



COLIN MACKENZIE AND HIS TREMENDOUS COLLECTIONS

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ABSTRACT :

Even as a youth Mackenzie displayed great avidity for mathematical knowledge and was on that account employed by Lord Napier of Merchistoun who was then engaged in writing a life of his ancestor, John Napier, the inventor of logarithms. Young Mackenzie was set to the task of collecting all available information regarding the knowledge that the ancient Hindus had of mathematics and of the nature and use of logarithms. After Lord Napier's death Mackenzie went to India and joined the Madras Engineers in 1782. He was invited to Madura by Johnstone the son-in law of Lora Napier and the father of Sir Alexander Johnstone who became Chief Justice of Ceylon and one of the founders of the Royal Asiatic Society.



KEYWORDS : Mackenzie, Brahmins , Madura, South India, Johnstone, Pandit, Madras , Leyden, C. P. Brown.

AT MADURA

It was during his stay at Madura in the company of the Johnstones that Mackenzie came into intellectual contact with the Brahmins and Pandits of that place and began to realise what a vast store of material lay ready for the historian in the antiquities and the existing literature of the country. It was then that he formed the plan of making that collection which afterwards became the favourite object of his pursuit for 38 years of his life and which is now the most extensive and most valuable collection of historical documents relative to India that ever was made by any individual in Europe or in Asia.¹

PIONEER IN ANTIQUARIAN RESEARCH

For the first fourteen years of his stay in India till 1796, Mackenzie had no good opportunities of pursuing his cherished aim. During this period, we have but a bare record, barren for our purposes, of his professional duties of surveying in the regions newly conquered from Tipu and in Southern Deccan. It was in the latter year that as Mackenzie himself generously acknowledges in a letter to Sir A. Johnstone,² that he came to appreciate the genius of Hindu, and in special of Brahmin scholarship which proved so helpful to him in his tasks. He thus writes of Kavali Venkata Boriah (Sooriah) who was his first Pandit-" The connection that I then (1796) formed with one person, a native and a Brahmin (Boriah), was the first step of my introduction into the portals of Indian knowledge. From the moment the talents of the lamented Boriah were applied, a new avenue to Hindu knowledge was opened; and though I was deprived of him at an early age, his example and instructions were so happily followed up by his brethren and disciples than an establishment was gradually formed through which the whole of our provinces might be gradually analysed by the method thus fortuitously begun and successfully followed so far." Thus Mackenzie was the pioneer to kindle

the lamp of historical and antiquarian research in the Indian mind as well as the founder of the peripatetic parties for the search of manuscripts and the discovery of archeological finds.

In the course of his official duties in the Mysore country and its northern and eastern frontier which lasted till 1810, his collection began to grow apace, and the quantity of grants, *sasanams* and manuscripts that he acquired enabled him to secure valuable information, among other interesting subjects, on the following topics:

1. The discovery of the Jaina religion and philosophy and its distinction from that of the Buddha.
2. The different ancient religious sects of the country and their sub-divisions like the Lingayat, Saivam, Pandaram Mutts, etc.
3. The nature and use of *sasanams* and inscriptions on stone and copper, especially with reference to the light that they throw on Hindu tenures.
4. The design and nature of monumental stones and trophies like *Virakal* and *Mastikal* which illustrate some of the ancient customs of the land.
5. A descriptive account of the discovered sepulchral tumuli, mounds and barrows of the primitive inhabitants of the land.

MARK WILKS'S VIEW

Of authentic inscriptions alone he was able to collect over 3,000. The value of the whole collection was first perceived by Lieutenant-Colonel Mark Wilks who thus acknowledges his obligations to the Collector and the collection : Lieutenant-Colonel Mackenzie has devoted to this pursuit the leisure which he has been enabled to snatch from a long course of meritorious and active service; and has formed under numerous discouragements a stupendous and daily increasing collection of all that is necessary to illustrate the antiquities, the civil, military and religious institutions and ancient history of South India; and I trust that he will in due time communicate to the public the result of his extraordinary perseverance I am obliged to Mackenzie for several valuable communications on particular periods of history written expressly for my aid and information in arranging the materials of the present work; and I cannot acknowledge in terms of too much gratitude how largely I am indebted to an unimpeded access to the study of the collection and to an intercourse entirely unreserved, with its worthy possessor and his large establishment of learned native assistants for whatever knowledge I possess of the ancient history of the South of India."³

Surveyor-General

Mackenzie became Surveyor-General of Madras in 1810, but was soon afterwards called away to command the Engineers in Java (1811-1815). 'While - in Java, Mackenzie took great interest in the Batavian Society and contributed some valuable notices -to its organ-including an account of a visit to -the ruins of Brambanam.⁴ He rose to be Surveyor-General of India in 1816 -and died near Calcutta, 8th May 1821.

Varied Publications

Mackenzie carried to Calcutta his literary and antiquarian collection and along with it a few of his devoted South Indian assistants. He had in occasional snatches of leisure published several articles⁵ in '*The Oriental Annual Register* and in the volumes of *the Asiatic Researches*.⁶ The subjects were varied in interest and included an account of the life of Haidar Ali, of the history of the Anegundi or Vijayanagar Rajas, of the Bhats or bards, of the temple of Srisailam, of Jain monuments and establishments, of the architecture and sculptures of the west and south coasts of Ceylon and of translation of several inscriptions.

His Design

Mackenzie had intended to present himself a condensed view of the whole collection. "It was his design," he wrote, "to publish a Catalogue Raisonnee of the Indian manuscripts and books and give the translated materials such form as might facilitate the production of some parts, should I they ever appear to the public, at least by persons better qualified, if the grateful task be not permitted to his years or to his

state of health."⁷ When death cut short his useful life, the whole collection was bought by the Governor-General, the Marquis of Hastings, at the instance of Sir A. Johnstone and with the permission of the Directors; and the task of cataloguing and indexing the whole material in an easily assemble form fell into the worthy hands of Professor H.H. Wilson ,then Secretary to the Asiatic Society of Bengal. 'The bulk of Wilson's two volumes was devoted to manuscripts in the original languages including a few in Persian and Arabic, Javanese and Burmese. An appendix gave short notices of what were called the Local Tracts dealing with particular places, buildings, traditions and usages; and the whole was prefaced by a luminous estimate of the chief results of the collection and the degree in which it would illustrate the literature, history and religions of South India.

Transfer of Mackenzie's Materials

Professor Wilson did not get at the whole treasure of what Mackenzie actually collected; for it appears that a considerable portion-including manuscripts in Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic, Javanese and Burman, and all the maps, plans, drawings, coins, images and sculptures had been despatched to England in two installments in 1823 and 1825.⁸ He suggested that the portion of the remaining collection consisting of books and tracts in the Dravidian languages might be sent as a most acceptable addition to the Library of the Madras College or the Madras Literary Society. These were accordingly sent over to Madras and deposited in the College Library in 1828. The Madras Literary Society addressed Government shortly afterwards⁹ on the desirability of proceeding, under the auspices of its Asiatic Department, to organise, as an initial effort, the papers relating to the Jains and inscriptions in general and extracting and publishing there from valuable information. The Society also intimated that the services of Kavalı Venkata Lakshmiah, a Pandit who was for 30 years in the service of Mackenzie, were available for this purpose. Though the materials were transferred to the custody of the Society, nothing fruitful was carried out by that body; while the offer made in 1836 by Mackenzie's Pandit that he would continue the researches of his late master was turned down by the Government of India on the recommendation of the Committee of the Asiatic Society who declared strangely enough that what was wanted was not so much the collection of new material as the thorough examination of that already existing.

Assessment of Mackenzie's Collections

Meanwhile there came forward men who proposed to and did work to some extent on the examination of the different parts of the Collection. Captain Harkness, Secretary to the Royal Asiatic Society (1833-1838), undertook to translate and describe a portion of the manuscripts in London. M. Jacquet of Paris offered to decipher and publish the bulk of the inscriptions in the collection; while the Reverend W.Taylor, a Madras missionary, published the results of his examination of the manuscripts in Tamil in 1835.¹⁰ The services of Taylor were secured for the further work of thoroughly examining all the records; and the results of his labours were published from time to time in the issues of *The Madras Journal of Literature and Science* in a highly interesting series of analytical reports. His final *Catalogue Raisonnee of Oriental Manuscripts*¹¹ in the Madras College was undertaken at the instance of the distinguished Sir Walter Elliot, archeologist and numismatist, and dedicated to him. This *Catalogue* included in its scope a survey of the collections of manuscripts made by John Leyden and C. P. Brown known as the East India House Collection and Brown Manuscripts respectively. The Leyden Collection was made by John Leyden (1775-1811) who was a noted linguist and a collaborator with Sir Walter Scott and best known in Oriental circles as the translator of Babar's Memoirs. After qualifying himself as a preacher and a doctor, he went over to Madras in 1803 and was employed as Surgeon and Naturalist to the Commissioners who were appointed to survey Mysore under Mackenzie (1803-1806). Leyden then drew up many useful papers on the geology and products of the Mysore country while quickly making himself proficient in Sanskrit and amusing himself in his leisure hours by translating tales from Persian and Urdu. "Wherever he went" his biographer, the Reverend James Morton writes, "he visited the temples and remarkable buildings on his route, copied and translated the ancient inscriptions and in every place sought after materials to illustrate the history, the customs and the religion of

the natives."¹² A short stay at Penang was enough for him to prosecute an inquiry into the peculiarities of the Malay race which was subsequently published as an essay.¹³ At Calcutta whither he went in 1806 he published a treatise on the Indo-Persian, Indo-Chinese and Deccan languages which led to his appointment as Professor of Hindustani at the College of Fort William. He subsequently rose to be a Judge and Assay Master at the Mint; but died prematurely when in Java acting as Malay Interpreter to Lord Minto's expedition to that Island (1811). "His early death was deplored by leading literati as a loss to Oriental learning and literature;" and Sir John Malcolm despaired of ever seeing his equal in the power of assimilating ancient and modern languages and of interpreting from all available material the history of the land.

Leyden's valuable collection of manuscripts in the Indian languages was purchased by the Company. C. P. Brown (1798-1884) who was in the Madras Civil Service from 1817 to 1855 and became an ardent student of Telugu, catalogued these manuscripts which numbered 2106.¹⁴ To these Mr. Brown added his own collection which in point of numbers was the richest of the three. Most of the Brown manuscripts were written in the Telugu character and in the Sanskrit and Telugu languages.

To conclude, all these three collections constituted a rich unexplored mine of knowledge and information, affording ample scope for translation, interpretation and research. The comprehensive *Catalogue Raisonnee of Mr. Taylor* is a monument of tireless industry and labour; it is prefaced by an introduction explaining the leading features of the various groups of subjects and thought to which the collections refer. Thus historical and other material for the paucity of which India has been blamed has always been forthcoming in abundance to intelligent and enthusiastic searchers. Good points may be culled even from the most trivial looking accounts and notices which are ordinarily brushed aside either as romance or as being too trashy to receive serious notice. The amount of information which can be gleaned from the historical portions of these collections has not yet been fully availed of. It is good for us all to bear in mind the caution given by Taylor. The absolute non-existence of historical records and our not being acquainted with such as do exist are quite different propositions. It is best to suspend a judgment on the former point until positively certain that all possible materials have been thoroughly sifted, and found to yield dust and no diamonds. Mackenzie, Leyden and Brown acted to the full truth of this and accumulated materials so far as was possible in their days; and they shine as beacon lights to all succeeding collectors and researchers.

END NOTES

1. Sir Alexander Johnstone's evidence before the Select Committee of the Commons in 1832-quoted in Taylor, W., *Catalogue Raisonnee of Oriental Manuscripts*, Vol. I, Introduction, pp. II and III.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. III-IX.
3. *Historical sketches of the South of India in an attempt to trace the history of Mysore* (2nd edition). Vol. I, Introduction pp. xi-xii.
4. Wilson, *A Descriptive Catalogue of the Mackenzie Collection*, Vol. I, p. xiv.
5. *Ibid*, pp. XII and XIII and Buckland, *Dictionary of Indian Biography*, p. 26.
6. *Asiatic Researches*, Vols. for 1804, V, VI and IX.
7. Wilson, H.H., *Mackenzie Collection*, I, pp. xv-xvi.
8. Wilson's letter to Government, dated 20th February 1828, quoted in Taylor's *Catalogue Raisonnee*, Vol. I. Preface, p. IX.
9. Letter of Secretary, Madras Literary Society, dated 9th March, 1830, quoted *Ibid*, pp. xv-xvi
10. *Oriental Historical Manuscripts in the Tamil Language*. Translated with annotations, 2 Vols.
11. In 3 Volumes, Madras, 1857.
12. Morton, J., *Biography of Leyden*, 1819, quoted in Taylor's *Catalogue Raisonnee*, Vol. I.
13. 'A Dissertation in the Languages and Literature of the Indo-Chinese Nations' in *Asiatic Researches*, Vol. X.
14. *Journal of the Madras Literary Society for 1847*, p. 97.