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Buchanan's "journey": A cultural projection

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Introduction

The western nations, in their quest to visit, explore and often to exploit the unknown lands of the East, took to adventurous methods. The journey of Columbus to the west, thinking that India was located there took him to the American continent, resulting in discovering the "West Indies". The journey to real East was heralded by Vasco-Da-Gama, of Portugal which took him to India. Since then other Western powers like Dutch, the British, and the French had come in succession which resulted in the establishing of colonialism. The rivalry among them to establish their foothold in India is too well known to require any narration. Of these the British with their political sagacity, business acumen and the cultural tradition, through evolutionary process stood foremost. Their strategy of not interfering in the local culture and tradition or offending the social ethos, without detriment to their own colonial and commercial interests, was something remarkable – which the other nations lacked – which paid them more dividends than their commercial ventures, It may not be an exaggeration to say that, but for their control of India, Britain would not have become a world power, nor the English language, a world language as we find them now. Yet in furthering their commercial interest, the British had to resort to some political manoeuvring, in which, siding with certain Native Rulers, opposing some others, coming to terms with certain others or both, were some of the modus operandi. Like a painless operation.

*A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar – Francis Buchanan, M.D. London 1807.

They went on adding portions of parts of India to their empire, at the same time allowing certain other areas i.e., 'Native States', to be ruled by the Native Rulers. But they maintained supremacy of their own over the latter by evolving what was called suzerainty under the theory of paramountcy. Thus by direct control of most of the areas of Bharat, and ruling the remaining areas i.e. the Native States, by proxy, they could project a Disney – Land type of unified India, unknown in any part of the world, the credit for which goes to themselves.

Bharat was and is one. The British knew it. Being a nation evolved out of a cultural evolution, they knew that the apparent multiplicity of India, was only an apparition and that the unity of India lay in the cultural homogeneity, a monolith, which could not be destroyed, because mankind's unity itself is culture, and culture alone, not politics, nor religion, nor language. In spite of their tremendous victory over the western nations and in spite of their occupying the major portion of Bharat they opted to keep Bharat divided in an exquisitely adroit manner one area ruled by themselves, the other by the native rulers who were under their control. It is this strategy that is called "Divide and Rule". Many mistake the communal divide as the creation of the British. It is not so. Of course that divide which was already there came in handy for them to perpetuate their own "Divide and Rule" policy, which was more effective. Thus, Bharat was divided into two, India and the Native States. Both the areas lay interspersed for the purpose of furthering colonialism. The oneness of the humanity in Bharat was so deep – rooted that it could not be uprooted by them.

In spite of this, one has to admire the efforts of the British whose interests in local culture led many administrators in the East India Company and later in the Administration to unearth the culture of the country. Most of them were Scholar Administrators. While it is true that they took away a lot of our material wealth, they unearthed the ancient culture of Bharat too, leaving them to us to enjoy.

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But for their effort, the cultural wealth of India would have remained as fossils in the rocks of Indian apathy. Foremost among such scholar – administrators, was Sir Williams Jones, that oriental scholar of Oxford who even during his student days at Oxford loved India more than his own country or more than Indians themselves did and who founded the Asiatic Society, an ardent student of Sanskrit too. His Socratic statement runs thus; *Sanskrit language, whatever be its antiquity, is of a wonderful structure, more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin, and more exquisite and refined than either.* While many in India burned copies of Manusmriti, there is a statue of Jones in a public place in London, holding a copy of the book with his right-hand, held high. He was a judge of the Supreme Court of Judge of the supreme court of Judicature, Calcutta. There are several others too who still stand as sentinels at the portals of Indian History and culture, like Jones.

The British completed consolidation of their supremacy in India by the latter half of the nineteenth century. One of the hard nuts to crack for them was Tippu, in whose territory they could not have a foothold even by the end of that century. Ultimately in the fourth Mysore War of 1799, Tippu was killed. The East Indian Company then appointed one of their officers, Dr. Francis Buchanan, from their Headquarters at Calcutta to go round the country i.e., the area under Tippu and also some other areas in the South study the state of Agriculture, Art, Commerce, Religion, manners and customs, Antiquities etc. Dr. Buchanan who came to Madras, started his journey from there on the 24th April, 1800 with a retinue of staff, sometimes walking, travelling on pony back and returned on the 6th July, 1801 reaching back Madras. His journey was through Conjeevaran, Bangalore, Seringapatam, Madura, erode, Palghat, Calicut, Cannanore, Bekal, Kasaragod, Kumble, Mangalore, Udipi, Kumta, Gokarna, Ankola, Sirsi, Banavasi and many other areas in the erstwhile Mysore State. The journey covered more than 300 places and took more than 439 days. The book entitled “A Journey from Madras through the countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar” (first printed in London in 1807) gives an exquisite picture of the living conditions of the people of these areas, their culture, religion etc. A major portion has been allotted for Agriculture, the religious ways of living and the caste system. There is statistics galore. All the details were collected by Dr. Buchanan by camping in different places for about two or three days, some times a week or a foremost visiting villages and forest areas and by contacting people who had the knowledge of the area, besides scholars. The details about the most backward communities and tribal’s form an integral part of his work. In one place he visited a building to see, out of curiosity how arrack was being prepared; the description about Serangapatam (where he stayed for 20 days) and the life and work of Hyder and Tippu, is very fascinating. The thoroughness and minuteness about all aspects of life, the absence of any prejudice though he was the first British to set foot in this area as a chronicler even 200 years back, make this work a balanced one. It is so impartial that nobody can stamp him as a ‘colonial agent’ as in the present ethos, we Indians are inclined to do. He achieved this within a short period of about 439 days. His work can be considered as a capsule of our ancient culture may has from a different angle an analysis of this, with a critical eye, would be very interesting and will forms as a good canvas to draw a picture of our social and cultural history during the period. There is scope for a through discussion and analysis of the various aspects of the life such as religion, art, social life etc.

A research work in his direction is worth a project.

The salient features of Buchanan’s work, in the way, he so scientifically dovetailed the details, he gathered from knowledgeable persons by his personal contact, and questioning and visiting the areas in spite of illness, sometimes, examining some works in progress to understand the technical aspects, examining certain ancient records in the possession of some informants and in some places assembling some groups of persons, as he did at Udupi in the South Canara district like the Koragas a primitive tribe. The conclusions he arrived at on all such occasions, affecting the population, were really based on the scrupulous following of the instruction given to him by the Governor General, dated 24th February 1800, Fort William. His judicious examination of the document he received from the local scholars, had not been accepted “in Toto”, but sifted by removing the chaff from the grain, which procedure shows its credit-worthness. A ‘comparisom-and-contrast’, method of assessing the merits and demerits of the literal rule of the Sultans of Mysore, Hyder Ali and his son Tippu will disprove the theories of some of the chroniclers and historical that Buchanan was prejudiced against the Sultans. Buchanan describes how Tippu’s mother, sitting in an ante-room-as was the wont of Muslim woman, hearing her son’s direction to his Dewan or Minister Purnea, to embrace Islam which the latter rejected and then resigned his official post, warned him against his action prophesying of the like hood of the end of the dynasty. The immanent wisdom and maturity of the so-called ‘illiterate woman’ of India have been so conspicuously made clear in this incident. Such cases in human activities in other spheres are in abundance in Indian history. Buchanan’s work, thus unfolds several such aspects of Indian society, polity, social activities, culture, etc., which alone can be considered as Indology and not any work which merely mentions a few only. A collection of such cases together with explanatory descriptions of culture and polity, which Buchanan wrote as early as the beginning of the 19th century would- be and should be – on the vanguard of riding the horse of Indology for 15th century guidance of often.

Some writers have termed Buchanan’s work as a travelogue which it is not, for the reason that a travelogue is only a description and self-satisfaction of what the individual felt as a freelancer in the course of a sight-seeing town whereas Buchanan’s work is an official one, the result of which was based on same official direction and methodology.

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