

## REFLECTIONS ON ROBERT SEWELL'S THOUGHTS ON INDIA

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### Abstract

Robert Sewell was a British Civil Servant who was recruited as a collector and magistrate in Madras Presidency in Colonial India. He was considered not only as a civil servant but also as a scholar of history. He was then in charge of the then archaeological department of Madras Presidency. He was the keeper of the Madras Record Office and was involved in the documentation of ancient inscriptions. Unlike Vincent Smith who meticulously studied the history of India in order to satiate his inquisitiveness to know a civilization entirely different from the western civilization, Robert Sewell's accounts were Britain centric. Many historians opinionated that Robert Sewell's aptitude wasn't that of a scholar but that of an Imperialist who wished to colonize not only the alien land but also the cultural essence of the entire civilization inhabiting the land. Robert based his research on the concept of ideological subversion and with the purpose of strengthening the roots of British administration in India presented before Indians an untrue story of their civilization. His accounts beamed with the hopeless episodes of factionalism among various regions of India. His commentaries were filled with blasphemy and superfluous words eulogising the greatness of British Civilization, while demeaning the political structure, social values and cultural threads binding India. Robert Sewell paid much emphasis on reconstructing the history of Vijayanagar Empire.

This research paper would try to analyse the authenticity of Robert Sewell's works and draw conclusions regarding his viewpoints on Indian civilization. Primary and secondary sources will be used to derive pertinent conclusions.

**Keywords:** Vijayanagar, Colonial, Historiography, 1857 Revolt, Civil Servant.

### Introduction

Robert Sewell was a British Civil Servant who was recruited as a collector and magistrate in Madras Presidency in Colonial India. He was considered not only as a civil servant but also as a scholar of history. He was then in charge of the then archaeological department of Madras Presidency. He was the keeper of the Madras Record Office and was involved in the documentation of ancient inscriptions. Unlike Vincent Smith who meticulously studied the history of India in order to satiate his inquisitiveness to know a civilization entirely different from the western civilization, Robert Sewell's accounts were Britain centric. Many historians opinionated that Robert Sewell's aptitude wasn't that of a scholar but that of an Imperialist who wished to colonize not only the alien land but also the cultural essence of the entire civilization inhabiting the land. Robert based his research on the concept of ideological subversion and with the purpose of strengthening the roots of British administration in India presented before Indians an untrue story of their civilization. His accounts beamed with the hopeless episodes of factionalism among various regions of India. His commentaries were filled with blasphemy and superfluous words eulogising the greatness of British Civilization, while demeaning the political structure, social values and cultural threads binding India. Robert Sewell paid much emphasis on reconstructing the history of Vijayanagar Empire. Burton Stein has frankly stated about Sewell's book entitled, "Forgotten Empire: A Contribution to the History of India", that it is the only popular work available to understand the history of Vijayanagar because it gave a comprehensive outline of the genealogical and chronological accounts of the dynasties that ruled the Kingdom<sup>1</sup>. He also facilitated the translation of two historical accounts presented by two sixteenth century Portuguese visitors who once have visited the city. Apart from presenting a historical account of Vijayanagar Empire he also undertook archaeological work, which included the Buddhist Stupa at Amravati. The archaeological remains of this site was previously been studied by Colin Mackenzie and Walter Elliot. Since Sewell was unacquainted with South Indian languages, so he was guided by various

native speakers of Kannada, Malayalam and Telugu languages. Not much information is available regarding the early life and works of Robert Sewell. Hence, his ideology towards Indian folk can be calculated through his works commenting on various aspects of Indian history and the special lectures he delivered on India in House of Commons, London.

### **Robert Sewell on India**

Colonial historiography has always undermined India's potential to conduct itself for self-rule. The genre of literature produced is spiced with the biased attitude of English Colonists. Robert Sewell's lectures delivered before the East India Association, London on Eight April and Thirteenth May, 1897 are embedded with vitriolic notions of civilizational superiority<sup>2</sup>. He expressed his resentment towards non-availability of proper historic sources to justify the political, social and cultural episodes of that period. According to Sewell, Indians had no sense of maintaining a chronological way of restoring data and historical facts. They possess no autobiographies or historical novels to enlighten them with the knowledge of their past. Thus, the ignorant populace of Indian civilization were quite indecisive to accept or reject the benefits of English rule and conclude whether it was a blessing or a curse. He further stated that Indians are of the opinion that they were once ruled by great Emperors like Rama, Asoka, Vikramaditya and Samudragupta. However, lack of proper historical data prove it as a hypothetical belief. Hindus believed that during the time of these great rulers there was peace and prosperity in the country as taxes were lighter and less cumbersome. Author contradicted such belief with the example of taxation policy of Cholas and Muslim rulers who used to extract heavy portion of earnings from petty peasants and tenants as taxes. About land survey system, Sewell said that it was better during the time of the British and criticised the flaws present in the system of land survey during the great Chola Empire. The petty villagers were at the mercy of the corrupt and rapacious village chiefs. Before the coming of the English an Indian villager was restricted to his village itself because of lack of proper transportation facilities and threat from thugs and dacoits whereas during colonial rule the same villager was free to involve in to overseas trading activities. According to author, Indians lacked the habit of looking into the past in order to take lessons for the present and inspiration for the future, whereas, English men always look back at his past to learn and evolve. Indians are unaware of their history and so they could never conduct any comparison between their past and their present. In order to justify his opinion he has given reference of his experiences with well-educated Hindu officers while accumulating records and documents for his two volume work on antiquities of Madras presidency. He said that though Hindus possessed great interest in monuments and inscriptions but they hardly tried to decipher the inscriptions and believed that the inscriptions were constructed by heavenly Gods themselves. During the times when Sewell had camped out on duty and pitched his tent nearby any hill top or any fort, he had tried to collect as much information about that grand old historical monument as possible. Simultaneously, he has expressed his resentment towards the reckless attitude of Indians who possessed no knowledge of such prestigious monuments or hills or forts which forms an important part of their cultural wealth. Robert Sewell has stated in his speech that when asked about the historical episode attached to a particular monument from the inhabitants, he never received any affirmative reply<sup>3</sup>. According to Sewell, Hindu civilization of India possess no any image of its past except in its dreams. Indians believed that the geographical area stretching from Hindu Kush to Ceylon and was ruled by the great monarchs who held supreme power, majestic courts and unmatched dignity. The unbelievable description of benevolent administration carried out by these monarchs greatly surprised Sewell who tried to contradict the beliefs of Indian masses through data collected after he conducted personal inspection of the historical facts<sup>4</sup>. He was greatly disturbed by the lecture delivered by an English speaking Indian Brahman who quoted that knowledge of medicine firstly arose on the soil of ancient India. He termed the declaration by some educated Indian King about the glorious history of his country as a myth for he based his explanation on ancient epic poems. The king has written that since ancient times India has enjoyed a peaceful reign. The type of benevolent administration pursued by the Kingdoms of

Hastinapur and Ayodhya made these two cities as the centre of political supremacy and the entire territories were bounded together by the twin threads of patriotism towards the mother country and loyalty towards the ruler. The ruler was considered to have ascended the throne through the theory of divine rights. After quoting the article presented by the indigenous regional ruler of India Sewell commented that it is the duty of educated and civilised English men and women to teach the People of India about the true nature of their history. In the next lecture delivered by him he attacked the ancient history of India. Sewell stated that India like Europe was never a single nation but a confederacy of separate regions and different people. According to him, it was the Europeans who gave the name India to Hindustan. Hindustan can never be called as a country because it had different races, languages and culture. He further stated that the earliest race that once inhabited India were the Turanians, who were displaced by Aryan conquerors. The migrants of Aryan race who later established the core of Indian civilization considered these tribes as savages and cannibals and used this population to serve them as slaves or dasas. He switched next to the heroes of Ramayana and Mahabharata and stated that according to Ramayana there were about fourteen distinct races which inhabited the southern part of Indian Territory. The most conspicuous fact highlighted by Robert Sewell in his lecture was that these distinct races or local tribal groups were not ruled by one common tribal chief or head. These groups were actually great Kingdoms such as- Kingdoms of Cholas, Pandyas, Keralas, Kalingas and Andhras. About Mahabharata, he said that six kingdoms have been mentioned in the text i.e. Hastinapur, Mathura, Panchala, Benaras, Magadha and Bengal. Reference has been made about Krishna being the ruler of Gujarat and Bhil Raja ruling over the south of Yamuna. About Alexander's invasion he commented that during the time Alexander invaded India, Upper India had no supreme lord protecting the territories. Megasthenese has referred to 118 nations thriving on the soil of Indian sub-continent with each having its individual significance. Robert Sewell in his speeches delivered before the East India Association raised objection against Asoka's status as a Chakravartin ruler<sup>5</sup>. He has presented a comprehensive discussion in order to justify his viewpoint. He said that in the thirteenth edict marking the ninth renal year of Asoka's reign, it has been mentioned that Kalinga was a flourishing empire and lay south of Bengal. The battle fought between the two kingdoms was fierce and to win over Kalinga was a hard nut to crack even for a ruler of such stature as that of Asoka. In his second edict, he has mentioned about the nations and princes who were his neighbours, such as the Cholas, Satyaputras, Pandyas, Kerelaputras and the Greeks who ruled the Southern Kingdom. Also, in his fifth edict Asoka has given reference of kingdoms of Kamboja, Gandharas, Rastikas, Pitinikas and many others as his neighbours. According to Sewell, in his thirteenth edict Asoka has stated that he had no claim over the political supremacy of India and the chiefest of conquest according to him is the conquest through sacred law. In the same edict Asoka has mentioned about the thriving empires in his neighbourhood. This according to Sewell justify the fact that Asoka wasn't a national or universal monarch and during his reign many independent kingdoms and tribes were in existence. He later moved on to the historical age of the two great classical Indian Epics i.e. Ramayana and Mahabharata and said that it is indecisive. According to him Ramayana and Mahabharata has nothing great to offer to human kind when it comes to moral lessons. The only symphony it produces is the symphony of constant dynastic wars and practical struggles for the throne. Even the great epic of Ramayana has not mentioned about any great universal empire and has mentioned the fourteen separate races which were inhabiting the region which lied south of the Tungabhadra river. In Mahabharata also it has been mentioned that during the tussle between Pandavas and Kauravas, Kauravas had called for their allies ruling the neighbouring Kingdoms, which again is a sign that India wasn't ruled by a single Empire instituting in Hastinapur<sup>6</sup>. From Mahabharata, author has shifted to the time of Alexander invasion, where again he found that there was no Universal Emperor to defend the country and Chandragupta and Puru were some powerful local rulers ruling a confederacy of vassal states. Sewell while discussing Alexander's invasion has also stated about Megasthenese accounts in which the chronicler has mentioned about the presence of 118 nations in India. He raised an eye of suspicion over the

authenticity of Hindu poems eulogizing the greatness of ruler and his deeds. He has given examples of such superfluous commentaries in order to substantiate his point. In order to clarify the fact that Vikram era wasn't instituted by the Indian King Vikramaditya, he summarized the work of Dr. Kielhorn. He said that Dr. Kielhorn combined a large number of Vikrama dates from numerous inscriptions in order to decipher its genesis<sup>7</sup>. According to him the earliest inscriptions in which Vikrama era was mentioned belonged from the region of Eastern Rajputana. The first mention of the name Vikrama is found in the year 840-41 A.D. which one hundred and seventy years after the time of Vikramaditya I. It was in the year 992 A.D. the first mention of the King Vikramaditya in connection with the Vikrama era was found in a poem eulogizing the greatness and popularity of the ruler. The tract where the inscription mentioning Vikram era was first found was the region of Eastern Rajputana. Further inscriptions were found to the north-east and east to Kannauj, Gwalior, Bundelkhand and South-West and South to Anhilwada. Kielhorn has stated in his work that in the year in between 1028 to 1090, Vikrama Samvat was there. In 1138 A.D., the year of the illustrious Vikrama was there. But in 1200 A.D. it era began to be called as the year established by the illustrious Vikramaditya. After 1200 A.D. the usage of Vikrama era became common and the inhabitants of Rajputana and Maharashtra began to believe that a legendary King name Vikramaditya has established it<sup>8</sup>. Again, Prof. Kielhorn explained the reason for which the use of the word Vikram became a common practice among Indians. According to him, the years of Vikrama era used to begin with the commencement of autumn. The season used to mark the end of scorching heat and dusty storms of the summer. Sky was burdened by heavy clouds and raining was a common affair. Thus, it was the time when armies of various Kingdoms used to gear up for wars and excursions. Hence, the name Vikrama became the note of addressing the era as literally it meant stepping or striding over and so the only meaning of Vikram year according to Robert Sewell and Professor Kielhorn was the current year<sup>9</sup>.

The next issue taken up by Sewell was the matter of revenue collection or taxation. He has substantiated his findings with the volumes produced by British civil servants, who conducted the field survey, made a proper account of every detail and produced it in the form of Official Gazetteers. Sewell has given reference of Chola Empire and its extravagant rule. He came across a colossal temple of Tanjore which according to him stood as a testimony of heavy taxation derived from the local populace. The walls and plinth of the grand temple were sculptured with a long list of royal grants and royal edicts engraved over it during eleventh and twelfth centuries. However, a German named Dr. E. Hultzsch took pains to accomplish a cumbersome task of translating the grants and edicts and gather comprehensive information regarding the system of taxation in India. The data produced the list of taxes which were due on the villagers. Also, Hultzsch's accounts enlightened the British over the type of taxes collected by the Cholas<sup>10</sup>. Tax for the village watchman, tax for the village accountant, tax on unripe fruit in the month of Karitigai, tax on looms, tax on oil-mills, tax on trade, tax on animals, tax on shops, tax on salt, tax on elephant stalls, tax on marriages, tax on washer man's stones, tax on potters, taxes were also charged for using water and collection of leaves and brokerages<sup>11</sup>. Thus, author concluded that Indians were well-exposed to the practice of heavy taxation even before the coming of the British. Besides Cholas, Robert Sewell has also discussed about the harassing taxation policy that existed in Palibothra, i.e. modern Patna. Megasthenes has described about the harsh taxation policy that was prevalent in Patna. An early registration of births and deaths was conducted for the purpose of taxation. A state officer was appointed to supervise each and every transaction and any kind of fraud done in such transactions was punished with death. Then, he discussed the taxation policy of another ruler named Chikka Deva Raya of Mysore<sup>12</sup>. He was so particular about taxes that he not only maintained the old taxes charged by his successors but also introduced twenty one more taxes to fill up his royal treasury.

Sewell has written in great details about the History of India from Ancient times till the commencement of British rule. He has started his discussion with an interpretation of Vedas and have written about the authenticity of Classical Epics like- Ramayana and Mahabharata. He has stated that the

earliest invader who raided India in 2034 B.C. was the Semiramis<sup>13</sup>. The description of this event can also be found in several other literary works. Egerton has commented that the resourceful and fertile soil of India allured foreigners from Western part of the World to come and conquer the territory. Thus, in order to satiate the desire of tasting ethereal beauty of Indian subcontinent and to acquire the hold of its abundant natural resources, it was in the year 2000 B.C. that the Assyrian Queen Semiramis invaded India and fought a fierce battle with her opponent which is known by the name of Stabrobates in Greece<sup>14</sup>. Egerton has identified Stabrobates with Sthabarpatri. The second invasion about which Sewell has discussed was that by an Egyptian King named Rameses, the Second. Invasions by Cyrus, Darius and Alexander has also been mentioned. Six Principal states of Hindustan according to author were- Hastinapuram, Mathura, Panchala, Benaras, Magadha and Bengal, where the ten less important ones were- Malwa, Gujarat, Kannauj, Delhi, Ajmer, Mewar, Jaipur, Sindh and Kashmir. About Deccan he said that there were ten important Kingdoms, Pandya, Chola, Kerala, Carnata, the Chalukyas of Kalinga, Andhra and Orissa. Author has given vivid description about the Political history of the afore-mentioned Kingdoms and influential rulers of various dynasties. He analysed that the most influential dynasty that ever ruled Bengal was the Pala dynasty. He gave a brief mention of the kingdom of Malwa and the importance of the reign of Vikramaditya.

Robert Sewell then moved on to discuss the dynasties that ruled later and gave his personal insight on the life and works of Muhammad bin Tughlaq. He said that Muhammad Tughlaq was an extraordinarily talented man with gifted intellect and fore-sightedness<sup>15</sup>. However, like all other historians of his times and later, Robert Sewell too has criticised his gargantuan plans of actions which failed to succeed. A detailed account of the rise of Pindaris has been given by Sewell. According to him, Pindaris were professional thieves and were treated as Thugs and Dacoits by the British. These Pindaris gained prominence during the time of Peshwa Baji Rao. Pindaris and Peshwa, both joined in all the fights against the English Government. Another tribe which was discussed by Sewell was Ghurkha. He stated that Ghurkhas belonged from Nepal and were the race of Rajputs. They kept on disturbing the reign of English and murdered a British magistrate in Bootwal<sup>16</sup>. The struggle between the Ghurkhas and the English wasn't an easy battle and the English army was divided into four divisions in order to combat the Ghurkhas warrior. The military commander, General Ochterlony was a brave and clever warrior himself. He was so impressed with the warfare tactics of Ghurkhas that he found it difficult to combat them with the European strategy, hence he used Ghurkhas tactics against them. The war between Ghurkhas and British was a fierce battle but ended in Ghurkhas subjugation before the British. This war proved beneficial for the British as it opened up new channels of communication between the English the Nepal Government. In consequence, the Ghurkhas who once were English's enemy joined the British army and thus was formed the Ghurkha Regiment. Sewell commented that in the war of 1857, it was the Ghurkhas who were the most loyal soldiers of the British regiment. While discussing one of the reasons behind the revolt of 1857, Sewell commented that the feeling of Nationalism wasn't the actual reason behind this rebellion. In order to justify his statement he used the character of Nana Sahib who was the adopted son of Baji Rao and his objective for participating in the revolt of 1857 was his hatred against the English for they have stopped providing him the amount of the pension which was promised to his deceased father<sup>17</sup>. Later pages of his work was filled by various wars and treatises conducted by them.

#### **Conclusion:**

It can be concluded after a comprehensive study of his works that Robert Sewell was a studious scholar, a keen observer, and an astute diplomat. He pursued a rigorous study of each and every element of Indian history in order to get a perfect picture of the historical developments that ornamented Indian Civilization and influenced the habits and lives of those who inhabited it. After a deep introspection of his works, it cannot be that his accounts contained merely the ingredient of absolute biasedness but it also reflected the flavour of dark reality. His observations regarding the lacuna of historical knowledge among

Indians about their glorious past cannot be dejected. The second important conclusion that can be inferred from his accounts is the authentic malaise of regionalism Indian subcontinent was inflected with. According to Sewell, Battle of 1857 wasn't an outcry of Indian Nationalists to oust the British from their homeland but each section participating in the battle had its own personal motive to fight for. The most conspicuous characteristic of Sewell's works is his manuscript on Vijayanagar Empire and Hampi. These works of Sewell has been counted by Historians as the most comprehensive account on the subject. The beauty with which he has discussed the architectural intricacies of buildings constructed during Vijayanagar Empire and temples at Hampi spell-bounds the readers and enrich their mental faculties. Besides, one of his work entitled-The Analytical History of India is a treasure trove of many historical information about the historical events that took place in India including the long process of transformation of British East India Company from a trading company to that of a sovereign of a colossal Empire administrating India. Lastly, it can be said that Sewell has played an important role in creating a heroic caricature of British rule in the minds of Indian educated class and have questioned some of the most prevalent and popular traditions of Indian culture on the grounds of its authenticity and historicity.

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