

150th Anniversary Celebration of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.<sup>1</sup>

ALL ancient institutions worthy of the name have their established traditions and customs, and there is, I understand, in our venerable Society a practice—comparable perhaps to the Hindu custom of abstaining from all forms of study on the day sacred to the Goddess of Learning—of removing, once in twenty-five years, most of the outward and visible signs of scholarship from this historic hall to make place for a banquet in celebration of the passing of another long stage in our career. “Dulce est desipere in loco.” Some of us have perhaps forgotten our Horace but if by the succinct phrase “in loco” the poet meant a qualification not only of place but of time,—and this is borne out by the well-known rendering “a little folly now and then is relished by the wisest men”—then time and place are peculiarly suitable for our laying aside the aspect of the scholar this evening for the place is the Society’s own home, built for them, on a site provided by the old East India Company’s Government, 126 years ago and inhabited by the Society continuously ever since; and the occasion marks the passage of a century and a half since a small company of scholars met together at the invitation of Sir Robert Chambers to found our Society and to inaugurate those meetings which in their early days assembled under the presidency of Sir William Jones in the Grand Jury Room of the Court at Fort William.

Properly regarded, such an occasion should be both symbolic in nature and ceremonial in form—the essence of the ceremonial being the creation of that common atmosphere of feeling and understanding in which an ideal may be more clearly visualised and an aspiration more deeply felt. To put it another way: a ceremonial meeting is not the appropriate place for giving or receiving detailed instruction but should have for its aim the cultivation of a mood.

For these reasons, Gentlemen, I do not propose to indulge in any reflections on the individual features, important though they be, of the Society’s long career as outlined in the most interesting address of the President. I would rather notice broadly some of the salient features of to-day’s celebrations—“broadly” because while the eye is the instrument best suited to the leisured assimilation of detail, the organ to which I must appeal to-night, the ear is more apt for the perception of general principles.

In the first place, then let me recall the stress that Indian philosophy has laid on the evanescence of all things in this material world. Empires decline, dynasties fall, great men and small pass on, and institutions once firmly established come to an end. Notwithstanding changing times—and has any other period of equal length been so fruitful of changes as the period 1784-1934?—the Society has managed to survive in vigour a century and a half of arduous labour. I am not sure that we fully realise how little of institutional life has come down to us from the days before the French Revolution. That there

are still extant Academic Societies, Museums and Universities ante-dating that event cannot be gainsaid, but their number is comparatively limited. Here in India not many institutions remain unaltered from those remote days. The very Indian Empire in its present form has only half the Society’s span of years. Survival is dependent on vitality; and in all human institutions the test of vitality is activity. It is therefore a proof of the past activity of the Society that it has been able to survive till to-day. For the last ninety years our membership has mostly oscillated between three and five hundred; and though it went beyond this maximum during a brief period between 1925 and 1932, it is within the same limits that we find ourselves now. Periodical fluctuations in membership have not, however, interfered with the general rate of progress since the foundation of the institution. We are justified in concluding therefore that the Society has well maintained its health and vitality despite advancing years.

And what of the Society’s activities during the third half century of its existence? Have we anything to show comparable to that series of giants who were associated with the Society’s work in the beginning, in the days of Sir William Jones and his immediate successors whose records are to be found in the pages of our Centenary Volume? The President has brought forward an imposing array of names of scholars outstanding in the fields of the Natural Sciences and of Philology and it would not be difficult I believe to add to his list. It is gratifying and may even come as a surprise to some—to note that the Society is able to cite from amongst the members active within its ranks during the last fifty years more than a score of men who have won for themselves a place in the world’s encyclopædia of scholarship—men who have helped materially to mould modern views in science and in letters. That this is not an empty boast is strikingly and abundantly proved by the addresses that have come to us from centres of learning all over the world. I venture to think that it may be something of a revelation to many members of the Society to “wake up” as it were “and find themselves” in the person of their Society “famous”—to hear the warm praise bestowed upon its work by learned bodies in distant countries, the praise of the Zoological Society of London for the Society’s work in Zoology, of the Linnean Society for its work in Botany, of the Prussian Academy for its indological researches and of representative institutions of four continents for its labours in the Geological, Anthropological, Archaeological and other fields. Can it be that the old saying “a prophet is not without honour but in his own country” is of application to the Asiatic Society of Bengal?

Another aspect of this celebration is the gratifying demonstration that it affords of the intellectual solidarity of the world. I understand that no addresses or congratulations were invited by the Society and that all the messages and tributes received have been spontaneous. Some thirty institutions, representing fifteen countries, have expressed their good wishes in messages which constitute a rare testimony to the esteem

<sup>1</sup> Speech by His Excellency the Right Hon’ble Sir John Anderson, P.C., G.C.B., G.C.I.E., Governor of Bengal and Patron of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.



in which the Society is held in the world of scholarship to-day. We are particularly happy to welcome here to-day Monsieur Delacour of the National Museum, Paris, and Mr. Alfred Ezra, representing the Zoological Society, of London of which he is Vice-President. It is also gratifying to see the number of Societies from India and Ceylon participating in our celebration. A dozen of them are represented either by personal attendance or by addresses. The Ceylon and Assam Societies have deputed their Presidents to be with us, and Bombay and other Indian centres of study are also well represented here to-night.

From all this it is very evident that the Society has both a national and an international significance and the citizens of Calcutta would do well to consider in what way they could take a greater share in the support and the renown of the institution established so long in their midst. According to the traditional formula as one who is anxious to promote the progress of science and literature is eligible for membership technical or academical qualifications are not indispensable. We must of course have our scholars, our specialists and our workers, but we are equally in need of patrons and supporters. In this connection I have noted with satisfaction the traditional connection of the order of Ruling Princes with the Society. A considerable number of the Ruling Princes of India have always been members. It would be a happy thing if this tradition could be widened and made permanent and if a day might come when the name of no substantial Ruler in this country would be missing from our members' list to the great benefit of scholarship in this vast country. If it is too much to hope that the Society's Members' list should be a complete directory of the aristocracy of the country, social and intellectual, it is at least reasonable to expect that a society of the standing which this Society enjoys, and one pursuing as its object the study of all that is produced by Nature or made by man within the limits of Asia, should draw its main support from sources not confined to the Municipal limits of Calcutta.

I had not intended this evening to make any personal reference within the Society but looking round me I feel I must make one exception. A

past president of the Society and still an honorary fellow, Sir Rajendranath Mookerjee has been for many decades a personality and a leader in almost every intellectual and progressive movement in this city. Advancing years make participation in functions like this an increasing burden to him but I wish to say that we regret his absence and we think of him with affection.

We have to-night elected in honour of the occasion twelve Anniversary Fellows of the Society. Drawn as they are from countries and from a great variety of fields of study, they illustrate once more the catholicity of our interests. Their names are a sufficient commendation and I will only say that I congratulate them and the Society on the honour which their election confers on both.

Ladies and gentlemen, it would, I am sure, be your wish that I should in my own name and yours express, however briefly, our thanks to those responsible for the organisation of these anniversary celebrations. An occasion of this kind entails a vast amount of forethought and labour and we owe a great debt of gratitude to the Anniversary Celebration Committee of which Dr. Hora is the energetic Secretary and to our own General Secretary, Mr. Van Manen, for the arrangements which have made possible so pleasant and inspiring a celebration.

It now only remains for me to congratulate the Society on a brilliant past and to wish it an equally brilliant future. The secret of real success in a Society of this kind is disinterested effort. In the realm of mind we are all brothers. May your labours for the future be marked by the same unselfish zeal and enthusiasm that have distinguished them in the past! Only by these qualities will enduring results be obtained. I trust that it may be vouchsafed to the Society to inaugurate to-day a new period of its life—a period worthy of its distinguished past and of the promise that the present holds—so that when once more, after another half century has gone, our successors assemble to review the period then closing, they may still be able to say with truth, as we are happily in a position to say to-day, that a worthy tradition has been worthily followed.

### A River Physics Laboratory for India.<sup>1</sup>

**T**HERE are many lines in which the Government of India as well as the provincial governments can profit immensely if they take the trouble of obtaining proper scientific guidance before launching on large-scale enterprises. As many such cases are not known to all, I would refer to only one. Year after year the Government and other public bodies spend an enormous amount in constructing bridges and water reservoirs, in opening canals, in development schemes, in hydro-electric schemes and in city drainage schemes. These schemes are certainly highly beneficial and undertaken with the best of intentions, but from time to time, very unpleasant facts leak through the columns of the news agency, which show that

these schemes are mishandled at some stage or other. Every scientific man knows that before the actual working commences the plans should be scientifically studied in Hydraulic Research Laboratories, with the aid of models and the engineers in charge of constructions should have a clear-cut idea of the work before they are put in charge of it. In spite of the fact that next to the United States of America, India is the country which has undertaken such works on the most gigantic scale, and has spent hundreds of crores of rupees on these works, the Government has not yet thought fit to establish a single Hydraulic Research or River Physics Laboratory in this country while in other civilised countries no such enterprise is allowed to be undertaken unless the plans are examined in suitable laboratories attached to the Universities, Technical High Schools, or State departments with the aid of

<sup>1</sup> From the Presidential Address to the Indian Science Congress (Bombay), 1934, by Professor Meghnad Saha, D.Sc., F.R.S.