PRESENTATION TO THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL OF LETTERS FROM SIR JOSEPH BANKS

On 10 May 1944 the Council of the Royal Society decided to purchase a collection of letters of Sir Joseph Banks relating to the Royal Botanic Garden at Calcutta with a view to presenting them to the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal. The letters were dispatched to Mr R. G. Casey, Governor of Bengal, who made the presentation to the Royal Asiatic Society and sent the following letters describing the proceedings.

The gratitude of the Society is due to Mr Casey for making the presentation and sending this communication.

Copy of a Letter, dated 22 August 1945

From: Mr R. G. Casey, Governor of Bengal.
To: Professor A. V. Hill, Biological Secretary of the Royal Society.

I handed over the letters of Sir Joseph Banks which dealt with the foundation of the Royal Botanic Garden, Sibpore, to the Royal Asiatic Society at a brief ceremony on 6 August 1945. The reason for the delay in handing them over was that the Royal Asiatic Society requested that I should wait until their President, Dr Meghnad Saha, returned from a trip to Russia. I am sending copies of the speeches which I and Dr Saha made on the occasion.

This ceremony was for me a very pleasant duty and I know that it has done a little more to cement the relationship between Australia and India, which is an integral part of the larger pattern of cultural relationships throughout the Commonwealth.

I need hardly say that I was asked to transmit to the Royal Society the most grateful thanks and appreciation of the Royal Asiatic Society—which I hope you will make known.
Copies of Speech by the Governor of Bengal

It is a great pleasure to meet you again to-day—and to present to you, on behalf of the Royal Society, these letters largely written by Sir Joseph Banks in connexion with the foundation of the East India Company’s Botanical Gardens at Sibpore.

The correspondence covers the period 1786 to 1805. It deals with the arrangements for the foundation of the Garden at Sibpore largely as a means of introducing into Bengal and acclimatizing food and medicinal plants, fruits, spices and timbers from other tropical areas of the world from Malaya to the West Indies—for the purpose of diversifying the indigenous productions, and perhaps in particular, for introducing new and quick growing food crops to guard against the recurring possibilities of famine, which even in those remote days was apparently a periodic anxiety.

These letters, as you no doubt know, were presented in London late in 1944 by the President of the Royal Society to your own distinguished President, Dr Meghnad Saha, himself a Fellow of the Royal Society, who was then a member of a Scientific Mission to England.

The letters are clear and as easy to read as if they had been written yesterday and cover the whole period of the formation of the Royal Botanical Gardens.

The opening letter from Lieutenant-Colonel Kyd has an interesting significance at this time by reason of its reference to the necessity for the establishment of public granaries for the storage of food grains and to famine prevention measures which apparently occupied the minds of the then administrators of India as a result of a recent famine as it occupies the minds of the present day Government of Bengal as a result of the disastrous famine of two years ago.

I notice also that the possibility of the introduction into Bengal of the sago palm from Malay was discussed before 1800. I realize that sago is an important foodstuff in South-Western India—but I am without knowledge as to whether it was ever introduced into Bengal in any considerable way—nor do I know whether or not it may still have possibilities here.
You will notice, I believe with interest, the very early reference to tea, in one of these papers dated 1790.

As you will readily appreciate, these old letters, by reason of their connexion with Sir Joseph Banks, have the greatest interest for me. The name of Banks is a well remembered one in Australia, through his work on the cruise of the *Endeavour* in Australian waters shortly before these letters were written. I have, in Australia, several copies of the original edition of Cook's Voyages, in which the name and activities of Banks is prominent.

I am unfortunately no botanist, but I realize very well the keen insight and inquiring mind that he brought to bear on his own subject—together with the businesslike approach to practical problems that these letters display.

In the very early 1880's, another link between Bengal and Australia was forged, by the introduction into Australia of sheep from Bengal—a flock of Bengal ewes, which I gather were probably Tibetan sheep that had been introduced some time before into what is now Bihar—and which appear to have formed the early basis of the pastoral industry in Australia, although the Bengal strain was to be later overlain by Merino sheep from England and Spain.

I trust that even closer co-operation between India and Australia may be attained in the future. This closer co-operation would be a natural result of the geographical positions of our two countries. I am constantly aware of the necessity for closer trade and cultural relations between Australia and India. A Society such as yours with its honoured and respected position in India, can do much to further cultural relationships and I know that this has already occupied the attention of your President and Committee. I can assure you that even after I leave this country, I shall continue to take a deep interest in its development and anything that I can do in the future to bring about a closer relationship between India and Australia will give me the greatest satisfaction.

I have been much impressed with your collection of manuscripts and documents. You have indeed a collection which it is a privilege to see and which must play an important part in the research into the past history of this country. I know that these letters of Sir Joseph
Banks will form a valuable addition to your collection—and it gives me the greatest pleasure to present them to you.

COPY OF A SPEECH BY PROFESSOR M. N. Saha, F.R.S., PRESIDENT OF THE ROYAL ASIATIC SOCIETY OF BENGAL

It is our special privilege and pleasure to welcome Your Excellency in our midst as a Patron of the Society. The Special Mission which you have taken upon yourself of presenting on behalf of the Royal Society of London certain manuscripts of Sir Joseph Banks recalls to our minds incidents connected with the foundation of this Society.

The Members of the Society are probably aware that Sir Joseph Banks was an eminent botanist who was selected to accompany the celebrated Captain Cook when the latter was commissioned by the Royal Society to observe the transit of Venus in the Tahiti islands in 1769, and also as part of the programme to look for undiscovered lands in the Southern Seas. This purely scientific expedition led to very thorough exploration of the eastern coast of the Southern Continent and led to its eventual settlement as the Colony of Australia. Sir Joseph Banks made a thorough botanical survey of the flora of the New Continent and after his return rose to be the President of the Royal Society and had the rare distinction of filling this post for nearly half a century (1778—1820). In 1784, the Asiatic Society was founded by Sir William Jones with the primary purpose of organizing the scientific study of Eastern languages, but he was also interested in the study of the diverse botanical specimens of Eastern India. In 1786, two years after the foundation of the Royal Asiatic Society, Colonel Robert Kyd of the Bengal Infantry, who was a keen horticulturist, proposed to the East India Company the foundation of a botanical garden at Sibpore for studying the economic plants of India and the East Indies. His suggestions were immediately accepted and the Botanical Gardens were founded in 1787 with Colonel Kyd as the first Superintendent-in-Charge. At the same time Sir William Jones aspired to complete a treatise on Indian botany and even published some preliminary papers giving scientific equivalents to the Latin terminology prevailing in the standard botanical works of those days.
The letters of Sir Joseph Banks probably refer to his schemes of collaboration with the early organisers of the East India Company’s Gardens of Sibpur, because it was the practice with the Government of India to consult the Royal Society on all matters concerning science in India.

It is a very kind act on the part of the Royal Society to send us the valuable unpublished letters of Sir Joseph Banks which will surely throw light on the incidents connected with the above affairs and would enrich our own historical collections on the eve of the celebration of the bi-centenary of the birth of our Founder. Our connexions with the Royal Society have been at times quite intimate. Some time back, the Royal Society subsidized the preparation through us of the International catalogue of Scientific Literature. Only about a couple of years ago we had the good fortune of receiving in our midst the eminent scientist Professor A. V. Hill, who, in his capacity as Secretary of the Royal Society, delivered a memorable address in a special meeting commemorating the 160th anniversary of our foundation.

While receiving with gratitude the letters of Sir Joseph Banks we beg to request Your Excellency as our Patron to convey to the President and Members of the Royal Society our profound thanks for their symbolical gift, which we shall treasure in the archives of our Society.

Permit me in this connexion to invite Your Excellency’s attention to a brief record of the cultural activities of our Society. Founded as early as 1784 A.D., its services to the cause of Indian archaeology, geography, ethnography, ancient history, Oriental languages and literatures, etc. are too well known to be described. For long years, it has advised the Government of India on matters of scientific and cultural interest and it was mainly at the initiative of this Society that the different Scientific Surveys were started; Indian Trigonometrical Survey in 1818; Geological Survey of India in 1840; Indian Meteorological Department in 1875; Zoological Survey of India in 1911; Botanical Survey of India in 1912. The Society first started a museum as early as the year 1814 and the Indian Museum, Calcutta, grew out of the Society’s valuable collections of geology, zoology, natural history and archaeology. The Society’s collection of rare coins have also been transferred to the Indian Museum and they have
been catalogued by eminent numismatists like the late Dr V. A. Smith of Oxford and Colonel Nelson Wright. In the domain of epigraphy, some of the very rare inscriptions relating to the history and administration of ancient Bengal could be found among the collection of our copper plates, which we shall have the privilege of showing Your Excellency. One of these plates was recently traced in the archives of the India Office and has been returned to us and has been very ably and thoroughly edited by our learned colleague Dr N. K. Bhattasali.

We have also a rare collection of manuscripts which we have the honour of holding in trust for over a century, and preservation and utilization of these manuscripts have caused considerable worry to us. The total strength of our manuscripts in the Sanskritic languages is about 27,000 representing a variety of subjects, such as literature from the Vedic times, philosophy, law, grammar, history, geography, astronomy, mathematics, art, architecture, medicine, theology and religion etc. In the Islamic section we have over 6,000 manuscripts on equally diversified subjects and some of the manuscripts formed part of the rich collection of Mogul Emperors whose autographs they bear. It is no good merely storing valuable manuscripts in godowns; to do full justice to the treasures of the Library, the Society must be enabled to develop a well co-ordinated plan of research into the contents of these manuscripts and arrange for their publication by enlisting the services of a number of competent scholars. We have already submitted schemes to the Government of India to give us financial aid on some of our projects.

The schemes contemplated the foundation of a number of Research Fellowships both for Sanskritic as well as for Islamic subjects, and in history and archaeology. These postgraduate research scholars should be attached to the distinguished Members and Fellows of our Society like Sir Jadunath Sircar, the historian of Mogul Emperors, who in spite of advanced age, is as active in his scholarly labours as in his youth, Dr R. C. Majumdar, who finished last year his monumental history of pre-Mahomedan Bengal, Dr Suniti Kumar Chatterjee, who has made an unrivalled scientific study of the vernacular languages of India, and Professor P. C. Sengupta, who has enriched our proceedings with his deep studies of ancient Indian astronomy. All these scholars
are willing to take upon themselves the onerous tasks of guiding young scholars, if they are placed under their care.

This, I hope, Your Excellency in the capacity of Patron of this Society would recommend to your Government. With your kind sympathy and support we expect to have the pleasure of getting not only the financial aid for the maintenance of a group of young scholars trained in objective research but also the necessary assistance in the conservation of these valuable materials for reconstruction of history and civilization of India and generally in the cultural and scientific activities of the Society.