

## DEFINING MOMENTS OF HISTORY

LAXMIPURAM P.SRIVATSA

### ABSTRACT

In the life of a nation, as in the life of a man, there are moments that have changed the entire course of its eventful history by the totally unexpected happening at an inordinate time. The defining moments of history are almost always inconspicuous situations that plays its assertive role in determining the final outcome of a grand design without in itself seeking prominence or due acknowledgement. This is very true when an individual is involved in the process.

### Introduction

In the life of a nation, as in the life of man, there are moments that have changed the entire course of its eventful history by the totally unexpected happening at an inordinate time.

When one speaks of the course of history, it is in reference to the abject circumstances of India's colonization into the British dominion and all efforts that went into realizing it as a grand diplomatic design.

What is rather little known of this defining moment in India's history is that, then Royal agent got assistance from the most unexpected quarter, a medical albeit surgical accident. The Indian empire would not have come under the so-called British rule of over two hundred years, if it were not for the services of a common English surgeon, Dr. William Hamilton. The contribution of Dr. Hamilton cannot in any way be construed upon as insignificant by any measure of reckoning.

### Quid Pro Quo

Following the early imperial possessions of the vast Indian sub-continent by the Mughals in early 1500's, Portuguese and the Dutch were the first of the European buccaneers who came to the east, looking for the colossal profit to be made in trade. Though the London merchants had a relatively late entry by late 1500's and early 17th century the British commerce company known as the East India Company had pegged themselves as mere traders with no greater ambitions or designs other than commerce. Not in the least, did the company think in terms of exercising a military option directed to colonize the Indian sub-continent.

Trade was their main objective which was both steady and grossly satisfactory in the first few decades of the Company's affairs in the East. Later, the Company had to taste bitter financial loss compelling it to diversify its operations. Sheer market forces forced

---

\* California Retinal Medical Group and 163 South Gordon Way, Los Altos, California 94022, U.S.A.

an otherwise essentially trading company to adopt a more general operative motto '*Auspicia Regis et Senatus Angliae*', which had a fine imperial ring to it.<sup>1</sup>

Added to this was the atmosphere of general anguish felt all around Delhi. Augangzeb, the last of the Great Moghuls who were Emperors of India in fact as well as in name died on March 4th, 1706/07. His son Azam seized the throne only to be killed in a battle with his own elder brother Shah Alam coming down from Kabul, Afghanistan. Shah Alam gave himself the grand title of Bahadur Shah. In 1708 he defeated and killed his other elder brother, Kam Baksh. Azimash Shan, Governor of Bengal, who was the second son of Shah Alam had decidedly gone in aid of his father, leaving Murshid Quli Khan as the caretaker of the Province of Bengal, in his absence. At this time, the second son of Azimash Shan who held the post of Deputy Governor of Bengal was silently waiting his chance to grab power all to himself.

Shah Alam, died on February 17th 1711, which started the battle for the throne once again. This was the period of the beginning of the end of the Moghuls, as rulers of India. Sons and nephews fought between themselves in a bitter filial fight only to allow Farakh Siyar gain the throne. At this time the seeds of a large scale domestic dissent and discontent was beginning to be sown even by the Hindu population, who were in majority. The disagreement with the Hindus was on the issue of

proselytization started by the earlier Mughal Emperor, Aurangzeb towards Islamization of the whole of India.

The domestic pressures reflected in the dealings with the Company. The case involving Mr. John Surman, a merchant deputed by the Company to Delhi to wager a basket of concessions relating to trade, was kept without an audience for over three years, can be cited as an instance of this difficult relationship.

This rather unstable political situation also suited the Company officers as well. Despite this political atmosphere, there was still no (deeper) colonization designs, as long as they were being feted with more and more trading concessions by the Mughals, in exchange for a favour or services of one kind or the other.

It could well be said that the Moghals were sensitive enough not to appear all too condescending and eager to oblige the English. Nonetheless, the Company officers watched on the quivive, ready to exploit the matter into any political advantage.

As things would have it, Emperor Farakh Siyar fell ill. He was suffering from a bad case of venereal disease. The Company deputed one of its surgeons, William Hamilton to assist. William Hamilton was a cadet of the family of Hamilton of Dalzell and originally came to India as Surgeon of the frigate *Sherborne*. Somehow, Hamilton made himself to be in medical service of the Company in Calcutta after a minor row with the frigate's Captain.

The important thing is, Surgeon Hamilton somewhat laboriously cured his most distinguished patient. An extract from Hamilton's own dairy speaks of the trouble he undertook.

Diary, 25th July, 1715. "The Doctor ordered by the King to give phisick to Tuccurub Caun."

Diary, 30th July, 1715. "The Doctor called to the Camp by Caundora, we Suppose on the King's account."

Diary, 16th Aug., 1715. "The Doctor being sent for last night by the King; went this morning with Cojah Seerhaud: where he Examined two Swellings in his Groin; and has now taken his Majesty under his hands, by God's blessing, to recover a very much impaired constitution."

Diary, 23rd Aug., 1715. "The Doctor lives with Tuccurub Caun."

Cons., 25th Sept., 1715. "Mr. William Hamilton having brot in an Account Amount: to 486.12. the bulk off which is for Medicines bot for the use of the King and Tuccurub Caun; Agreed, that it be paid, & inserted in Hugh Barker's Accot."

Diary, 30th Sept., 1715. "Tuccurub Caun having gratyfyd our Doctor has left him off, and taken to others; butt his distemper is off such a nature, as to be judged incurable."

Diary, 3<sup>rd</sup> Oct., 1715. "Cojah Seerhaud and the Doctor sent for by the King's Mother, where his Majesty's indisposition was debated."

Letter VI., 6th Oct., 1715. "To the Hon<sup>ble</sup> Robt Hedges, Esq. Presi<sup>t</sup> & Gov<sup>r</sup> of Fort William & c. Council in Bengal.

"Our last to your Hon<sup>r</sup> Etc<sup>a</sup> was August the 31<sup>st</sup> Since which we have not received any Letters from your Hon<sup>r</sup> Etc<sup>a</sup>. We then advised, that we had prepar'd our General Petition we design'd to have presented it the first good Opportunity, but his Majesty's

indisposition continuing and M<sup>r</sup> Hamilton having him under care it has been thought advisable by our friends as well as our Selves to deferr delivering it till such time as it Shall please God that his Majesty in some measure return to his former State of health which advice we intend to follow considering that whilst he is in so much pain it can be but a very indifferent opportunity to beg favours of him. The first distemper the Doctor took him in hand for was swellings in his Groin which thanks be to God he is in a fair way of curing, but within these few days last past he has been taken with a Violent pain in his posteriors which is likely to come to Fistula, it hinders his Majestie from coming out, so naturally puts a Stop to all manner of business wherefore must have patience perforce..... this."

Diary, 19<sup>th</sup> Oct., 1715. "The King visited in the Duan Coss.\* Mons<sup>r</sup> Martin has sided with the King's Doctor against M<sup>r</sup> Hamilton."

Diary, 7<sup>th</sup> Nov, 1715. "Our Doctor coming from the Fort att night, his head was Cutt with A Pebble: off which the King being informed; he ordered Search to be made for the offender; and gave the Doctor people for his future protection."

Letter VII, 12<sup>th</sup> Nov., 1715. "To the Hon<sup>ble</sup> Edward Harrison, Esq. President and Governor of Fort St. George & c<sup>a</sup>. Council.

"Honourable Sir and Sirs. The Kings indisposition has much impeded the forwarding of our Negociation; so that want of matter has occasioned our Long Silence: We hope his Majesty is at present in a fair way of Recovery, which if it pleases God to grant, it must of necessity Redound to the Honour and Credit of our Nation, he having been under the Sole care of our Surgeon who has administred much to his Majesties satisfaction.

During the same year, Hamilton was asked to treat the Emperor once again,

as the pain in the swollen groin was causing excruciating pain. The Emperor was so much relieved from this surgery that he agreed to go through with (thereto) the long postponed marriage of his, with the daughter of Raja Ajit Singh of Jodhpur. Later, the news that he was even able to consummate his marriage, brought relief to everybody. The risks taken by Surgeon Hamilton was so enormous that he clearly felt the burden that a nineteenth century chronicler Sir William Hunter <sup>2</sup> (3) writes....

"As a mater of fact, while he was curing the Delhi Emperor at the risk of his own life, if the operation went wrong, and exhausting his credit with his august patient to obtain indulgences for the English Company, his Honourable Masters had, in a fit of parsimony on the other side of the globe, done away with his appointment, and ordered' the discharge of Dr. Hamilton on his return from Court.' From this ingratitude the Directors were spared partly by the fear of losing Hamilton's influence with the Emperor, and partly by Hamilton's death. They wrote grudgingly in their Bengal despatch of January, 1717, Finding by the letters before us how successsful he has been in curing the Great Moghul, which very probably will help forward our negotiations and get an easier grant of some of our requests, we now say that, if Dr. Hamilton shall desire a continuance in our service, you readily consent to it, and let him see you are sensible of the benefit accruing to us, if you find he any hath, by his undertaking and accomplishing that cure.:"

This singular call of medical duty, apparently restored the Company's bargaining clout with the reigning Mughal

once again. By this service alone, Hamilton became the most famous of all the medical officers who have served in India, probably, the greatest benefactor of his country.

As a return of favour, the grateful Emperor rewarded the Company with the rights for the purchase of about thirty eight villages in Bengal Presidency and the freedom to trade exclusively within Bengal and a flat customs duty of about Rs. 3,000 per year.

The rest is history. The vile and opportunistic English Company forged a similar quid pro quo arrangement with the local Governors namely, the Nawabs, amassing themselves with more and more trade concessions in return for a variety of services that was provided as enticement.

### **Apocalyptic Faith**

Although much of the Indian sub-continent around the beginning of the 18th century was still under the Mughals, reign, it was federalistic in structure. However, the entire empire was suffering from enough of a discontent underneath, it made itself attractive to any of the imperialistic forces to await for the opportune moment to strike.

The British who entered essentially as traders much after the Portugese and Dutch had already well entrenched as the early contenders to the post of being the main colonizing force. Indeed, the English East India Company had no motive other than trade to begin with. The Company officers were satisfied with an easy going and satisfactorily condescending (continued) relationship with the reigning Mughals. Only with the imminent failings and rumblings in the seat of power in

Delhi, growing steadily, did the actual tergiversation by the Company begin.

The traders ultimately became the rulers for over a two hundred period of the entire subcontinent is also history. In this, there is a need to emphasize that all trials in the exercise of the state craft apparently can not be credited entirely to the triumph of diplomacy or beaurocrats. The role of a subtle and serendipitous act by a minor non-discript individual almost in synchrony with the main exponent although does not seek its full-fraught merit, the role the individual played in the fruition of the grand expose' cannot be rightfully ignored.

#### **Frustum of the argument**

The defining moments of history are almost always inconspicuous situations that plays its assetive role in determining the final outcome of a grand design without in itself seeking prominence or due acknowledgement. This is very true when an individual is involved in the process. The reasons for such neglect may be its very nature of subtlety of action, than any attachable motive to the role played by the persona in question.

In the matter relating to an otherwise diminutive role played by a surgeon Hamilton in comparison with the otherwise mighty East India Company, leading to the ultimate establishment of a near two centuries of colonial rule of the Indian subcontinent; it can be said in *facon de parler*,

that the aesculpiian skill had its gainsaid in an effective way than all the craftiness of Machiaveli could.

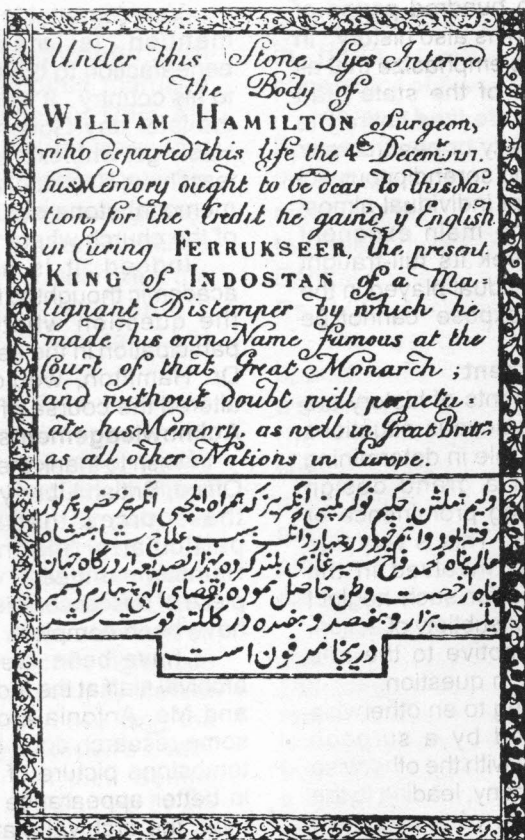
Very regrettably, in all the records, no mention is made of Hamilton's beneafaction to the Company and in turn to his country. It was however evident to the later day Governor General, warren Hastings, who expressed his desire to at least have Hamilton's grave gilded and the memorial stone setup in the central hall of the church where he was buried<sup>3</sup>.

Indeed, it is an interesting final academic thought to fledge one self to ask the question whether the total non-participation in the sequence of events by Dr. Hamilton, would in any way have altered the course of history?

#### **Acknowledgements**

I wish to thank the librarian at the India Office, British Library for helping me with the sources that was hard to find particularly relating to Dr. William Hamliton. Indeed, without this crucial piece of reference, this research would not have been complete.

I have been greatly helped by the archival staff at the India Library in London and Ms. Antonia Moon in particular in some research done on the subject. The tombstone picture of Dr. Hamilton being in better appearance than what I myself took, the archival plate is reproduced in the paper with all necessary acknowledgements due.



The epigraph may be literally translated as follows:—

William Hamilton, Physician, servant of the English Company, who had gone along with the English Ambassadors to the illustrious Presence and had raised his name high in the four quarters of the world by reason of the cure of the King of Kings, the Asylum of the World, Muhammad Farukh Syud the Victorious, with a numerous difficulty having obtained from the Court of the Asylum of the World, leave of absence to his native land, by the decree of God on the 4th December 1717, died in Calcutta, and in this place was buried.

## REFERENCES

- |                  |      |  |
|------------------|------|--|
| 1. Anstey Vera   | 1929 | The Economic Development of India, (London ).                                      |
| 2. Roberts, P.E. | 1952 | History of British India under the Company and the Crown, (London ).               |
| 3. Hunter, W.W.  | 1897 | The Thackerays in India, and some Calcutta Graves, Henry Froude, London, (pp 33)s. |

सारांश

## इतिहास के निरूपक क्षण

- लक्ष्मीपुरम पी. श्रीवत्स

एक व्यक्ति के जीवन के सदृश एक राष्ट्र के जीवन में भी ऐसे क्षण आते हैं जिनके कारण किसी अनुचित समय पर घटित पूर्णतया अप्रत्याशित घटनाओं द्वारा उसके इतिहास का संपूर्ण ढर्रा ही बदल जाता है। इतिहास के यह निरूपक क्षण अनायास ही एक भव्य योजना के अंतिम परिणाम के निरूपण में सशक्त भूमिका निभाते हैं। किंतु लगभग यह स्थितियाँ सदा ही ऐसी होती हैं जिनकी ओर जल्दी से ध्यान नहीं जाता। इस प्रकार के घटनाचक्र से जब कोई वैयक्तिक रूप से संबद्ध होता है तब यह और भी सत्य सिद्ध होता है।