

A Significant Order on Record Management

By M. L. AHLUWALIA *

National Archives of India

“THE RECORDS of the East India Company’s governments in India are probably the best historical materials in the world.” So begins the introduction to William Foster’s *Guide to the India Office Records, 1600-1858*, quoting from the *History of the Mahrattas*, by the famous historian James Grant Duff.¹

What led Duff to appreciate the wealth of material available in the archives of the East India Company and Foster to echo him is the availability of the records of the company in a sufficiently intact form—both the records in India and their counterparts, now preserved in the Commonwealth Relations Office, London. This, however, does not mean that—like any other records in the world—the company’s archives did not suffer from the usual hazards of fire, rain, theft, and human negligence. These were there. For example, the company’s records at Calcutta had suffered some destruction in 1737, during a flood and cyclone, and some in 1756, during hostilities when Calcutta was captured from the British by Nawab Siraj-ud-daulah.² As early as 1682 mention was made in the Court of Directors’ minutes of the “old books and papers which are in a confused manner layd in the upper garret of the [East India] House.”³ Again in January 1717 it was reported that one of the Surat journals had been removed from its covers and stolen, and that “great quantities of the Company’s packets and other papers were thrown on heaps in the Back Warehouse.”⁴

But, in spite of all this, it is to the credit of the directors of the East India Company that they began to bestow the necessary attention to the management and safety of their records at a comparatively early period. Thus we find that in 1769 the company had

* The contributor of this article is an archivist on the staff of the National Archives of India, New Delhi.

¹ Foster, *Guide*, p. (i) (London, India Office, 1919); Duff, *History*, 2: 185 (London, 1826).

² *A Hand-Book to the Records of the Government of India, 1748-1859*, p. 2.

³ Foster, *Guide*, p. (i).

⁴ *Ibid.*

appointed at its London headquarters a special officer to look after their fast-growing archives.⁵ The designation of this officer was "Examiner of the Indian Correspondence and Records," and his department came to be called the Book Office.⁶ From this time onward the Court of Directors continued to issue necessary instructions regarding the management of their records in India.

One of the most significant of such orders was the Court's general letter dated September 21, 1785, and addressed to the Governor General of India in Council at Fort William. This order was issued in view of the mismanagement and misuse of the company's records in India. It had come to the notice of the directors that, because of the unrestricted access that all their "servants" had to the records, it had become a practice of some to transmit or sell these records to private correspondents in London. Moreover, it had become a practice of the high officers of the company in India to divulge the secrets of the company to their friends and relatives in England. Pointing to these malpractices, the Court in its general letter observed:

We have long regretted an abuse which is now become so prevalent, and has gone to such an extent, that we must be peremptory in taking the most effectual measures to put an end to it. We allude to the practice of our Servants having access to, and transmitting home to their private correspondents such part of our records as they think proper. Our orders therefore are that no persons but the Members of the different Boards⁷ shall have access to their Records, except the Secretaries of such Boards, and those entrusted by them, and *that* no private copies shall be given thereof, except to the President of each Board if he shall desire it. To these persons so entrusted, we shall look for responsibility, and if copies of any of our papers, correspondence or Records shall be discovered in the possession of any persons not warranted by the Government either at home or abroad, we shall certainly take the most effectual measures in our power to discover by whose means the communication has been made and will dismiss from our service any person who shall be found guilty of disobeying our Orders.

⁵ The officer was Samuel Wilks.

⁶ Foster, *Guide*, p. (ii). The archives of the company in India could not, however, be put under proper management until 1891, when the Imperial Record Department, now called the National Archives of India, came into existence. As early as 1799, however, a separate record room was constructed at Fort William at a cost of *Sicca* Rs. 1500/-/- and was fitted with wooden racks at an additional cost of *Sicca* Rs. 500/-/-. Henceforward all the noncurrent records of the Presidency, which had been kept in boxes, were kept on open racks so as to be easily looked after. Public general letter to Court, Dec. 31, 1799, para. 6. See also *Indian Historical Records Commission; a Retrospect, 1919-1948*, p. 33.

⁷ By the same letter the Court of Directors had ordered that the company's administration at Fort William be controlled by four boards to be called the Board of Council, the Military Board, the Board of Revenue, and the Board of Trade.

Another practice of a similar nature likewise calls for our animadversion. Many of our servants possessing our most confidential situations are accustomed to indulge themselves, without Reserve in corresponding their private Letters, upon the Public Affairs of the Company. This is attended with many inconveniences, is directly contrary to our repeated orders, and we desire you will take the most effectual means to prevent it, and if any of our servants presume to continue in a practice so contrary to our wishes and orders, we shall certainly mark our disapprobation by the severest tokens of our displeasure.

Another irregular practice of the company's servants had been to send some of the letters meant for the directors in care of their friends and relatives in London. In order to put an end to this the Court in paragraph 52 of the above letter continued:

It is incumbent upon us further to inform you, that a practice has sometimes prevailed of late, of our servants abroad, sending home Public Letters to the care of persons resident in this country to be delivered by them or not as in their discretion they shall think proper. We prohibit any such practice in future, and direct that all Letters to us from our servants abroad, be addressed directly to the Court of Directors and sent by the usual conveyance: No other will be received by us.

As a result of these orders (a) the safe custody of records became a primary duty of the seniormost officials of every department of the company; (b) only the members of the different boards and their secretaries concerned had access to their departmental records; (c) authenticated copies of records could not be had by any official of less rank than the president of each board, and such copies could be taken only for the official use of the company in India or abroad; (d) no records or copies of records could thereafter be taken away, sold, or otherwise disposed of from the departmental archives; and lastly (e) the prohibition of sending public letters in care of private persons in London prevented the loss of valuable correspondence while in transit.

Thus the English East India Company's records continued to be kept safe and intact by the various departments long before they were physically stored in a proper records depository and began to receive the care of professional archivists.

The Varieties of the Record

Before calling Menderes, the prosecution attempted to set the scene by offering in evidence a pair of lace-trimmed silk panties found in his office safe in an envelope marked "historical records."

—Account of the mass trial in Turkey of officials of the government of ex-Premier Adnan Menderes, in *Time*, Nov. 14, 1960, p. 31. Quoted by permission of the publisher.