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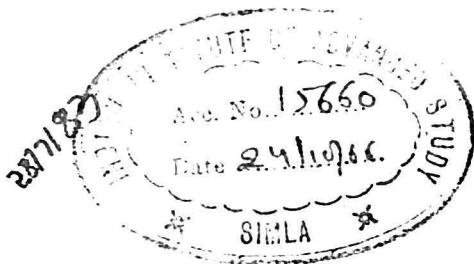
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WAS THE CALCUTTA "BLACK HOLE" A MYTH?

In the Journal of the "Calcutta Historical Society" (Bengal—Past and Present) for July-September, 1915 (Vol. XI. Part I. Serial No. 21), the late Mr. J. H. Little published a remarkable article in which he made the astounding comment that Holwell's story of the Calcutta "Black Hole" was a "gigantic hoax," inasmuch as none of the contemporary Mohammedan historians of Bengal had made any reference to it in their works. Later on, at a special meeting of the "Calcutta Historical Society," held on March 24th, 1916, in the hall of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, under the presidentship of the Venerable Archdeacon, W. K. Firminger, M.A., B.D., a very interesting and a highly illuminating Debate took place on the subject, in which the following gentlemen, all well-known historical scholars, took part—Mr. J. H. Little, who opened the Debate, was followed by Professor E. F. Oaten, the Hon'ble Mr. E. J. Monahan, and Mr. Akshaya Kumar Maitra, B.L., all of whom expressed their views, *pro* and *con*, in a scholarly manner which displayed deep erudition and historical acumen of a very high order. Full proceedings of the Debate can be had from the Honorary Secretary of the "Calcutta Historical Society."

That the tragedy of the Black Hole was not a myth, or the figment of the much-maligned Zephaniah Holwell's imagination, is proved conclusively by two independent contemporary Armenians who have left records of the crime, which go to prove that Holwell's story, though greatly exaggerated, was nevertheless true and that the blood-curdling tragedy did occur, all arguments and evidence to the contrary notwithstanding.

A well-known Armenian merchant of Calcutta, Joseph Emin, writing to his son in London, in 1757, refers to the sack of Calcutta by Suraj-ud-Dowlah in the following terms:—

"The wicked Suraj-ud-Dowlah came with a vast army, destroyed almost 400 innocent English gentlemen in one night in the Black Hole; Calcutta was overset by him. For my share, I have lost 16,000 rupees, and all the Armenians in proportion; we are all become as poor as you were when you went from this place. I have written to Mr. Davis to pay you the 500 rupees deposited in his hands. The glorious English army came with the fleet; re-took Calcutta, destroyed

Chandernagore, and drove the Musulman army to destruction and I am in the hopes that the whole kingdom, in a dozen years' time, will be subdued under the blessed mild government of the English, which you used to prophesy, when you were here. Walk in the way of God, and be happy, without fear; put your trust in Him; who knows but He may one day or other set your countrymen free from the slavery of the unmerciful Mohomedans."

Mr. Emin gives the number of the victims in the "Black Hole" as 400, which is a glaring error, and it must have occurred at the time of printing. I am inclined however to think it was 40 and an extra *zero* was added by the printer or the zealous proof-corrector when the "Life and Adventures of Emin Joseph Emin, an Armenian, written in English by himself" was printed at London in 1792,—from which the above is an extract. Be that as it may, Mr. Emin, a resident of Calcutta and an eye-witness of the sack of the city, corroborates Mr. Holwell's story of the "Black Hole" tragedy which was enacted in June, 1756, and which in the words of Macaulay became "memorable for its singular atrocity, memorable for the tremendous retribution by which it was followed."

Another Armenian merchant, Thomas Khojamall, in his "History of India" written in Armenian at Allahabad in 1768, referring to the events in Bengal and to the sack of Calcutta, writes as follows:—

"After this the army of Suraj-ud-Dowlah suddenly attacked the city of Calcutta, and as there was no Military fortress there, but simply a small fort, which was surrounded by a wall, and in that were the house of the Governor and all the goods of the merchants, which the troops of Suraj-ud-Dowlah surrounded, as there were not sufficient Christian soldiers, not more than four hundred in all. And all the Christian merchants, of whom 150 were of our Armenian nation, all of whom were great and wealthy merchants, together with many others, that is, Greeks, Syrians and Portuguese, who being unable to hide their goods, owing to the sudden arrival of Suraj-ud-Dowlah, left their houses full of merchandise and fleeing entered the Fort. Then the army of the enemy began to pillage the city of Calcutta. The Christians inside the Fort seeing that there was no possible help for them from anywhere and there was no chance of escape, became hopeless and having opened the small gate that was on the river Ganges, they all fled to the ships and having cut the ropes of the anchors, went southwards. Then Suraj-ud-Dowlah looted the Fort full of goods and treasure and having caught many of the Christian Soldiers who were unable to escape, threw them into a small prison, where, for want of sufficient space, they were

heaped one over the other by the cruel soldiers of Suraj-ud-Dowlah by his order. Of these, more than fifteen soldiers died in one night. After conquering the city and plundering all the wealth that was there, he remained there for twenty-five days and named the city Alinagar."

As will be seen from the above translation, Thomas Khojamall, who was a well-informed historian, gives the number of the victims "more than fifteen soldiers," as compared with 123 in Holwell's narrative of the Black Hole tragedy, which as stated in the beginning of this article seems to be a bit exaggerated by the vain-glorious hero, Zephaniah Holwell of "Black Hole" fame. From the writings of the two Armenian merchants of the period, the "gigantic hoax" of Holwell is once more proved to be a solid historical and therefore an indisputable fact, despite Mr. Little's laborious researches.

MESROVB J. SETH.

SHAMS: AND THE REVIVAL OF URDU POETRY IN BENGAL.

A quarter of a century back the name of *Shams* was one to conjure with in Bengal; it is now fast fading into oblivion. A disciple of the well-known poet Dâgh of Delhi, he stood for purity of language and simplicity of expression. Times have changed and the school of Dâgh has been steadily losing the position it once occupied, and the combined influences of Hâli, Akbar and Iqbâl have recast Urdu poetry in another mould. The old school wherever it exists is found contaminated with the cult of Ghâlib, which within recent years has had considerable vogue. The result is deplorable in the extreme; Urdu poetry is now another name for an artificial arrangement of words, mostly Persian, strung together with a long thread of *izafâts*. In the majority of cases the meaning is thoroughly obscure. Imitators of Ghalib have failed to grasp the spirit of that great poet and have succumbed to the fatal fascination of his Persianised Urdu, and the poetry of to-day is nothing but a shameless jugglery with words. Such was not the case with *Shams*. He did not aspire to great heights of fancy: his poetry was spontaneous and couched in graceful, every-day Urdu. His appeal was irresistible, and the many *mushaaras* in which he took part constituted a glorious record of personal triumphs.

His name was Abul Qâsim Muhammad. He was the son of that illustrious scholar and poet, the late Khan Bahadur Abdul Ghafûr *Nassâkh*, brother of the late Nawab Bahadur Abdul Latif, C.I.E. He was born in 1284 A. H. (1867 A.D.). He had no pretensions to high education, but was well brought up. He spoke English with perfect fluency and wrote it gracefully. His Urdu was chaste and elegant, and as a conversationalist he was simply superb. Of commanding stature, with the refined manners of a perfect gentleman, he was an ornament to society, and though he lived and died a poor man he was respected by all who knew him. He passed his days in a neat little cottage in Gardner Lane, Calcutta, where he lived alone, for he was a confirmed bachelor. He died comparatively young, in 1905.

Much of what he wrote perished with him. A collection of his poems that survived him was published in 1919 by the writer of this

article under the title of *Divan-i-Shams*. *Shams* did a great service to Urdu literature in Bengal. At a time when Urdu was losing its hold on the province he gave an impetus to it, and there gathered around him a band of zealous pupils among whom the writer of these lines is proud to count himself. The torch of Urdu which was kept burning in Bengal by Nassakh and Saiyid Mahmûd Azâd was not allowed to die out, and thanks to the vivifying influence of *Shams* it is still burning.

RAZA ALI WAHSHAT.

PANJAB RECORDS IN THE IMPERIAL RECORD DEPARTMENT AT CALCUTTA.

The English first entered the Panjab in the year 1803 when Lord Lake broke the Maratha power in the north of India. The British adopted a policy of strict neutrality in regard to the affairs of the territories to the north of the Jumna, and contented themselves with establishing the Sikh Chiefs in their respective realms and rewarding those who had done good service. Subsequently the transactions of the British Government were mainly in relation to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, who in 1799 obtained a grant of Lahore from Zaman Shah, the Durrani Ruler of Kabul, and afterwards gradually spread his power over the greater part of the Panjab. The Treaty of Amritsar, signed on the 25th April, 1809, gave the English a definite political status in the Panjab. It enjoined that the British Government should have no concern with the territories and subjects of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the north of the Sutlej, and that the Maharaja should neither commit nor suffer encroachments on the possessions or rights of those Chiefs to the south of that river who had been declared to be under British protection. The Maharaja was guaranteed the possession of the conquests made by him on the left of the Sutlej. Other treaties and agreements were on different occasions concluded between the British Government and Ranjit Singh and a cordial friendship was engendered during the lifetime of the Maharaja. At the time of Ranjit Singh's death in 1839, his sovereignty extended over practically the whole of the tract which constitutes the present Province of the Panjab, together with the Native State of Kashmir.

2. Confusion and disorder followed Ranjit Singh's death. His son Kharak Singh, who succeeded him on the throne of Lahore, died in November, 1840, not without suspicion of being poisoned. Nao Nihal Singh, the only son of Kharak Singh, was killed when returning from his father's funeral. Then followed a series of changes; Dalip Singh, then a minor, became the Ruler of the Panjab under the Regency of his mother. Irresponsible government led the Sikhs to declare war against the English,—known as the First Sikh War, towards the end of 1845. This ended in the cession of a portion of Maharaja Dalip

Singh's dominion to the English as indemnity, and the appointment of a British Resident at Lahore to advise the local Council of Regency in conducting the government during the minority of Maharaja Dalip Singh. At the same time Kashmir was alienated from the Sikh kingdom. A general dissatisfaction created by the altered conditions in these parts culminated in the Second Sikh War in 1848. After successfully terminating this campaign, the English formally annexed the Panjab on the 29th March, 1849, and granted a pension to Maharaja Dalip Singh, who shortly afterwards retired to live in England.

3. The Panjab was governed by a Board of Administration from March, 1849, to February, 1853. It was next formed into a Chief Commissionership; after the transfer of the Delhi territory from the North-Western (now the United) provinces, the Panjab along with its dependencies was placed under a Lieutenant-Governor on the 1st January, 1859.

4. The records of the Foreign Department of the Government of India are invaluable in respect of nearly all the historical materials relating to the Panjab in modern times. Even prior to British relations with this province references are to be found in the records relating to matters of British interest. Apart from the regular proceedings of the Department, there is a considerable number of volumes containing interesting information about the Panjab and the Maharaja Ranjit Singh. A few of them are noticed below:—

I. Miscellaneous Records of the Foreign Department:—

- (i) *India and Russia*.—This manuscript, by Lieutenant A. Burnes, contains a political dissertation on the Panjab, a historical sketch of events in Afghanistan since 1809, a report on the commerce of the upper part of India, Kabul, Tartary and Persia, a military memoir on the countries between India and Russia and an account of the travels of the writer in Bokhara, 1833.
- (ii) *Indus (The)*.—A geographical and military memoir on the Indus and its tributary rivers from the sea to Lahore, by Lieutenant A. Burnes, Assistant Resident in Cutch, 1831.
- (iii) *Panjab*.—H. M. Elliott's note on the revenues and resources of the Panjab, 1847.
- (iv) supplement to the above note by the same writer 1849.
- (v) *Panjab and Ranjit Singh*.—A geographical sketch of the Panjab together with a history of the origin, life and progress of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, 1830.

- (vi) *Panjab*.—C. M. Wade's report of the Panjab and adjacent provinces forming the territories of Maharaja Ranjit Singh together with an historical sketch of that Chief, 1814.
- (vii) *Panjab Intelligence*, 1843-4. This volume contains abstracts of political intelligence regularly forwarded by the Agent to the Governor-General, North-West Frontier, during the period 31st December, 1843, to 31st October, 1844. Each abstract is devoted to the events of two or three days, which are grouped separately under the respective dates.
- (viii) *Panjab Roads*, 1853-4. Lieutenant-Colonel R. Napier's report regarding the construction of various roads in the Panjab both in the plains as well as in the hills, such as the Lahore and Peshawar road, the road from Rawalpindi to Murree, Frontier Military Roads, etc., Volumes I-II (Published in Selections from the Records of the Government of India, No. 7, 1854).
- (ix) *Rajputana, Russia, etc.*, 1812-25. This volume which is named "Miscellaneous Papers" contains among the following, viz.:—

The report by William Moorcroft, Superintendent of the Company's Stud, on the Russian trade with the countries lying north and north-west of India, being copy of a letter dated 7th September, 1812, addressed to the Secretary, Political Department.

II. Miscellaneous Records of the Persian Branch:—

- (i) *News of Ranjit Singh*. This is a diary of the daily routine of his life for 1825. Presumably this came into the possession of the English at the time of the annexation of the Panjab in 1849 (in Persian).
- (ii) *Agha Abbas Shirazi: Tour in the Panjab and Afghanistan, etc.*, being the English translation of the author's original account in Persian by Major Robert Leech, under whose instructions and patronage this political tour was made (1837). (Published in the Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, N.S. Volume XII, pages 564-621, July-December, 1843).
- (iii) *Panjab Akhbar* or confidential reports in English of the Governor-General's Political Agent at Lahore on important events, the movements of the Native Chiefs, etc., 1839-41.

The original treaties and agreements between the British Government and Maharaja Ranjit Singh and a number of seals belonging to the Lahore Durbar (of Ranjit Singh, Kharak Singh, Dalip Singh and certain Government departments) are also preserved in the Imperial Record Department. The records of the Army Department afford details of the military operations in the Panjab.

5. The following are some specimens of the subjects in regard to which papers exist among the records affecting the Panjab.

- (i) Administration of Criminal Justice in the Cis and Trans Sutlej States (1850).
- (ii) Question of revision of fiscal duties in the Panjab (1850).
- (iii) Notice on the practice of Thagi in the Panjab and measures for its suppression (1850).
- (iv) Plans and estimates for cantonments at Sialkote and Mianmir (1850).
- (v) Approval of measures against Afridis (1850).
- (vi) Geological examination of the hills north of the Panjab.
- (vii) Rules for the guidance of travellers in Maharaja Gulab Singh's dominions (1850).
- (viii) Observations of the Governor-General regarding the survey of the Panjab (1851).
- (ix) Selection of Murrec Hill for a sanatorium (1851).
- (x) Threatened inroad of Pindealli Mohmunds with the view to plunder (1851).
- (xi) Selection of efficient officers for civil employment in the Panjab (1851).
- (xii) Proposition to restore the native places of worship in the fortress of Multan (1851).
- (xiii) Minute by the Governor-General on the organization of the Panjab Police Battalion (1851).
- (xiv) Scheme by Lieut. Lumsden of defensive military posts for the frontier (1851).
- (xv) Drainage and sanitary improvement of the city ditch at Lahore (1851).
- (xvi) Articles for the London Exhibition from Native Chiefs of the Panjab (1851).
- (xvii) Question as to the command of the Sind Camel Corps (1852).
- (xviii) Charitable grants of the late Sikh Government in Leiah District (1852).
- (xix) Operations of Sir Colin Campbell's force on his march to Swat.

- (xx) An account of the expedition to the Black Mountains (1852).
- (xxi) Report by Major H. B. Edwardes, Deputy Commissioner of Jullundur, on female infanticide in the Panjab and measures adopted for its suppression (1853).
- (xxii) Experimental cultivation of tea in the vicinity of Murree (1853).
- (xxiii) Notes by Lieut. Lumsden on the Peshawar Frontier.
- (xxiv) Proposed rules for the administration of Civil Justice in the Panjab (1854).
- (xxv) Minute by the Governor-General on crime in the Panjab (1854).
- (xxvi) News of Hindustanis being in slavery in Turkistan (1854).
- (xxvii) Despatch from Court regarding the state of education in the Panjab (1855).
- (xxviii) Intelligence from Independent Tartary (1855).
- (xxix) Plan for punishing the border tribes for their raids (1856).
- (xxx) News of progress of Turkiman's conquest of Khiva (1856).
- (xxxi) Introduction of the Law of Limitation in the Panjab (from 1st May 1857) (1857).
- (xxxii) Formation of European Volunteer Corps at Simla.
- (xxxiii) Report on the monetary condition of the Panjab (1858).
- (xxxiv) Russian Proceedings on Central Asia (1858).
- (xxxv) Queen's Proclamation in the Panjab (1859).

5. It has been usual for Local Governments to send abstracts or, in latter days, copies of their proceedings for the information of the Government of India. Thus the Imperial Record Office has come to be in possession of the Proceedings of the Government of the Panjab, in the various departments, commencing from the year 1849. In recent years the Government of India decided that the Proceedings of Local Governments should no longer be stocked in the Imperial Record Department and that the old stock should be weeded out, after meeting the requirements of the Local Governments.

A. F. M. ABDUL ALI.



