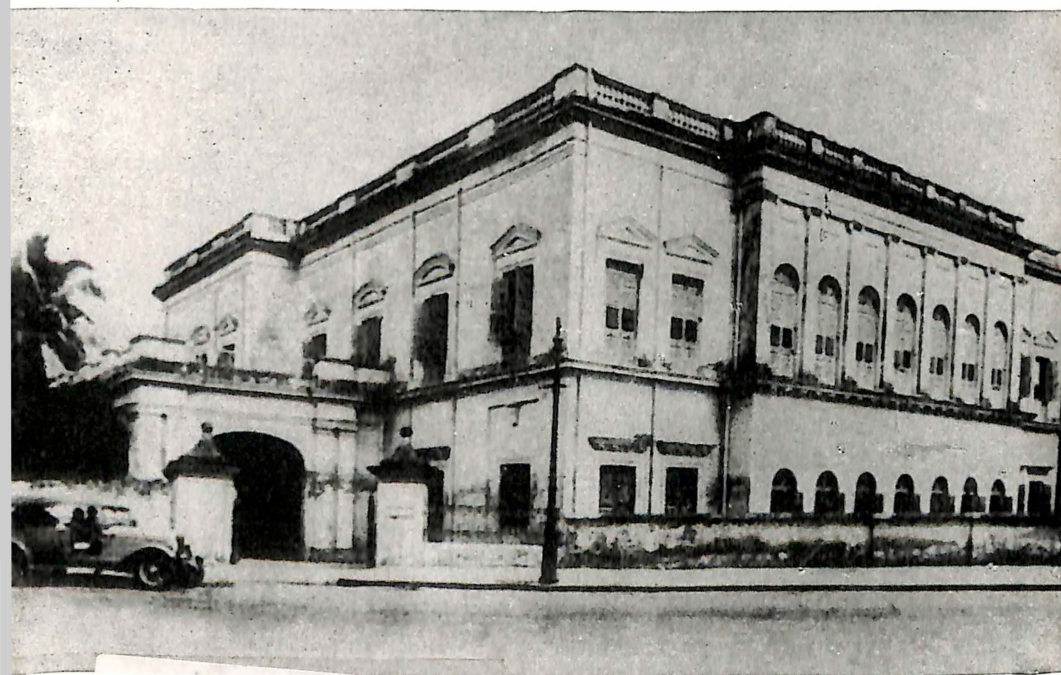


THE ASIATIC SOCIETY

FOUNDED 15 JANUARY, 1784

(An Institution of National Importance)



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1 PARK STREET, CALCUTTA 700016
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PREFACE

This small volume on the Asiatic Society gives a brief outline of its growth and development, its various activities, as well as its future development plans. It is widely acknowledged that the Asiatic Society is unique in many ways, being the oldest learned institution in modern India which made the single most important contribution to the revival of the Indian spirit that lay behind the Indian Renaissance. In many ways the Asiatic Society has promoted the growth and development of the major academic associations and institutions in India. Unfortunately, many people outside the circle of scholars and intellectuals are not quite aware of the importance of the Asiatic Society, its activities and its priceless possessions. This small booklet, we hope, will meet that need.

Recently the Society has before it several plans and projects. One of these plans "Heritage India" intends to vividly present different facets of Indian history, culture and civilization. The project, we hope, will succeed in highlighting the pluralistic, yet integrated character of Indian life and activities. Several other projects like the *Encyclopaedia Asiatica*, setting up a centre for the development of computer-based typography for scripts of classical languages of India and Southeast Asian countries, cultural co-operation between the Asiatic Society and the U.K., U.S.A., Germany, Hungary, China and Russia have also been taken up by the Society.

We feel that while preserving and enriching the original character of the Society as a premier institution for the promotion of Oriental studies and research, it is imperative that to keep pace with the needs of modern times the Society should also promote activities and integrated research which have contemporary relevance.

We sincerely hope that the Society's past history will provide us with necessary confidence and inspiration.

I acknowledge with thanks the assistance received from scholars of the Asiatic Society, and I am specially grateful to Professor Anil Kumar Sarkar and Professor Sisir Kumar Das who have helped me in the preparation of this slim volume.

15 March, 1995
Calcutta 700016

CHANDAN ROYCHAUDHURI
General Secretary

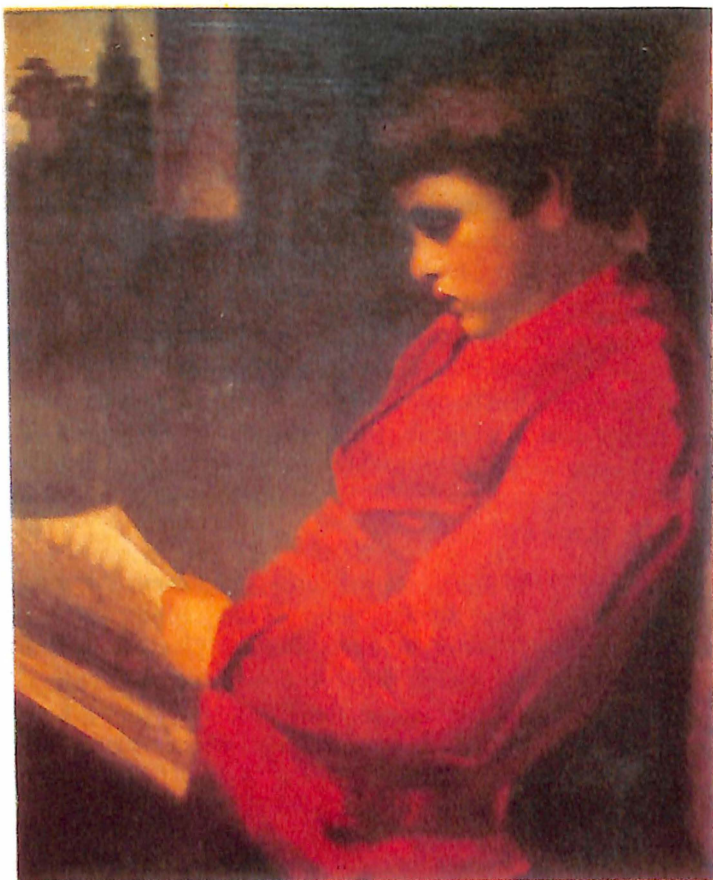
Genesis

The Asiatic Society had a rather humble beginning, but it was the realization of a magnificent dream of an outstanding scholar from Oxford, Sir William Jones, Fellow of the Royal Society. Jones came to India as a puisne judge of the Bengal Supreme Court at Fort William. Within months of his arrival in India he founded the Asiatic Society. He was a poet, a linguist, and above all an orientalist *par excellence*. Jones was greatly influenced by Benjamin Franklin, the founder of the American Philosophical Society. He had already published a *Grammar of the Persian Language* (1771), poems consisting chiefly of translations from the Asiatic languages (1773), the *Saba-Mualla Kat* or Seven Arabic Poems (1782), and was also deeply absorbed in Sanskrit studies. He learnt Sanskrit from Pandit Ramlochan Kavibhusan of Howrah. His translation of Kalidasa's *Sakuntala* (Calcutta 1790) captivated Goethe; and the *Asiatick Researches*, edited (1788) by him, opened the eyes of the European scholars to the grandeur of India, its science, civilization and culture.

On 15 January, 1784 Jones invited thirty gentlemen, the elite of the European community, like Justice John Hyde, John Carnac, Henry Vanistart, John Shore, Charles Wilkins, Francis Gladwin and Jonathan Duncan. They met in the Grand Jury Room of the Supreme Court at Calcutta with Sir Robert Chambers in the Chair, and passed a resolution for the establishment of the Asiatic Society which would investigate practically everything under the sun. Thus his 'Asian Dream' encompassed the entire range of human knowledge.

The name of the Society has undergone various changes during the last two centuries such as the Asiatic Society of Bengal (1832-1935), The Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal (1936-1951) and in July 1952 it came to be known as the Asiatic Society.

The Society's old building constructed in 1805 is one of the most important historical edifices of the metropolis; today, it is in a true sense, a national monument; and the maintenance of the building is under the direct control of the President of India. The new building of the Asiatic Society built in 1965 was inaugurated by Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan who was at that time the President of India. He dedicated the Society to the advancement of the Sciences, Physical and Human, to be achieved through international co-operation as was visualized by Sir William Jones in 1784.



Sir William Jones as a boy Painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds

The Contributions of the Asiatic Society

The Asiatic Society, founded in 1784, is the oldest institution of learning in science and humanities in India today. "Some institutions reflect history and some contribute to it". But the Asiatic Society has reflected history and has contributed to it by retrieving, restoring, preserving and studying the ancient remains and thus revealing the country's past. Through its work the Society has revealed the cultural and intellectual achievements of India to the rest of the world. But more than the impact the Society had on Europe was its influence on Indian life and thought. Not only did it give back to India its forgotten heritage, but asserted that India once possessed a very rich culture and had progressed no less than Europe in

art, science and literature. This discovery of the country's past and the evolution of historical consciousness in its people helped in heralding the Indian Renaissance.

It is through the Asiatic Society that the world's attention was first drawn to India's rich heritage — its philosophy, its literature, mathematics, medicine, astronomy as well as the methodology of scientific investigation. The Society popularised Sanskrit texts as well as the rich store of scientific and philosophical knowledge in Persian and other Asian languages. The foundation of linguistics, Indian archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, historiography and many other fields of studies was also laid here. Thus the Society became the centre of a new phase of European enlightenment.

The Society was from the beginning fertilized by western thought and ideas. Its aim, however, was to enlarge the domain of knowledge and contribute to the growth of modern India. Jones declared the object of the Society in these words :

investigation of whatever is rare in the stupendous fabric of nature; correcting the geography of Asia by new observations and discoveries; tracing the annals and even traditions of these nations ... and bringing to light their various forms of government, with their institutions, civil and religious; examining their improvements and methods in arithmetic and geometry — its trigonometry, mensuration, mechanics, optics, astronomy and general physics; their systems of modality, grammar and rhetoric and dialectic; their skill in chirurgery and medicine, and their advancement whatever it may be, in anatomy and chemistry. To this you will add researches into their agriculture, manufacture and trade, and, whilst you enquire into their music, architecture, painting and poetry, will not neglect those inferior arts, by which comforts, and even elegances of social life, are supplied or improved. If now it be asked, what are the intended objects of our enquiries within these specious limits, we answer, Man and Nature; whatever is performed by the one, or produced by the other.

How far this noble aim has been faithfully and diligently carried out can be illustrated by a look at the growth and development of most of the major institutions in India today.

The Society's contribution to the growth and development of most of the major antiquarian, scientific and literary institutions in India was immense.

The Society has been collecting specimens, art objects and artefacts since 1796. On 2 February, 1814 the Society decided to set up a Museum and appointed Dr Nathaniel Wallich Superintendent of the "Museum of the Asiatic Society"; he was in charge of the geological and zoological specimens. Through his untiring efforts the collections multiplied and when it became 'an unmanageable burden' to properly display the objects for the education of the common men, it was decided (1868) that the specimens and artefacts should be transferred to the Trustees of the Indian Museum. This was done in 1875 when the building of the Indian Museum was completed.

The Asiatic Society was the first institution in India to publish weather reports in 1788; meteorological observations began in 1824 and went on for fifty-one years. When the government established the Indian Meteorological Department in 1875, its chief was H.F. Blanford who was Secretary (1863-68) and President (1884) of the Asiatic Society and was engaged in the preparation of reports at the Society.

In 1824 the Asiatic Society formed a Geological Committee which started surveying the land, investigating the resources of a particular region and publishing the findings in written reports published in the *Asiatick Researches*. The Geological Survey of India as it is known today was born much later on 5 March, 1851. Thomas Oldham who was the first Director of the Geological Survey was a member and later President (1868-69) of the Society. In 1861 The Archaeological Survey of India was founded. The Government of India communicated to the Society the first archaeological report by Alexander Cunningham who was also a member of the Asiatic Society. The Society published his Reports for three years (1861-64). Similarly the Anthropological Survey of India which was born on 1 December, 1945 was largely indebted to the researches initiated long ago in this area by the Asiatic Society; Dr B.S. Guha who was the General Secretary of the Society (1937-1940) joined the Anthropological Survey as its first Director. A curious thing was that all Surveyor Generals including Colin Mackenzie and George Everest were for years members of the Asiatic Society.

An illustrious member of the Asiatic Society was George Abraham Grierson who was largely instrumental in the making of the Linguistic Survey of India in 1896. The zoological gallery at the Asiatic Society Museum under the care of Dr Nathaniel Wallich supplied the impetus behind the formation of the Zoological Survey of India and it was much later born as an independent organization on 1 July, 1916. William Lambton, who for several years published papers on Trigonometry, was also

a member of the Asiatic Society, and he was put in charge of the Trigonometrical Survey that came into being in 1802. The Asiatic Society regularly carried out researches in botany; the first paper "Mahwa Tree" by C. Hamilton on botanical research was also published in the *Asiatick Researches* in 1788; all pioneer Indian botanists, William Roxburg, Nathaniel Wallich, John Forbes, Royle and others were members of the Asiatic Society before 1836; Lord Hastings purchased hundreds of botanical books and kept them in the Asiatic Society. These led to the formation of the Botanical Survey on 13 February, 1890.

The Asiatic Society, Calcutta was also the model for all other Asiatic Societies of the world including the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland which was established in 1823. A large number of important national institutions grew up between 1785 and 1860 and the Asiatic Society either directly or indirectly inspired their growth. One of these was the Calcutta Medical College which was established in 1835. Many of the members of the Asiatic Society were medical men and when Lord Bentinck established the Medical College he chose as its first Principal Dr M.J. Bramley who was also a member of the Society. Dr Leonard Rogers, the first Director of the School of Tropical Medicine established in 1920 happened to be the President (1915) of the Asiatic Society. Later the Asiatic Society donated all its medical books to the School of Tropical Medicine.

The first proposal for establishing a university in Calcutta was mooted on 4 November, 1845. The proposal came from Ram Gopal Ghosh, who was a member of the Council of Education and was the first Indian Vice-President of the Asiatic Society (1853-1858). At that time Sir James William Colville was the President of the Asiatic Society (1848-1859). Sir James was also the President of the Council of Education, and as the Vice-President of the Governor General's Council he piloted the Universities Bill, and then as the Chief Justice of the Calcutta Supreme Court (1855-59) he championed the cause of the Calcutta University. The University of Calcutta was born (1857) and Sir James was nominated its first Vice-Chancellor.

The Indian Science Congress was started (15 January, 1914) under the auspices of the Asiatic Society with Sir Asutosh Mukherjee as its first President. The Asiatic Society had also provided the Congress accommodation and secretarial facilities for more than thirty years. Other similar organizations which had been provided accommodation and other facilities include the Agricultural and Horticultural Society of India (1820), the Automobile Association of Bengal, the Photographic Society of India, Serampore Missionaries (for a course of Lectures on Chemistry and

Phrenology), the Medical and Physical Societies of Calcutta and Indian National Science Academy. The Society also contributed to the foundation of the Calcutta Public Library which was begun in 1835 by Prince Dwarkanath Tagore who was the foremost native member of the Asiatic Society. Many other institutions which no longer exist today were similarly encouraged and helped by the Society.

Before the International Congress of Orientalists was founded (1873), the Society conceived of such a gathering, though in a miniature form, as early as 1811. A meeting of the Physical and Literary Committee of the Society was held at Malacca on 8 June, 1811 under the presidency of Lord Minto. This move of the Society to hold a conference outside its headquarters may be considered as a predecessor of the International Congress of Human Sciences in Asia and North Africa (1976), formerly International Congress of Orientalists in which the Society has been taking an active part since the foundation of the Congress in 1873.

Lord Macaulay's *Minutes* (1835) asserted that oriental languages and literature had little or nothing to contribute to the enlightened mind; and Lord Bentinck also identified himself with the anti-orientalist policy of the Raj. But James Prinsep, at that time the General Secretary of the Society, stalled a decision of the Government to stop releasing funds for the printing of oriental works.

The Society has always taken an active interest in the welfare and progress of the educational and research institutions all over India. Its immense contributions and its historic importance were at last recognized, and the Government of India declared it as "an Institution of national importance" by an Act of Parliament in its bicentenary year, 1984. The inaugural speech of Mrs Indira Gandhi (11 January, 1984) at the bicentenary celebrations of the society is given below :

REDISCOVERY OF OUR HERITAGE

It seems that this visit of mine to Calcutta is a date with history. Just before coming here, I opened an exhibition, 'Calcutta : Past and Present' and that went even further back than the 200 years of this Society. But there is no doubt that a bicentenary is a very important occasion, especially for a Society of which we can legitimately be proud. I congratulate the Asiatic Society on this birthday. It has done much for our country and for the world of learning.

Some institutions reflect history and some contribute to it. This Society has done both. Through its work it revealed India's cultural and intellectual achievements to Europe. When we were enveloped in doubt and difficulty, it let in a ray of light. To our own people this meant a rediscovery of our heritage and restored our self-respect. It can be said that the revival of India's spirit originated here.

The world's attention was drawn to India's philosophical thought, Indian literature, and also to Indian mathematics, astronomy and scientific investigations. The Society popularised Sanskrit text as well as the great store of scientific and philosophical knowledge in Persian and other languages. The foundations of Indian archaeology, numismatics, epigraphy, historiography etc., were laid here. Investigations were pioneered here which brought into being many national organizations about which you have already heard.

Empire builders helped the rulers but there were scholars and thinkers who truly served the ruled and lit candles in the darkness of colonial rule. This Society did more than this. The story of the electric impact on European scholars and authors, of Sir William Jones's researches into what he called the "Celestial language", Sanskrit, and of his translation of Shakuntala is well known. I have just heard that this is going to be performed here in his translation. This awakened interest in oriental studies and stimulated new branches of study, like philology, comparative linguistics



Prime Minister Sm. Indira Gandhi with Dr Chandan Roy Choudhuri, General Secretary, looking at the Asokan Rock Edict of 250 B.C. at the Museum of the Asiatic Society during its Bicentenary in January, 1984

and comparative religion and mythology. This Society can legitimately claim to be the elder brother of the Russian Asiatic Society, which was established in St. Petersburg, now Leningrad, in 1810, the Asiatic Society of Paris, which came into being in 1822, and the Royal Asiatic Society of London, in 1829.

The founders of the Society aimed at a union of Indian and European learning. Raja Rammohun Roy and his colleagues were enthusiastic about the new knowledge of the West, but without alienating themselves from the front of our old wisdom. Rabindranath Tagore, who also symbolised such a union of East and West, said : "we are complementary to each other because of our different outlooks upon life, which have given us a different aspect of truth."

Heritage is not merely to be admired and drawn upon. It has to be studied in depth as a means of self-understanding; it has to be preserved, cherished and enriched. Yet the contemporary human is largely blind to the beauty, natural or man-made, that has come down to us and are allowing it to be denuded and desecrated.

For countless centuries the dexterity of our artisans was the envy of the world. The craftsmen who built the Taj Mahal and the shore temple of Mahabalipuram were described as having conceived their grand patterns like gaints and executed them like jewellers. Such are the standards of perfection that we should set for ourselves in every project. The descendants of those craftsmen are still amongst us.

In several parts of our country great treasures from the past lie undiscovered in private collections or obscure galleries. Often enough their value is not known even to their guardians and they are poorly maintained and unattractively displayed. This palces such treasures at risk. Already we have lost too much. We can no longer neglect searching for and restoring these treasures and safeguarding them from predatory eyes. The responsibility has to be shared between old institutions like this Society and new groups of citizens. The campaign has to be a continuing one, not a series of sporadic thrusts.

Institutions like the Asiatic Society must form part of our people's educational system and cultural activity. They must continue to innovate and keep pace with the times. History has no holiday. The entire community must be sensitive to social and cultural development which influences and is influenced by individual action.

The Society's original statement of objectives refers to the study of man and nature, whatever in performed by one or produced by the other.

We do not still understand the full potential of either man or nature. The exploitation of nature has given us many short-term gains, but there is increasing realization that humankind cannot survive if the destructive instinct is not checked. And also our heritage cannot be preserved if there are amongst us those who wish to narrow the width and the breadth of its vision and its farsightedness. The scope of the Society's study continues to have relevance.

The Society has completed two centuries of rich endeavour, but it has also passed through a difficult period. Its future depends on the success with which it can meet contemporary needs.

I should like to reaffirm what the Finance Minister has said, that is, that I have decided to declare it as an Institution of National Importance. As you know, the Central Government is giving it large grants. If we had more funds ourselves, we would help it more. But this grant does not in any way affect its autonomy; we do not want to interfere with its functions or with its programmes.

Once more, I welcome you all here. I have great pleasure in inaugurating the celebrations and give you my good wishes.

May this bicentenary enable the Society to regain its pre-eminence in the study of our many splendoured heritage.

My good wishes to you all and may I say that for me it has been a great privilege to be amongst you on this occasion.

Activities

The Asiatic Society initiated modern scientific investigations in different fields of humanities and sciences. It may be said that there is no branch of science or arts in India which did not receive encouragement and nourishment from the Asiatic Society during the last two centuries. Naturally, the Society occupies the position of the foremost research institution in the East.

The Society is regarded as the birthplace of linguistics and comparative philology. In February, 1786 Jones demonstrated not only "the affinity between Sanskrit, Greek, Latin and even the Celtic and Teutonic languages", but also "ascribed this affinity to a postulated common source

which no longer existed". Macdonell in his *History of Sanskrit Literature* remarked that "since the Renaissance there has been no event of such world-wide significance in the history of culture as the discovery of Sanskrit literature in the latter part of the eighteenth century". James Prinsep deciphered the Brahmi Script (1837) and with the help of Premchand Tarkavagis, an Indian Scholar, read the language of the Asokan edicts (one of the edicts belonging to 250 B.C. is in the possession of the Society's Museum) and rock inscriptions which contributed to our knowledge of ancient Indian art of writing. Once the Asokan Brahmi script was deciphered, the history and development of Indian scripts could be finally established. The Society's archaeological and philological researches led to the deciphering of the Indian Prakrit and the Asian Prakrit alphabets.

Sir William Jones's worthy successors include Henry Thomas Colebrooke, Horace Hayman Wilson, James Prinsep, A.F.R. Hoernle, Alexander Csoma de Koros, Sarat Chandra Das, Rajendralal Mitra, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Jadunath Sarkar, Baini Prasad, Haraprasad Shastri, Md. Shahidullah, Md. Ishaque, Harinath De, Rakhal Das Banerjee, Asutosh Mukherjee, Suniti Kumar Chattopadhyay, Sukumar Sen, C.V. Raman, Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, Dr Mahandra Lal Sarkar, Prafulla Chandra Roy, U.N. Brahmachari, Megnad Saha and many others who made outstanding contributions to different branches of humanities and science.

The Society's contributions towards the development of such disciplines as folklore, numismatics, paleography and epigraphy were widely recognized. The importance of the disciplines of palaeobotany and economic geography were also first perceived by this Society. Dr J. Fayrer's suggestion (December 1865) for a grand Ethnological Exhibition in Calcutta and Col E.T. Dalton's proposal "to draw up an account of the tribes from all available sources of information resulting in the book *The Ethnology of Bengal* (1872) had been warmly supported by the Society. The responsibility to carry out the stupendous project of the International Catalogue of Scientific Literature, proposed by the Royal Society of London, was entrusted to the Society (1898). To execute the project a Regional Bureau was formed in 1900 with Prafulla Chandra Roy as Secretary; its objective was to select and codify the catalogue from the mass of materials published on the subject in the Indian subcontinent.

Another milestone in the progress of the Society was the sponsoring of the scheme for writing a Comprehensive History of Sciences of India. The Society did the spadework, but later the scheme was handed over to the National Institute of Science, now known as the Indian National Science Academy.

For a long time the Society was practically the only adviser to the Government of India on matters of scientific interest. It was also through the activities of the Society that the magnificent monuments of India and of the neighbouring countries came to be known to various countries of the world.

The Society recognizes outstanding contributions of different branches of knowledge by awarding Honorary Fellowships. Associate Membership, Plaques, Medals and Lectureships.

Programmes and plans of the Society

A brief outline indicating the salient features of the Society's programmes and future plans is given below :

- (1) Extensive research programmes focussing on the pluralistic yet integrated character and richness of Indian History and Culture;
- (2) Preparation of an Encyclopaedia Asiatica;
- (3) A Bengali Dictionary for students and scholars whose mother tongue is not Bengali;
- (4) Making more widely available for all scholars edited texts and English translations of Indian classics;
- (5) Search for and collection of important manuscripts and archival records in India and abroad;
- (6) Improvement of library services by introducing computers for developing network of information system by linking it up with other libraries/centres in Calcutta and its metropolitan area keeping in view its subsequent stepping up to the national level. .
- (7) Laying greater emphasis on cataloguing hitherto uncatalogued MSS and editing of manuscripts;
- (8) Modernising and further strengthening of the restoration unit and the stepping up of the activities of the Conservation and Preservation Sections and extending the services to Institutions in West Bengal for the preservation of materials of national importance;
- (9) Setting up of an Art Gallery for the priceless paintings and other objects that are in the possession of the Society;
- (10) Acquisition of additional space to solve the problem of accommodation, and space for a better display of the rich national treasures that are in the possession of the Society.

Indology today comprehends a wide range of subjects — humanistic, social, political, technical and scientific — in so far as they help towards a full understanding of the development of the character of India through the ages. "The India of Indology is no longer limited to Vedic, epic and classical India; it embraces pre Vedic India, tribal India, and greater India, besides of course, medieval India and modern India." The Indologists in the west now have an unusually broad range of interests, and one sees considerable diversification of subjects coming under the purview of Indology. Indology now embraces culture, geography, economic conditions, social structure, anthropology, ethnography, political systems, sciences, arts and cultural relations with foreign countries.

In 1984 when the Society was declared as an Institution of National Importance, the Society emerged from behind the clouds; a rather prolonged period of stagnation and dire financial difficulties no longer stifled its activities. In the light of the new definition of Indology, diverse research programmes were instituted in areas like South East Asian Studies, Buddhist Studies, Islamic Culture and Civilization, Folklore, History of Science, History of Medicine, Language and Linguistics, Universal Spiritual Values and Tagore Studies. Distinguished scholars regularly participate in these programmes.

In 1985 the Society introduced traditional Sanskrit Courses like Shastri (B.A.), Acharya (M.A.) and postgraduate courses in Manuscriptology and Oriental Studies including Indian Culture and Civilization, in which scholars from many countries and all parts of India participated. The Society will shortly introduce courses for the study of Asian culture and the classical languages, and will have a full-fledged Chinese department.

The Society has now decided to initiate research programmes which would reveal the cultural heritage of India in an integrated manner. Some of the thrust areas of research at this phase of its activity are :

- a) The Indian Concept of Nature and Concern for Environment;
- b) Development of Science and Technology in Ancient and Medieval India;
- c) Faith and Reason : The Indian Scene and Experience;
- d) Identity and Integration : The Indian Dichotomy (The Indian Tribals and the Indian Mainstream);
- e) Cultural and commercial contact between India and ancient Arabia (i.e. before the birth of Mohammad)
- f) The Image of Women in India : In Religion, Society, Politics and Family as well as in Agriculture and Industry.

In 1975 with the declaration of the International Year for Women by the UN the importance of the status and role of women was recognized for the first time. Since then various conferences have been and are being held to promote their cause. In this context the Asiatic Society has decided to have its Women's Studies Department which will highlight the performance of Women in Asia in humanities, science and technology.

At present more than seventy scholars are involved in different research programmes of the Society. Eminent senior professors have joined the Society who, in addition to their own research work, are directing various research projects. In the past the Society had as its faculty member distinguished visiting professors like A.L. Basham, Alex Waymen and Herman Kulkey. A scheme for such visiting professors has been revived and two eminent professors from outside India have joined the Society recently.

Intercultural activities

In the past cultural and academic exchanges between the Asiatic Society and international societies and various eminent people were frequent and regular. The following names reflect the range and extent of the Society's interest : Sir J.W.F. Herschel, Professor Jules Mohl, Hekekyan Bey, Max Muller, Prof. H. Princeton, Mon. Stanislas Julien, Charles Darwin, Prof. H. Helmholtz, William Whitney, Louis Pasteur, J. Takakusu, Taha Hosain and innumerable others equally well-known.

Cultural Exchange Programmes have recently been initiated with many Countries and national and international seminars are being held regularly. In 1984 as a leader of the Indian delegation, Dr Chandan Roychaudhuri, the General Secretary of the Asiatic Society, signed an agreement with the Csoma de Koros Society at Budapest.

Since 1992 the intercultural activities of the Society increased considerably.

Dr Federico Mayor Zaragoza, the Director General of the UNESCO visited the society in December 1993. Shortly after the visit the Society was chosen as one of the institutions for its "Memory of the World Programme". for which it asked the Society to catalogue all the valuable items in its collection on a CD-ROM disk. The Asiatic Society is the only institution to receive such a unique honour. Work on this project has been already started.

As a representative of Sir Martin Jacomb, Chairman of the British Council, Dr M.D. McWilliam, Director of the school of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London, visited the Asiatic Society in December 1994 and noted with pleasure "the remarkable changes that have been set in motion during the past two years". He also reported to the British Council that "the Asiatic Society would be a very appropriate vehicle for Indo-British academic collaboration" and recommended appropriate measures ranging from conservation to academic visits and research collaboration. The Society is now working in collaboration with the British Council.

Even as efforts are being made to strengthen Indo-US economic ties, plans for similar collaborations on the cultural front are making considerable headway. Ambassador Nicholas Platt, President of the New York-based Asia Society visited (1995) the Asiatic Society to explore possibilities of the Society "acting as a nodal agency for such collaborations."

Recently two delegations from China proposed a collaborative research programme with the Asiatic Society and agreed to exchange scholars between China and India. They also sought the help of the Society in obtaining copies of rare books and manuscripts not available in China; the Society will seek similar help from China in addition to copies of Indian texts in Chinese and Tibetan translations and transcriptions.

The Prime Minister of Singapore who visited the Society was deeply impressed by the Society's work and showed keen interest in its activities. He expressed a desire to collaborate on schemes of mutual interest. Bangladesh and a few other countries have also expressed similar desires to associate themselves with the Society for certain specific programmes.

A protocol of co-operation between the Asiatic Society and the Institute of Oriental Studies, Moscow, for bringing out the works that reflect ties between India and Russia was signed on 4 March, 1995. The protocol envisages a joint programme for bringing out collected works on age-old ties by delving into the past to search for the roots of the cultural links between India and Russia from the fifteenth century to the first half of the twentieth century (upto 1947) in four volumes. A lot of work has already been done and the materials for the first volume have already been prepared.

The first phase of the co-operative programme between the Asiatic Society and Arizona State University has already been finalised. Another collaborative programme between the Society and Humboldt University

aims at tracing Indo-German cultural ties during the last five hundred years. Similar programmes between the Society and California and Columbia universities are making steady headway. The Society is also exploring possibilities to initiate appropriate collaborative programmes with Cambodia, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Mangolia, Sri Lanka and Vietnam.

Computerization

Speedy access to a wider area of information, storage and information retrieval are the keywords in the functioning of a modern library. Information transfer through computer networks has become essential at regional, national and international levels. The Society has already taken steps to instal an in-house Computer system to bring various functional areas of the library under its ambit.

The Society's library has around 200,000 volumes ancient and modern. The Museum of the Society has approximately 60,000 Ms written in more than forty different languages employing various scripts and belonging to various ages.

To serve the needs of the members and scholars in identifying the required materials, the Society has already begun building a computerized database of its catalogue. It has also initiated steps towards computerizing Acquisition, Serial Control, Cataloguing, Circulation as a part of a nationally sponsored computer network system.

The in-house computer system of the Society's library employs electronic dataprocessing gadgets, and it has already prepared computerized database in areas of research in Anthropology. A hard-copy of which, arranged in chronological sequence, was published on the occasion of the birth centenary celebration of Dr Biraja Sankar Guha, the first Indian General Secretary of the Society. The Society has also prepared computerized database on the History of Science and other rare books in the Society's collection.

The preparation of a computerized Keyword Index to the *Asiatick Researches*. Proceedings of the Asiatic Society, Yearbook and Memoir of the Society covering the period between 1788 and 1958 with flexible data sheet provision through any desired access point is almost complete. At the moment preparations are on to build the second volume of the Keyword Index covering the recent years. Various other schemes like the preparation of computerized databases of papers on Numismatics, Epigraphy, Indology and MSS have also been undertaken.

'No man is an island' in today's world of information explosion; similarly no library can remain in isolation; resource sharing is a vital need today. As a first step towards resource sharing at various levels through library co-operation as conceived by the UNESCO, the Society Library has already joined the regional metropolitan computerized library network, the CALIBNET (Calcutta Library Network), formulated by the Government of India. This will connect the Society library with other important libraries of the metropolis as well as other major cities of the country.

The society library has also been included in the SIRNET the computerized on-line national information network on science and allied disciplines sponsored by the INSDOC, a Scientific documentation body of the Government of India. Both the networks will provide access to information in libraries and research organizations in other countries through international hook-up facilities.

The Society, in collaboration with information technology houses, is devising methods for building computerized image bases of the texts of important MSS in its collection. Physical handling of the MSS will no longer be necessary; photocopies of desired folios will be immediately available. The Society is also exploring the possibility of the installation of E-mail with Dot-compression and De-compression method connected with the on-line computer network system for transmission of image-bases of texts of rare books, MSS etc. against payment.

Another scheme of the Society is related to the development of computer softwares for the Romanization of various Asian scripts used in MSS, and for writing various Indian and Asian Scripts.

The Society has been identified by the UNESCO as the only significant repository of cultural heritage. The UNESCO has requested the Society to build image bases of important treasures that may depict the cultural Heritage of Mankind under the scheme, 'Memory of the World Programme'. The Society has involved language experts, software system developers and graphic artists to implement the project. Well-known scholars have also been included in the advisory team set up for the project.

Heritage India

The Asiatic Society also proposes to set up a programme called 'Heritage India'. It is an ambitious and imaginative project which would seek to integrate various activities of the Asiatic Society in a way that would reflect the aspirations and achievements of the people of India. The idea may be traced to the address of Smt. Indira Gandhi delivered at the

bicentenary celebrations of the Society in 1984. She said, "Heritage is not merely to be admired and drawn upon. It has to be studied in depth and as a means of self-understanding, it has to be preserved, cherished, and enriched".

Heritage India would aim at reflecting the major historical experiences of India that have led to her contemporary heterogeneous reality. The composite nature of Indian society through various exposures over time and space, has contributed to her distinctive personality. Over the periods of history, different human races and tribes with their characteristic attributes, came to occupy the physiographic space known as India, which is bound by natural barriers from all directions. Owing largely to the character of the space as such, and to a certain extent, depending on the nature of strength of culture of the people themselves, despite periodic stress as well as harmonic interactions, total homogenization of the interacting people did not appear as a major phenomenon. Rather the cumulative reflections have been that of continuity and recognition of individuality of distinctive strands. The borrowed perception of a homogenized nation-state, thus, appears alien to India's socio-political reality. The recognition of India as a civilizational whole was not necessarily subservient to her political status. For the major stretches of history, despite her politically fragmented nature, India as a cultural identity survived. The idea of political boundary as a sharp line of divide, and appreciation of its importance for management of state being relatively recent, adoptions are yet to get fully naturalized to the system. Thus, the periodic stress generated by centrifugal and centripetal forces needs to be realized as the manifestation of mutuality between the political and cultural systems of boundary maintenance. The contemporary socio-political developments of India, therefore, justify reassessment taking her relevant historical experiences into account.

Heritage India as a multi-disciplinary grand project or as an institution in itself, proposes to dive deep into the past, glean relevant information, and project the dynamic aspects of Indian society and culture through *multi-media display systems*, inculcating the spirit of unity in diversity and in the process, demonstrating a kind of extraordinary resilience hitherto unknown. It is primarily due to this fact that accommodation and continuity have not only been possible, but incorporation of new ideas and traits, without necessarily rejecting the old, have become an important reality. The much cherished notion of a melting pot, and consequent homogenization, has yet remained a distant dream the world over. The socio-cultural reality of India, as reflected through the facts of history, suggests the emergence of an alternative model of integration, where distinctive traits coexist without major loss of identity. In its initial stages the approximate

expenditure involved in the project will be in the region of one thousand million rupees.

Encyclopaedia Asiatica

The Society has undertaken another project, the production of the Encyclopaedia Asiatica in eight volumes. The subjects to be covered in this encyclopedia have been already worked out. They are (1) Land and People, (2) The Economy (3) Language and Literature, (4) Social and Political Institutions, (5) History, (6) The Arts, (7) Science and Technology and (8) Religion, Philosophy and Spirituality. The work envisaged will be a collection of 'organic monographic studies' and will combine the feature of both dictionaries and encyclopaedias.

The Encyclopaedia aims at presenting for the scholar as well as the inquisitive general reader the life, history and culture of the people of Asia from the earliest times till today. It will include details of the present day social, political economic and other scenarios with the description of the physical framework in which the life of each people has flourished. This means that the Encyclopaedia aims at covering all aspects of the life, material as well as spiritual, of the people of Asia, and it will try to emphasize the 'Asian Values'.

Experts have been chosen for the subjects in each volume, and they are being requested to discuss their subjects from every point of view so that the encyclopaedia may be accepted to readers all over the world. Attempts will also be made to make the encyclopedia attractive and useful in the wealth and technical excellence of its illustrations.

Library

The Library of the Asiatic Society is the oldest of its kind in modern India. Initially, the library was located in private dwelling houses of the pioneers, as the Society did not have its own house. Gradually, its collections grew and were brought into its own house. The nucleus was, however, formed initially from the gifts received from various sources and on exchange with Society's own publications. The collections was expanded and enriched by the titles of Tipu Sultan Library in 1808 and those of the Fort William College (between 1810 and 1830). This was further enriched by the collections of many eminent intellectuals including the collections of Dr C.W. Gurner, Dr B.C. Law, Dr R.P. Chanda and the Anandabazar Patrika. At present the library has two district divisions — printed reading materials and manuscripts.

The Society acquired a complete set of Tibetan manuscripts of B.H. Hodgson. A second set of xylograph was brought by Alexander Csoma de Koros, the famous Tibetan scholar of Hungary. A valuable collection of manuscripts and books from Col Mackenzie was received in 1822.

By 1884 the Society owned about 29,425 books and manuscripts in English, Arabic, Persian, Pushto, Urdu, Sanskrit, Tibetan, Burmese and Siamese. Among the priceless collection of books and manuscripts only a few may be mentioned here. Among the earliest printed books mention may be made of *Julii Firmici Astronomicorum Libri Octo Integri* (Venice 1499), *Kripara Sastrera Arthebheda* (Bengali in Roman script, Lisbon, 1743). The earliest Sanskrit manuscript in the library, *Kubjikamatam*, belongs to circa 7th century A.D. Among other outstanding rare manuscripts that the Society owns are an illuminated manuscript of the *Holy Quran* and the *Gulistan*, said to be the first copies from the original manuscripts, and the *Padshanamah* which bears an autograph of the Mughal Emperor, Shah Jahan.

Books & Journals

There are about 200,000 books and journals, monographs and pamphlets in European and Indian languages on various fields of humanistic knowledge (particularly Oriental Studies in all its branches). There is a good collection of books and journals on life sciences and earth sciences. Many of the books are rare and are kept in a separate sequence. The library receives 155 journals on subscription and 302 journals in exchange.

Manuscripts

The richest assets of this 212 year old institution are its priceless manuscripts. The prime mover behind the collection of MSS was Raja Rajendralal Mitra who became the first Indian President of the Society in 1885 and Haraprasad Sastri. The collection as it is now comprises a large number of bundles. Many of these bundles contain not just one but several MSS, and now they are all being carefully examined and catalogued. So far more than 45000 MSS have been listed and catalogued and it is conjectured that the total number of the MSS would be in the region of 60,000 or more.

After the rejuvenation of the Society since its bicentenary in 1984, determined and systematic efforts were made to resume the collection of manuscripts. The Society's unique collection places it in a singular position of being the only institution which is capable of imparting a through

training in manuscriptology to interested scholars. The Society had started an M. Phil course in this subject, but in the absence of proper academic support the course was eventually discontinued. Instead, it has started a certificate course in the subject to keep alive the spirit of enquiry in the area.

The Society's unique collection comprises MSS in forty-one languages and dialects and cover nearly all subjects under the sun. It contains MSS in Sanskrit and in the languages that descended from it, such as Pali, Prakrit, Hindi, Meithili, Sarada (Kashmiri), Gujrati, Marathi, Assamese, Oriya, Bengali, Rajasthani, Tamil, Telegu and other South Indian languages. There is also a large collection of MSS in Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Pushto, Urdu and Armenian. And last but not the least is the collection in Sino-Tibetan and Southeast Asian languages like Chinese, Tibetan,



Mss of Ain-i-Akbari

Burmese, Siamese and Javanese. The Scripts used are equally varied including, apart from the scripts of different languages mentioned, Gurmukhi, Kanarese, Modi, Newari, Rajasthani and Simhalese. The material used is also varied, ranging from palm leaves, barks of different trees to leather, copper plates, stone blocks, and handmade paper of different varieties and grades.

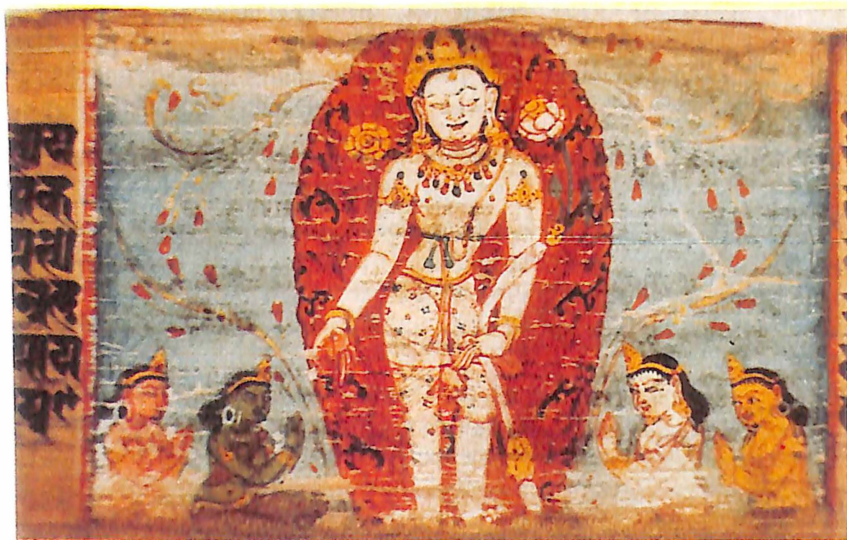
The Director General of UNESCO, Dr Federico Mayor, who visited the Society in December 1993 was so deeply impressed by the rarity and wide range of the collection that this was the single factor which prompted him to identify without hesitation the Asiatic Society, Calcutta, as the only resource base in India for UNESCO's gigantic "Memory of the World" programme.

The MSS accumulated through donation and purchase. The donated library of the former Fort William College was a bulk source of Arabic, Persian and Urdu MSS; it also included some from the Mughal court and other Islamic sources. The Society's oldest items is a 3rd century B.C. rock edict of Emperor Asoka in Brahmi Script. Copper plates include one of 1st century B.C. exhibit with peripheral inscription in Kharosthi script of Kanishka's time, and others of later periods in Nagari script and one in old Bengali from Tripura

There are MSS on leaves and books using vegetable dye as ink. The oldest item of this kind is a late Gupta script text on tantra *Kubjikamatam* from the 7th century A.D. An illustrated Pali Buddhist text in the Newari



Asokan Rock Edict



MS of Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita

script of Nepal, *Astasahasrika Prajnaparamita* from the 11th century, Emperor Shah Jahan's biography *Padshanamah* with his autograph, and *Jami-ut-Twarikh* a sixteenth century illustrated Ms relating to the history of Chenghis Khan and his descendants, the Hungarian scholar, Alexander Csoma De Koros's *Sanskrit-Tibetan-English Dictionary* (1830) in his own handwriting, an illustrated Burmese *Ramayana* and a Persian *Mahabharata*



Ms of Astasahasrika Projnaparamita

are among the rarest treasures in the Society's collection. There are others like a volume on astronomy (1497) in Latin, the first Bengali grammar (1778) by N.B. Halhead, an illuminated MS of the *Holy Quran* and the *Gulistan* said to be the first copies from the original manuscript.

Museum

Although the Society continued to receive art objects, it had no museum of its own. The idea to build a museum was first mooted in 1796, but nothing came out at that time. In 1814, Dr Nathaniel Wallich, a Danish Surgeon at the Danish settlement in Serampore, urged upon the Society to set up a museum. While all coins, copper plates, sculptures etc. were placed in charge of the Librarian, Dr Wallich was appointed the Superintendent of the "Museum of the Asiatic society" of geological and zoological specimen. Thus the foundation of the oldest museum in modern India was laid in Calcutta, and it thrived rapidly; today the collections in the Museum are only available to research scholars.

An Art Gallery, the first of its kind in India, was opened by the Society in December, 1834.

Archives

The rich archival materials in the possession of the Society's Museum include manuscript in English from Nathaniel Brassy Hallhead, James Prinsep, Buchanan Hamilton, Alexnder Csoma de Kores and many others.

Letters, from persons belonging to different walks of life requesting for information relating to manuscripts and coins are preserved in the archival section of the museum. These documents are important for the history of the Asiatic Society in particular, and of India in general in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Among the recent collections are the typed papers relating to the Chitagong Armoury Raid Case and Professor Nirmal Kumar Bose's collection of Gandhiji's letters and papers.

Besides manuscripts and rare books, the Society has a valuable collection of oil paintings, sculpture and marble busts. A part of the oil paintings came from the studio of Robert Home who was, in 1802, the Secretary of the Society. There are original paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, Reni Guido, Robert Home. Domenichino, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Tilly Kettle, Nicholas Roerich, George Chinnery, Thomas and William Daniell, F.R. Say, A.W. Devis, and George Morland. There are sculptures, engravings and copper plate inscriptions . Among other valuable possessions of the Society

mention may be made of the Bairat Rock Edict in Brahmi Script of Asoka dated 250 B.C. and the Sue Bihar inscription in Kharosti belonging to the 1st Century A.D.

On 4 November, 1868 the Asiatic Society unanimously sanctioned the transfer of most of its collections to the Trustees of the newly founded Indian Museum and the Society's collections remained on the ground floor of the old building till 1875 when the present building of the Indian Museum was completed. Today the Society's Museum beside its large collection of coins, is a treasure house of invaluable historical artefacts. With the recent acquisition of the Metcalfe Hall, another national monument, the Society will soon be in a position to display all its artefacts in a proper manner.



Ms of Jami-ut Twarikh

Publications

The Asiatic Society is the oldest academic publisher in India. The first prestigious publication of the Society was the *Asiatick Researches*. It was first published by a private publisher, Manual Cantopher, in 1788, because the Society had no funds to bear the cost. After the publication of volumes 1 to 5, the Society itself began to bring out the other volumes. The publication ceased after the 20th volume in 1839.

In 1830 James Prinsep planned to bring out a journal with an entirely new character. The first issue of the journal, *The Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, appeared in March 1832, with the aim "to give publicity to such oriental matters as the antiquarian, the linguist, the traveller and the naturalist may glean, in the ample field open to their industry in this part of the world, i.e. Asia, and as far as means would permit, to the progress of the various sciences at home, especially such as are connected in any way with Asia". The journal lived up to the high standard expected of it.

For 144 years, the Asiatic Society has been publishing a series of learned books known as the *Bibliotheca Indica*. It is a collection of works on oriental literature, grammar, dictionaries and studies covering different disciplines. There are about 2000 fascicles representing approximately 400 different titles. These works relate to Sanskrit, Prakrit, Pali, Rajasthani, Kashmiri, Hindi, Bengali, Tibetan, Kui, Arabic, Urdu and Persian languages.

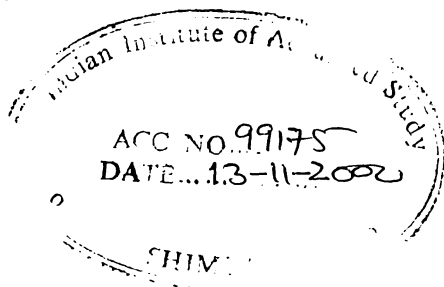
A glance through the Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal and *Bicentennial Index to Publications* (since 1788) will show that the subjects included investigation on 'literature, philology, history, fine arts, antiquities, religion, manners and customs and whatever is constructed under the general term of literature; and Society's publications on literary and scientific subjects covered mathematical and physical sciences including meteorology, tidal observations, laws of storms, electrical researches, earth sciences (stratigraphical and dynamical geology and mineralogy); zoology, botany (including palaeobotany), astronomy, chemistry, medicine, photography, geography and ethnology. The recent acquisition of a new building for the publication unit of the society will solve many of the problems that have plagued it for a long time.

The achievements of the Society have been very briefly mentioned in the foregoing pages. It is evident that the Society has always aimed at a union of Eastern and Western learning. This endeavour has to be continued : and this has to keep pace with the times. As Mrs. Indira Gandhi has said,

'History has no holiday'. The Society has firm faith in the depth and breadth of its maker's vision and pursues steadfastly the study of man's many — splendoured heritage. "Heritage is not merely to be admired and drawn upon. It has to be studied in depth and as a means of self-understanding, it has to be preserved, cherished and enriched". This is precisely what the Society seeks to do.



Sohgaura Copperplate C. third century B.C.





NEW BUILDING



Library

IIAS, Shimla

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