NOTE

BETWEEN 1765, the year Mir Jafar died a leprous, imbecile and dejected man, and 1834, the year from which these records date, no less than seven Nawabs ascended the Musud of Murshidabad, all helpless creatures at the hands of the designing and intriguing officials of the Company who progressively denuded them of their lawful power, privilege and purse. The longest reign, if that appellation is permitted for the term of office of a titular princeling, was that of Nawab Mobarak-oos-daulah, the fourth son of Mir Jafar, whom the kingmakers planted on the throne in 1770 after his elder brother had suddenly died in those calamitous times when the twin scourges of famine and smallpox were ravaging his domains. Hastings promptly seized the opportunity of this succession to reduce to sixteen lakhs the annual allowance the Nawab used to receive from the Company’s treasury for the maintenance of his government, an institution which was existing more in myth than in reality ever since 1765 when Clive obtained direct from the Emperor, through a Sanad or Letters Patent, the Dewany of the three provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa in a deal described by a contemporary historian as being “done and finished in less time that would have been taken up for the sale of a jack-ass, or of a beast of burden, or of a head of cattle.” The Nizamut now signified nothing more than the household of the Nawab. His personal stipend which was later separated from the gross allowance was hardly seven and a half lakhs at the time of the last of the Nawab Nazims, Feradun Jah (1838-1881), whose successors were left merely with the hereditary title of Nawab Bahadur of Murshidabad and a small pension.

The office of the Agent to the Governor General at Murshidabad, from which the present correspondence emanated and which was created in 1817 and financed from the lapsed stipends accumulated in the Agency Deposit Fund, may appear to the reader of these letters to be a curious combination of diplomatic, bursarial and managerial functions. It not only acted as the immediate channel of communication between the Nawab Nazim and other branches of the Nizamut on the one side and the British Government and their Officers and subjects on the other, and afforded supervision and control of the Nizamut office and stipends, but also acted as the clearing house for all intelligence of the happenings at the Durbar and the Deorhee. The Agent, though paid out of funds rightfully belonging to the Nizamut, owed little obligation and no allegiance to the Nawab but assumed the role of his gurdian whose job it was to keep him “from committing gross errors and follies” (p. 640) and to administer occasional rebuffs for any failure to remain grateful to “that
nation and Government to whose favor and indulgence you are indebted for all that you possess" (p. 120). The Nawabs’ remonstrances were as feeble as they were few and the painful realisation came to Humayun Jah barely two months before his death “that his predecessors made Treaties and the Government kept all the country, all the money, and left him nothing but the old and useless paper” and that if the Nizamut was now degraded it was because “the English Government had broken its faith” (p. 230).

Most of the correspondence on record relate to the management of the Nizamut Funds and make, inevitably, a tardy reading. But they will not fail to impress even a casual reader of the seriousness with which the English Officers applied themselves to the task of not only ruling the land but also knowing it inside out. These enterprising men had their ears on the ground “for it was a standing rule with them, that whatever remarkable they heard from any man versed in business, or even from any other individual, was immediately set in writing in a kind of book composed of a few blank leaves, which most of them carry about” (Seir Mutaqherin) and did not omit “even at the risk of being charged with importunity” to pass on to the Government, twenty years before the ‘Mutiny,’ the popular distrust of the “Government of strangers and foreigners” and to plead for “allowing the natives a much larger share in the deliberations of the Government than is permitted to them under the present system” (p. 148). They claimed intimate knowledge of the nature of the people of all classes, whether “the opulent native possessing their submissiveness to authority and their habitual addiction to corruption and intrigue,” or “the Hindoo females, the most timid and helpless of mankind, trembling for the welfare of their single object of solicitude in the world, their son” (p. 99).

The letters dealing with the construction of the Palace, popularly known as the Hazarduri, and the adjoining Imambarah will be found to be of topical interest, with a touch of humaneness lent by the understandable controversy over the desirability of spending so lavishly on museum pieces when the town itself was “a bog during the rains, and a sink of miasma for three months in the year” and when “the pressing necessity of applying some part of the Nizamut funds to the improvement of the Town, and the support of a dispensary” (p. 247) went unattended to.

In conformity with the practice followed in the earlier publications of the present series, all letters, as far as available, have been printed in full without any alteration whatsoever.

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