhar Ali Khan 'Vila'.¹⁶

The library of Fort William College had an impressive collection of Oriental MSS. Perhaps the best in the world at that time. It was composed of individual gifts made to the College, of the libraries of teachers attached to it and MSS. That were purchased by the College on account of their value. In addition, the library of Tipu Sultan was also given to the Library by Wellesley. This had several beautifully illuminated copies of the Quran, the first copy of the *Gulistan* [in Sa'di's hand] and a copy of the *Badshah Nama* with the autograph of the Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. The Asiatic Society was also casting its covetous eyes on this unique collection.¹⁷

One interesting fact that emerges is that the first Urdu translation of the Quran was made in the first decade of the 19th century at Fort William College. This was the collective effort of three *munshis* of the college viz. Kazim Ali Jowan, Bahadur Ali Husaini and Amanatullah. Dr Gilchrist offered a reward for the team completing their valuable task. The translation was completed in 1804 but it remained unpublished after the departure of Dr Gilchrist for England in the same year on the basis of differences between him and the authorities. The printing was begun by Gilchrist and 56 pages, were printed [out of a total of 500 pages.]. The printing was stopped by the government. The reason for this was probably the objections of the Christian missionaries who were working to spread Christianity in India.¹⁸ This they were attempting to do by the wholesale translation of the Bible into as many Indian languages that

¹⁵ Ebadet Brelvi [ed.], *Poems of John Gilchrist*, Lahore, n.d. see Introduction.

¹⁶ Syed Waqar Azim gives 18 names; Obayda Begum gives 38; Dr Nisar Ahmad Faruqi gives 22.

¹⁷ O.P. Keriwal, *The Asiatic Society of Bengal and the discovery of India's past 1784-1838*, Delhi, 1988, p.110

¹⁸ Dr Nisar Ahmad Faruqi, Introduction to *Wasaiq Fort William College*, Delhi, 2003, pp.37-39.

they could possibly manage. They saw that the Urdu translation of the Quran would greatly undermine their efforts.

The great success of Fort William College in the promotion of Indian languages and literature led to increased expenditure on the part of the government. And this was not to the liking of the semi-literate politicians. As such, efforts were made to curtail the governmental outlay on Fort William College. The opening of the Hertford College, UK, [1805], the Hindu College, Benares [1818], the Sanskrit College [1828] resulted in the grants given to Fort William College being drastically reduced.¹⁹ The slow erosion of government support led to the eventual demise of the College of Fort William which had made such a remarkable contribution to Oriental learning. The Minute of Macaulay [1835] dealt the final blow to this ‘centre of excellence’. It continued a phantom existence for some years. Lord Dalhousie ‘officially dissolved the College of Fort William ‘on 24 January 1854.’²⁰

In conclusion, an appraisal of the College of Fort William leads us to these formulations. Initially, the college not established for any altruistic desire to remove ‘native’ illiteracy, ignorance or defects of knowledge. It was meant as a front for providing capable persons who could increase the commercial profitability of the East India Company. Alongside this, the intense pressure from various evangelical societies led the college in a different direction and made it an instrument for the propagation of Christianity. These two aims harmonized seamlessly and continued until the third decade of its existence. The college became a catalyst for change in Bengal society and led to a ‘Bengal renaissance’, as Kopf puts it.²¹ The founding and progress of the Fort William College caused reform movements in Hinduism spearheaded by Rannohan Roy and his Brahma Samaj. It increased the awareness of European culture and civilization among educated Indians. It developed Indian languages, their alphabet, their type fonts, their printing and created a culture of reading, writing and reflection. It encouraged great scholars – Indian and British – to develop their talent for Oriental learning and made the results of their labours accessible to all – in India and abroad. This broke down the barrier of ignorance and prejudice on both sides, But all this was brought to an untimely end with the closure of the College in 1854. The larger picture was now seen against the perspective of the furtherance of British colonialism and the propagandist machinations for the spread of Christianity on a defeated and disgruntled people.

¹⁹ David Kopf, *op.cit.*, pp.150-54.

²⁰ Sisir Kumar Das, *op.cit.*, p.103.

²¹ David Kopf, *op.cit.*, p.189.