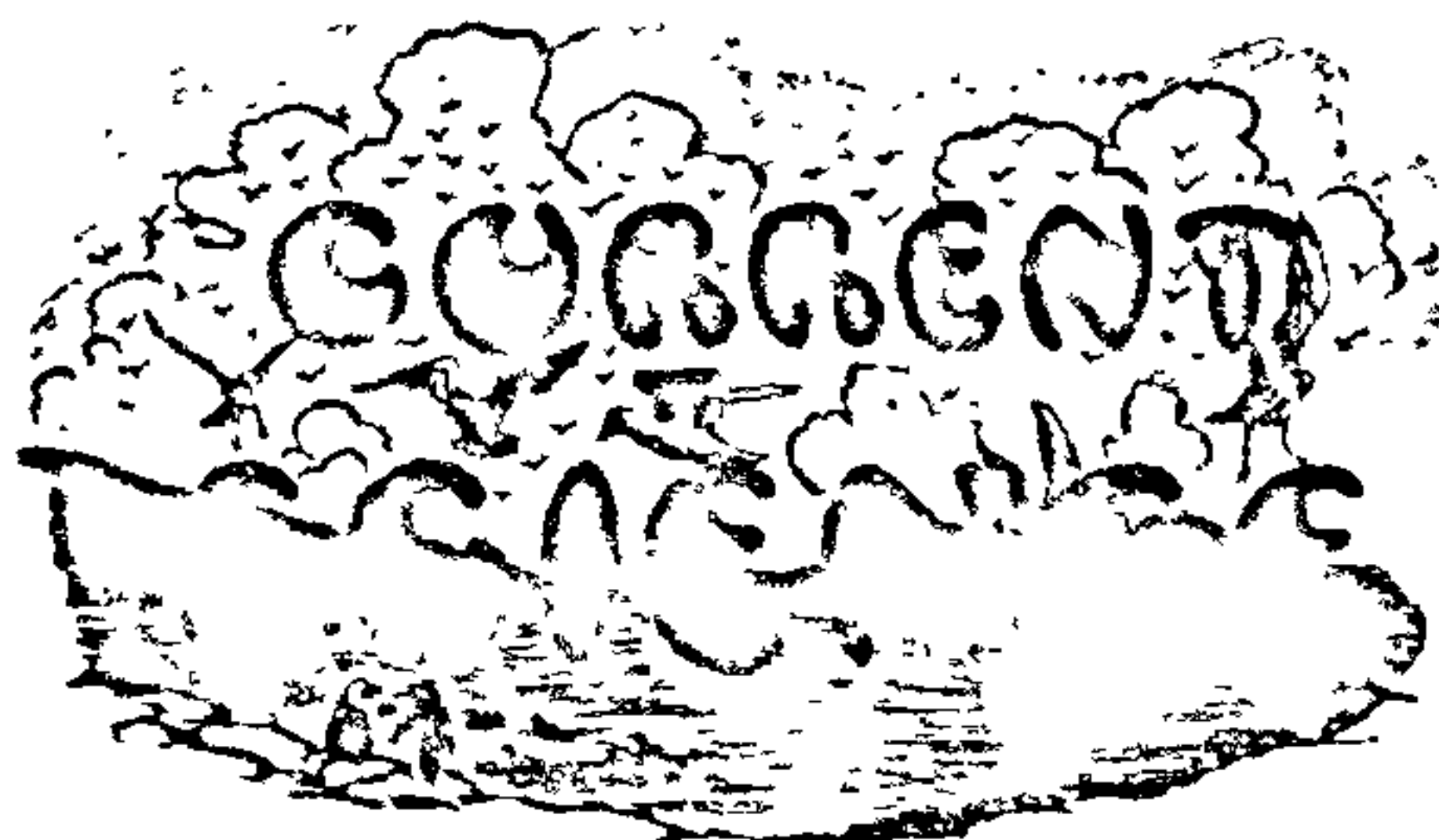


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## CURRENT SCIENCE—50 YEARS AGO

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### The Sesquicentenary of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

We take the earliest opportunity of offering our hearty congratulations to the Asiatic Society of Bengal, Calcutta, on its Sesquicentenary which it celebrated on the 15th of January 1934. This Society is, after the *Bataviaasch Genootschap van Kunsten en Wetenschappen* of Java, the oldest literary and scientific society in the East, being founded in 1784 by Sir William Jones. Before coming to India Sir William Jones had mastered several Oriental languages, and utilised the leisure during the voyage of six months from England to meditate, to use his own phrase, "on the eventful histories and agreeable fictions of this Eastern World". Soon after his arrival he, therefore, invited the *elite* of the European community of Calcutta to discuss the formation of a research society and as a result the 'Asiatick Society' came into being on the 15th of January 1784 with the Governor-General of India, Warren Hastings, as Patron, and Sir William Jones as President. In his first Address the scope of the Society was defined by Sir William Jones in these terms: "The bounds of its investigations will be the geographical limits of Asia and within these limits its enquiries will be extended to whatever is performed by man or produced by nature."

The meetings of the Society, in the early days of its existence, were held in the Grand Jury's room in the Supreme Court and it was not till 1808 that a building designed by Capt. Lock of the Bengal Engineers, was completed on a site granted free by the Government on the corners of the Park Street and Chowringhee; the cost of the building was defrayed by subscriptions

from the members. Extensive additions and alterations have since been made to the original building, but the main structure remains as it was in 1808.

In the early years, probably owing to the backward state of Western education in India there were no Indian members of the Society, and it was not till 1832 that Dwarka Nath Tagore was elected as its first Indian member. This, however, does not mean that the Society was founded on racial or communal lines. The far-seeing founder of the Society, who envisaged a happy companionship of intellect amongst its members, irrespective of race or creed, politics or fortune, suggested in his second Anniversary Discourse the circulation to the learned Indians of a brochure in Persian and Hindi setting forth 'the design of our institution'. The beautiful vignette, which formed the letter-head of the Society's correspondence at a later date, gives apt expression to its non-sectarian community of aim,—this latter consists of an engraving of the Vedas and a Hindu Temple on one side, of the Quran and a Mosque on the other, and in the centre is a medallion of Sir William Jones, surrounded by tropical foliage and fruit. During the last 50 years a vast development of scientific and literary research has taken place in India and as a result the European to Indian membership of the Society is now in the proportion of 2 to 3.

In the early days of the Society its meetings were confined to discussion of papers submitted to the Society, but it was soon felt that it was necessary to publish a serial publication embodying the results of the researches and the observations of its members. The name of the publication, as originally contemplated, was "Assiatick Miscellany", but in 1788 when the Journal appeared, the name was changed to "Asiatic Researches". Twenty volumes of this periodical were published, but the work was not a success financially and was finally stopped in 1839. That there was a great demand for this publication is clear from the fact that more than one 'pirated' edition of it was printed—a compliment which must be rare in the bibliography of science. In 1839 a small monthly magazine was started under the title of "Gleanings in Science" and this formed a medium for the publication of monthly proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. It was edited by James Prinsep, for many years the Secretary of the Society. Its name was later changed to the "Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal", but it was still published by the Editors at



their own risk. In 1859, however, the Society recognised the journal as an official organ of its own and took over its entire control. Seventy-five volumes of this journal were published between 1832 and 1904. In addition a second part for contributions on Natural History, Anthropology, etc., and for the proceedings of the meetings of the Society, was started in 1865 under the name of the "Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal". Of this work nearly 40 volumes were issued. In 1905 these two serials were amalgamated and the new series entitled "Journal and Proceedings of the Asiatic Society of Bengal" was started. This journal is issued as an annual volume in parts at irregular intervals during the year. In addition to the above, a special publication of quarto size, called the "Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal" was started in 1905 for publishing larger and more comprehensive articles which, on account of their size or the nature of their illustrations, are not suitable for publication in the "Journal and Proceedings". A list of papers classified according to various headings, was published in the "Centenary Review of the Asiatic Society of Bengal" in 1883, and this shows that there is practically no subject on which original researches have not been encouraged by the Society and printed in its publications. The more recent publications of the Society also show the varied activities of the Society in all branches of Literature, Arts and Sciences. The most important activity of the Society, however, is "Bibliotheca Indica", a series of publications of Oriental texts in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian and other languages and their translations. Almost 2,000 fascicles of this series have been published. In view of the above the Asiatic Society of Bengal has been rightly described as probably the largest publisher of Oriental works in the world.

The Society's library is very large, and in round figures is estimated to contain about 100,000 volumes. It is one of the finest libraries in the East, and is particularly rich in several serial publications from all parts of the world. Financial considerations have unfortunately prevented the Council of the Society from keeping this library up-to-date within recent years, but it is hoped that funds would soon be available to fill up the lacunæ.

In connection with the work of the "Bibliotheca Indica" and in fulfilment of its special rôle in the domain of Oriental literature and its development, the Society has accumulated a very large number of manuscripts in Sanskrit, Arabic, Persian, Urdu, Chinese xylographs, and manuscripts in Burmese, Siamese, and other languages. The total number of these manuscripts is roughly about 25,000 and de-

scriptive catalogues of various classes of manuscripts are being prepared by expert scholars at the expense of the Society. The acquisition of fresh manuscripts never ceases and thanks to the generosity of the Government of Bengal and the Government of India, the Society is able to keep its collections more or less up-to-date.

The Indian Museum of Calcutta which may aptly be described as the National Museum of the country, is a grown-up child of the Asiatic Society of Bengal. The Society started its own museum in 1814, but the collections grew so rapidly that within less than 50 years it was not found possible with its resources either to properly preserve or display the large collections in the space available in the Society's rooms. The Society persistently memorialised the Government to subsidise the establishment of a National Museum and offered to hand over its collections as a nucleus of the proposed museum. It was not till 1866 that the Society succeeded in its efforts and the Indian Museum Act was passed. The collections of the Society were handed over to the Board of Trustees of the Indian Museum and are now exhibited along with those of Government research departments—the Archaeological, Botanical, Geological and Zoological Surveys most of which were also initiated through the efforts of the Society. A great part of the work of the members of these departments, and also the results of the research by various Universities and unofficial workers all over India, are still published in the publications of the Society.

The Asiatic Society is also the parent institution of similar societies in India and elsewhere. The Royal Asiatic Society of London was founded in 1823 by H. T. Colebrooke, an eminent mathematician, astronomer and Sanskrit scholar, who prior to his retirement was the President of the Asiatic Society of Bengal for 10 years and after his retirement acted as the agent of the Society in London until his death. The Bombay and Ceylon branches of the Society, founded in 1827 and 1845 respectively, were also inspired by the successful pioneer work of the Asiatic Society of Bengal.

Another activity of the Society to which special reference may be made is the Indian Science Congress which was started in 1914.

The Asiatic Society of Bengal has during the past 150 years done marvellous work for the development of human knowledge in Asia and has exercised an influence which may be described as second to none in any part of the world. In offering our congratulations to the Society on its Sesquicentenary celebrations we hope that its activities will continue and that it will go on flourishing and doing still more valuable work for the cause of Letters and Science in this country.