

The Ocean of Story

Preface

Charles Henry Tawney

1837 – 1922

[The following account of the life and labours of Mr Tawney has been prepared chiefly from the obituary notices which appeared in "The Times," "Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society" and "The Calcutta Review."]

CHARLES HENRY TAWNEY was the son of the Rev. Richard Tawney, vicar of Willoughby, whose wife was a sister of Dr Bernard, of Clifton. From Rugby, which he entered while the great days of Dr Arnold were still a recent memory, he went to Trinity College, Cambridge, where he greatly distinguished himself. He was Bell University Scholar in 1857, and Davies University Scholar and Scholar of Trinity in the following year. In 1860 he was bracketed Senior classic and was elected a Fellow of his college.

For the next four years he worked as a Fellow and Tutor at Trinity, but though he had obviously excellent prospects of academical work at home, considerations of health induced him to seek employment in India.

In 1865 he was selected to occupy the Chair of History in the Presidency College, just then vacated by Professor E. Byles Cowell. Mr Tawney filled this Chair with great credit from 1866 to 1872; in the latter year he was appointed Professor of English.

In 1875 he officiated as Principal in the place of Mr James Sutcliffe, and on the latter's death, in the following year, his position as Principal was confirmed. This office he held from 1876 to 1892, with breaks for short periods, during which he either went home on leave or was called upon to officiate as Director of Public Instruction in the then undivided province of Bengal.

He also held the position of Registrar of Calcutta University from 1877 to 1881, 1884 to 1885, and again in 1886 and 1889.

He was awarded the C.I.E. in 1888 and retired from the Education service at the end of 1892.

Mr Tawney had a happy familiarity with the literature of his own country, and published in Calcutta (1875) *The English People and their Language, translated from the German of Loth*. His acquaintance with Elizabethan literature was remarkable, while in Shakespearean learning he had no living rival in India. In this connection it is to be regretted that, except for editing *Richard III* (1888), he left no record of his great learning in this particular field of knowledge.

There was little scope in Calcutta for the display of Mr Tawney's knowledge of Latin and Greek, and so almost as soon as he arrived in India he threw himself heart and soul into the mastering of Sanskrit. This he achieved with the greatest credit, as the numerous works which he has left clearly show. His first publications were prose translations of two well-known plays, the *Uttara-rāma-carita* of Bhavabhūti (1874) and the *Mālavikāgnimitra* of Kālidāsa (1875). In *Two Centuries of Bhartrihari* (1877) he gave a skilful rendering into English verse of two famous collections of ethical and philosophico-religious stanzas. But his *magnum opus*, to which he devoted some later years of his Indian career, was his translation of Somadeva's *Kathā Sarit Sāgara*, which was published by the Asiatic Society of Bengal in their *Bibliotheca Indica* series (two volumes, 1880-1884). Considering the date of the appearance of this great translation it was well annotated by most useful notes drawn from a wide reading in both classical and modern literature. The extreme variety and importance of the work, together with the recent strides made in the study of comparative folklore, religion and anthropology, are the *raison d'être* of the present edition.

The same interests which prompted Mr Tawney to produce his *magnum opus* also led him, during his official life in London, to the study of the rich stores of narrative connected with the Jain doctrine, resulting in his translations of the *Kathākoca* (Oriental Translation Fund, N.S., ii, 1895) and Merutunga's *Prabandhacintāmani* (*Bibliotheca Indica*, 1899-1901), both works of considerable difficulty and interest. At the same time he was engaged in superintending the preparation and printing of catalogues issued from the India Office Library, the catalogue of Sanskrit Books by Dr Rost (1897), the Supplement to the Catalogue of European books (1895), the Catalogue of Sanskrit MSS. By Professor Eggeling, of Persian MSS. By Professor Ethè, of Hindustani books by Professor Blumhardt (1900), and of Hindi, Punjabi, Pushtu and Sindhi books by the same (1902), of the Royal Society's Collection of Persian and Arabic MSS. By E. D. Ross and E. G. Browne (1902). He was himself joint-author of a catalogue of the Sanskrit MSS. Belonging to the last-named collection (1903).

Mr Tawney's services to Sanskrit scholarship were therefore both varied and extensive.

Apart from Sanskrit and European languages, Mr Tawney knew Hindi, Urdu and Persian.

As an Anglo-Indian he was a worthy successor to men like Jones, Wilson and Colebrook. He genuinely loved India through its learning and literature. The great influence that he had upon his Indian students was amazing. It was due, in a large measure, to his elevated moral character, his impartiality, his independence of judgment and his keen desire to do justice to all who came into contact with him.

In this connection it is interesting to read the opinion of one of his old pupils.

At the unveiling of his portrait at the Presidency College, Calcutta, professor Ganguli speaks of his wonderfully sympathetic nature, and adds: "What struck me most in my master was his utter indifference to popularity, which, unfortunately, in some cases magnifies the artful, and minimises the genuine. I consider him to be an ideal teacher who combined in himself the best of the East and the best of the West, and I look upon him as a never-failing source of inspiration to me."

After his retirement from the Education service at the close of 1892 he was made Librarian of the India Office. He held this post till 1903, when he was superannuated.

Mr Tawney married in 1867 a daughter of Charles Fox, M.D., and the union extended over fifty-three years, Mrs Tawney dying in 1920. They had a large family.

In concluding this short account of Mr Tawney's life, the following lines from his own translation of Bhartrihari seem especially relevant:-

"Knowledge is Man's highest beauty,
Knowledge is his hidden treasure,
Chief of earthly blessings, bringing
Calm contentment, fame and pleasure."



[Next](#)

[Ocean Home](#)



[Home](#)

Prepared for www.wollamshram.ca/1001/Ocean/Ocean_Main.htm

© 20090201