

Sir William Jones (1746-1794)

Two Hundred years ago, exact to this day (April 19, 1794), breathed his last, a great Englishman who sought to try to understand India and its culture and interpret it to the western world. He lived for less than fifty years, but within that brief period, blazed a trail of glory and achievement, not surpassed by any other.



William Jones, born in London on 28th September, 1746, had his education at Harvard and University College, Oxford (1764-1768). Even as a young student, he was known to be proficient in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, Arabic and Persian, having a knack of learning languages and by the end of his life had learnt 28 languages, an astounding feat for any scholar. He also possessed remarkable memory and it is stated that he once wrote out the entire text of 'Tempest' from memory when that book was lost. Knighted in 1783, he came to India in 1784 as a Judge of the Supreme Court. The governance of India, which was then in the hands of the East India Company, had proved to be inefficient and corrupt with petty fellows occupying seats of power and amassing private fortunes by extorting money from the Nawabs who, in turn, squeezed it out of the poor people of Bengal. There was a dire need for an upright person like Jones to set matters right and present a better image of the British power. In all, he spent just ten years in India and in that short period had achieved great things. He was the first to realize the folly of holding Indians in contempt (a characteristic of the average Britisher of those days) and their literature as primitive and worthless.

The first thing that Jones did after coming to India was to learn Sanskrit. But first he had to overcome the prejudice of the local Brahmins who were not prepared to teach this foreigner their sacred language. However, the authority vested in him and his power of persuasion soon overcame this initial reluctance on their part and the learned pandits agreed to part with their knowledge. They were captivated by the extraordinary memory of Jones and the assiduity of his studies. Without any inhibition or restraint they then parted with all their knowledge and brought to his notice several treasures of Sanskrit literature, more particularly *Sakuntala* of Kalidasa, the greatest Sanskrit drama which was to captivate the hearts of learned men both in the west and the east. Jones started translating the texts which appealed to him most. First appeared the hymns to the Gods *Ganesha, Indra, Agni, Varuna and Vayu* to be followed by the translation of the famous love lyric *Gita Govinda* of Jayadeva and *Sakuntala* of Kalidasa.

The educated Indians of that day did not know of the existence of these classics, until Jones drew the attention of the world to these masterpieces. He characterised *Sakuntala* as the best among the world's best dramas, and urged his readers to learn Sanskrit. He was so enamored with the Sanskrit language and its wonderful structure which was 'more perfect than the Greek, more copious than the Latin and more exquisitely refined than either'.

His greatest service to India was the starting, in 1784, of the Asiatic Society of Bengal (which became the Royal Asiatic Society in 1835 and still later as the Asiatic Society). He initiated a programme of research bringing to light oriental culture which lay buried in ancient Sanskrit texts. As the first President of the Society and throughout the period of his presidency, he delivered annual addresses on a variety of topics giving a great fillip to Indological research.

He wanted this Society to enquire into the history and antiquities, the national productions, arts, sciences and literature of Asia. Before his audience he projected the image of the Royal Society which started first only as a meeting of a few literary friends at Oxford and rose gradually to that splendid zenith at which a Halley was its Secretary and a Newton its President.

The secret of his effortless achievement of great works and deeds is revealed by his advice to fellow members of the Asiatic Society :

"We must make automatic and habitual as early as possible, as many useful actions as we can, and guard against growing into ways that are disadvantageous as we guard against the plague. The more

details of our daly life we can handover to the effortless custody of automation, the more our higher powers of mind will be set free for their proper work".

He was greatly interested in botany and had collected thousands of Indian plants, giving the name of each in Sanskrit, Roman and Arabic scripts. The well-known botanist, Roxburgh named the Asoka tree as *Jonesia asoka*, after William Jones, and thus immortalised his name by associating it with the graceful Asoka tree. It can truly be said that the Asaitic Society started by Jones was responsible for all the progress made in India during his life time and many years after in the fields of archaeology, science and literature.

His major work was the compilation of a copious digest of Hindu and Mohammedan law. Because his accomplishments and literary attainments were so vast, few have attempted to give a fair account of these, as there were none to match him in his learning. Sir John Shore, speaking about him, has stated : "Knowledge and truth were the object of all his studies and his ambition was to be useful to mankind. With this view he extended his researches to all languages, nations and times".

Jones had developed a great love for India. He spoke of it as a land "almost encircled by the vast regions of Asia which has even been esteemed thenurse..... of sciences, the inventress of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the production of human genius, abounding in natural wonders, and infinitely diversified in the forms of religion and languages as well as in the features and complexion of men". At the same time, he was struck by the poverty and misery of the Indian and warned his countrymen not to hold them in contempt, reminding them that in the early ages these very same Hindus "were splendid in arts and arms, happy in government, wise in legislation and eminent in various knowledge".

He was a man of noble character. Those who had seen him have referred to the affability of his conversation and manners and his modest unassuming deportment, totally free from pedantry as well as arrogance. His presence was a delight to every society, while his conversation exhilarated and improved those to whom it was addressed.

Jones died very young, when he was barely 48. A small tumour appeared on his right side which was later identified as inflammation of the liver. In spite of best medical aid, he did not improve, but breathed his last on April 17, 1794, at Calcutta. The Brahmin pandits were in tears at the loss of one who had impressed them by the wonderful progress he had made in the study of Sanskrit. "The Indological colossus died an

oriental martyr much to the sorrow of his Indian people and the rest of the world". We should do well to remember Sir William Jones as the person who rediscovered ancient India and restored it to its rightful place and to the Indian people.

B.P. RADHAKRISHNA

We regret to announce the sad demise of Dr. W.D. West, formerly Director, Geological Survey of India and Professor, Department of Applied Geology, University of Saugar, Sagar on 23 July, 1994.