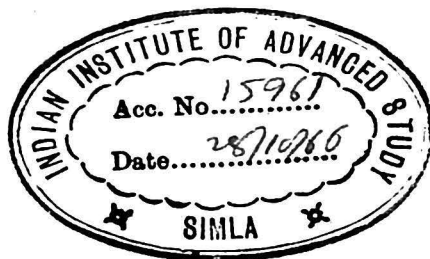


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DR. MOOKERJEE, MR. PRESIDENT, MR. VICE-CHANCELLOR, LADIES
AND GENTLEMEN :

I have been asked to introduce you to the Historical Exhibition. The exhibition has, for obvious reasons, been a regular feature of the annual session of the Indian History Congress. Historical investigators always prefer to examine the raw materials they use in the original. That is why well-known inscriptions and coins, correspondence and state papers, paintings and other objects of art are usually exhibited for fresh scrutiny and more minute examination. Sometimes hitherto unknown materials of unsuspected significance in private collection are brought to light. Such occasions are necessarily rare. But even when the exhibition has nothing new to present the trained intellect may not unfrequently find in old texts a new meaning and a novel message. The *Tarikh-i-Rahimi* and *Adab-i-Alamgiri*, the *Ashtasahasrika Prajnaparamita* and *Ramacharita* may be well-known even to the neophyte but I hope the manuscripts exhibited to-day will not be without interest to the discerning expert. One of these manuscripts dates back to the sixth year of Mahipala-deva and was copied at Nalanda. Another copy of the *Prajnaparamita* belongs to the eighteenth year of Govindapala. To us of Bengal Sandhyakara Nandi's *Ramacharita* is of particular interest. The text has been edited by three distinguished scholars but even they will concede that the last word on this unique historical poem has not yet been said. The transcript which has been lent for the exhibition was



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copied probably eight hundred years ago. This reminds me of another poem of more recent origin which gives a graphic description of the Maratha invasion of Bengal by Bhaskar Ram Kolhatkar. The author, a village poet, describes in simple verses the horror of war and the sufferings of its helpless victims. It is interesting to note that he attributes all these calamities to divine displeasure.

No student of Ancient Indian History can do without inscriptions, coins and seals. Thanks to the co-operation of Bangiya Sahitya Parishat and the Asutosh Museum a few inscriptions relating to Bengal have been exhibited. Of these Belwa copper plates of Mahipala I and Vighrahapala III are donatory records couched in the usual terms, the Mehar copper plate of Damodara-deva testifies to the rule of a minor dynasty in 13th century Bengal, the Mallasarul copper plate emanates from Vijayasena, a seventh century dignitary, the Sundarban inscription of Srimad Dommanapala indicates the existence of a small independent principality in the coastal region of Bengal ruled by a Pala family not necessarily connected with the Imperial Palas. Besides these you will find a copper plate inscription of the Vakataka King Pravarasena II and several others from Orissa. Of the seals that belonging to the famous monastic establishment of Nalanda will probably take you back to the lofty towers, spacious halls, the golden hued Kanaka flowers, the green mango groves and lovely tanks bedecked with white and red lotus so enthusiastically described by the Chinese Master of Law. But a fragment of terracotta will perhaps tax your ingenuity more. Discovered in Bengal it bears a few lines of inscription in a mysterious script which some scholars believe to be of Hellenic origin, and others, more sceptic, suggest that it may be a form of the indigenous Brahmi. Here is a problem worthy of your erudition.

The coins range from the early days of the Indo-Greek and Indo-Scythian days to the more recent times of Shah Alam II.

The silver coin of Sophytes or Saubhuti shows how intimate the Hellenic contact was with the north-western frontier of India. A gold plated rectangular cast coin with ship design was probably minted to perpetuate the memory of the maritime greatness of Tamralipti where it was discovered. The silver coin of Menander, King Milinda of the Pali texts, reminds us of a Yavana potentate who interested himself in Buddhist philosophy. A mysterious personality immortalised by Hiuen-tsang is represented by a gold coin. Whether King Sasanka's attitude towards Buddhism was antagonistic is a controversial subject into which I do not propose to enter.

. The majority of our exhibits consists of stone images. The historian cannot ignore such objects of art in which the creative genius of the people finds expression. Moreover when the artist and craftsman chisels a stone he leaves on it not only the impress of his own personality but also the impress of his times. Look at the remnants of the beautiful image of Chandi and note the swan design of the textile in which the torso was draped. Here is an instance of sculpture corroborating literary evidence. There is a theory, propounded many years ago by Henry Beveridge, that the Sundarbans, now the happy hunting ground of the Royal Bengal Tiger, was once a well populated region, rich and prosperous. It has been reduced to its present desolation by the civilising activities of the gentle exponents of Christianity whom Portugal let loose in the East. The theory seems to be more than plausible when we find that this wild area has yielded a few Gupta coins and it was here that the copper plate inscription of Srimad Dommanapala was discovered. Beveridge noticed extensive ruins of Muslim times in the depth of the forest but the beautiful image of dancing Ganesa that reminds me of a Hoysala figure at Belur, the rare dancing Vishnu, poised on his winged vehicle the Garuda, the exquisite representation of Sarasvati go a long way to prove that the Sunderbans formed once a flourishing centre of Bengali

plastic arts and if objects of art connote a prosperous population this forest land was not always devoid of it.

The stones carry the tales to a remoter antiquity. The neolithic implements discovered in Bankura positively show that prehistoric settlements existed within the confines of the modern state of West Bengal also and we must explore more sites if we are to reconstruct the story of the forgotten past.

A few facsimiles of frescoes from Ajanta and Bagh, Sittanavasal and Sigiriya (Ceylon) have been reproduced and for the purpose of comparison one from the temple of Nara in Japan has been placed in close proximity. This group will doubtless be of interest to students of oriental art but to students of history the nineteenth century Mughul paintings will prove no less interesting. Akbar II, King of Delhi by the grace of the East India Company, holds his court with the same pomp and splendour as did his mighty namesake and he goes in procession with the crown prince and the courtiers in the same style as did Shah Jahan and Aurangzib. The power of the imperial Mughals was a thing of the past but its memory was fondly retained.

In conclusion I must tender, on my own behalf and on behalf of the local organisers of the Congress, my grateful thanks to the Bangiya Sahitya Parisat, the Asutosh Museum, the Asiatic Society, the Government of Orissa, Shri Narendra Singh Singhi and Shri Bejoy Singh Nahar but for whose generous co-operation it would have been impossible to bring together so many exhibits illustrative of our country's past.

I now declare the exhibition open.

