

EAST INDIA COMPANY AT HOME PROJECT CASE STUDY

The Indian Seal of Sir Francis Sykes – A Tale of two Families By Sir John Sykes

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Coat of Arms of the Cossimbazar Raj



Coat of Arms of Sykes of Basildon

The Seal

It is small, its total height no more than 40mm, the seal itself only 25mm by 20mm. The seal is engraved in steel and is set in a holder probably made of gun metal, the holder tapering pyramid-like to a tiny swivel which might have been used to hold a cord. Nothing much to look at on first appearance yet this seal carried with it the authority of one of the most powerful men in mid eighteenth century Bengal.



The seal was read by Professor A.M.K.Masumi, William Jones Professor at the Persian Department of the Asiatic Society of Calcutta, on 28 July 1995. It is written in a script called *Nastaylick*, the name given to the form of old Persian which had been used in seals and coins since the latter part of the Emperor Akbar's reign (1556-1605) and continued to be used as the language of administration in 18th century Mughal India. The inscription reads from right to left "Francis Sykes (written as Sikshi) – 6". This means that it was made in the 6th year of the reign of the Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II (reigned 1759-1806), namely 1765.

In addition to the lettering there are three flowers engraved in the seal. These were only for decoration, indicating that the seal belonged to someone of importance since under the rules governing the cutting of seals in the Mughal period no ordinary person was permitted to use such decorations. Since all official work was done in Persian language it was necessary for all important persons to have a seal in that language for the use in the Nawab's Court and administrative establishments, in legal documents, trade and business contracts, administrative directions, formal correspondence and various other official and quasi-official documents and papers. The seals were precious possessions and were only left with the person in whom the principal had total confidence such as the banian. Trust was the most important element of official and business relationships in 18th century Bengal as standards of ethical behaviour were not high.

It is presumed that when he left for England Francis Sykes left the seal with his banian Cantoo Baboo to complete his unfinished business, reference to which will be found in his letters to Warren Hastings. Unfortunately no document has yet come to light where the seal has been used.

[f.n. Information supplied by Dr S C Nandy]

The Owner

[Francis Sykes \(1730-1804\)](#) arrived in India for the second and last time with Robert Clive on 3 May 1765 after a tedious eleven month voyage. Clive's Select Committee (only five in number), of which he was a member, had been given extraordinary powers by the East India Company Directors in London to bring to an end what was increasingly becoming a chaotic state of affairs in Bengal which had included the outbreak of war between the Company and the Nawab of Bengal, Mir Qasim.



Miniature portraits of Francis Sykes – as an older man, possibly by Thomas Richmond, and as a younger man by Henry Bone 1804 copied from an earlier portrait by Thomas Gainsborough destroyed by fire in 1874

Sykes had spent nine years in India from 1751-1760 working his way up the ladder at the important trading “factory” of Cossimbazar, sited just outside the Nawab’s capital of Murshidabad on the upper reaches of the Hugli River about five days’ journey from Calcutta. It was here that his friendship with another “writer”, Warren Hastings, began, a friendship that only ended with Sykes’s death in 1804. Sykes had survived the upheaval of the Company’s war with Suraj–ud-daulah when, following the Nawab’s capture of the Cossimbazar factory and of Calcutta itself, the Company was in danger of being expelled completely from Bengal. He had played a part in the dangerous negotiations with both Suraj-ud-daulah and, secretly, with the man who was destined to succeed him, Mir Jafar, which led to the successful outcome of the Battle of Plassey in 1757, domination by the Company of Bengal and ultimately the foundation of the British Raj. During this time he accumulated sufficient wealth through private trade to purchase an estate (Ackworth Park) in Yorkshire in 1763. In the same year he took out a grant of arms, interestingly taking as his crest “A demy lady of Bengal, in the compleat dress of that kingdom, holding in the dexter hand a rose”.



The Sykes crest



Map of the Hugli River

He also came to the notice of Clive who, as a condition of his return to India in 1764, hand-picked the Select Committee. On the day of their arrival in Calcutta, Clive wrote “Sykes may

be thoroughly relied on” [f.n.Clive to Carnac 3 May 1765] and after Sykes had been sent to the *darbar* of the Nawab at Murshidabad he wrote “I need only add, that Sykes, for whom we intend the Residentsip, is a gentleman whose flexible integrity, and long experience in the country politics, we have reason to expect the most exact performance of every duty in such an important station.” [f.n.Clive to Court of Directors 30 Sept 1765]



Part of a map of 'The Countries of Indostan East of Delhi' by Rennell published in "A History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan" by Robert Orme (London 1778). Muxadabad was the former name of the Nawab of Bengal's capital of Murshidabad.

The importance of Sykes's position as Resident at the Court of the Nawab increased enormously after the grant by the Emperor to the Company of the *Diwani*, the right to collect the revenues of Bengal, Behar and Orissa. This gave rise to the "dual system" whereby the Nawab was the *subahdar* of those provinces under the Emperor but the real power lay with the Company as it held the purse-strings. Sykes, as Resident, was set the task of maximising the revenues (which often involved a rigorous overhaul of the ways in which they were collected and of the "expenses" deducted by the assigned collectors) and of controlling the Nawab's own expenditure, working in close co-operation with the Nawab's Chief Minister . The Mughal title

by which Sykes was known to many of the Indians said it all: *Intizam-ud-daulah* “The Administration of the State”.

Alongside Sykes’s official activities, he carried on very substantial private trade. This, together with the expense allowances and commissions on taxes which he obtained from his official position provided him with the huge wealth which he accumulated over a period of only 3 ½ years. His private trade was in numerous commodities but chiefly in salt, betel nut, tobacco, timber, saltpetre and silk. He appears to have used his position ruthlessly to oust competitors and secure monopolies of some of these items. But none of this would have been possible without the support of a trusted Indian agent or *banian*.

The Banian

“A Banyan is a person...by whom the English gentlemen in general conduct all their business. He is interpreter, head book-keeper, head secretary, head broker, the supplier of cash and cash-keeper, and in general also secret-keeper. He puts in the under-clerks, the porter or door-keeper, stewards, bearers of the silver wands, running footmen, torch and branch-light carriers, palanqueen bearers, and all the long tribe of under-servants, for whose honesty he is deemed answerable; and he conducts all the trade of his master, to whom, unless pretty well acquainted with the country languages, it is difficult for any of the natives to obtain access.”
[f.n. W. Bolts – *Considerations on Indian Affairs (1772-5) vol I p.84*]. “Nominally their status was servile and they performed some menial tasks, such as managing their master’s household and his personal spending. But the banian of a prominent European was a man to be reckoned with.....Men like....Cantu Babu, banian to Warren Hastings, were among the richest and most influential members of the Indian community in Calcutta.....They might appear to have become their masters’ servants, merely managing their trade for them; but the reality was often less that of master and servant than of trading partners. The banian brought his skill and his capital to the partnership; the European contributed his privileges.”
[f.n.P.J.Marshall – *East Indian Fortunes (1976) p.45*].



Krishna Kanta Nandy (known as Cantoo Baboo) (c.1720-1794), the great-grandson of a farmer who migrated from the Burdwan District of Bengal to Murshidabad to set up business as a weaver of cloths, was a successful silk merchant at Cossimbazar when he became banian to Warren Hastings in 1754, serving him until his departure for England in 1764. It must have been Sykes's previous knowledge of Cantoo and of his services to Hastings, especially after Plassey, coupled with Hastings' recommendation which determined his choice of Cantoo as his banian.

A Banian by Solvyns (probably Cantoo Baboo)

Sykes's official roles as Resident and subsequently as Governor of the trading factory at Cossimbazar would have occupied most of his time and energy in a climate which is immensely enervating for most of the year. His monthly reports to the Select Committee in Calcutta give detailed accounts of his work, the problems, the challenges and the achievements. He would have had little time to devote to his private trading, important though it was to his financial position. Cantoo seems to have been the ideal choice. He was an experienced trader, extremely astute, well able to take advantage of trading opportunities, but at the same time very cautious. As a devout Baisnab Hindu, austere and frugal, conservative, religious and conventional, he was above reproach in his private life. Undoubtedly, Sykes's fortune owed much to Cantoo's skill.

So what was in it for Cantoo? Sykes's privileges as a Company servant (eg freedom from internal customs dues) for a start, but more than that: Sykes's power and prestige were undoubtedly assets of which he could take full advantage and if Sykes became rich his own affairs would prosper. His situation as banian meant that he could branch out from one highly profitable business, silk trading, into others. Moreover it was a valuable insurance. At this

time of transition Bengal could be a precarious place to carry on business – Cantoo must have realised that his interests were best served by attaching himself to one of the major players in the East India Company who would not only provide support for his own business dealings but also protection should things go wrong. The latter was amply proved after Sykes’s return to England when parliamentary committees began enquiries into the manner in which nabob fortunes had been acquired and, by extension, into the activities of their banians. Several letters written by Sykes to Warren Hastings, then in India, ask him to ensure that no harm comes to Cantoo. “Settle Cantoo privately and if possible peaceably otherwise he will from Party be in much trouble, my respects to him, his holding the lands I have explained till I am tired, they will not see the propriety of having substantial men in the management of the collections.” (*f.n. F Sykes to W Hastings 13 May 1776 Add Ms 29137 f.189*) and again “I fear Cantoo will suffer much from the spirit of the Party, you must place him somewhere, that he may enjoy what he has, in Peace and Quietness” (*F Sykes to W Hastings 29 Mar 1777 Add Ms 29138 f.280-281*). And years later, “I hope you will leave Cauntoo (*sic*) in a happy situation” (*F Sykes to W Hastings 8 Mar 1785 Add Ms 29168 f.166*).



The trust which Sykes placed in Cantoo is demonstrated by a letter in which he wrote: “..... I need say nothing here regarding my situation as Cantoo can tell you how I stand in every circumstance. I never hid anything from him...” (*f.n. F Sykes to W Hastings 28 Jan 1773 Add Ms 29133 f.347*). The friendship was reciprocated. On 22 February 1785 Cantoo sent what must have been a large amount of mango chutney to Sykes (in the order written Sikshi Shahab) in England at a cost of 54 rupees, a substantial sum for such a commodity. (*f.n. S C Nandy – Life and Times of Cantoo Baboo vol. II p.275*).

Dress, Bengal (embroidered) and England (made), ca. 1795, cotton muslin embroidered with tussar silk thread, T.220&A-1962, Victoria and Albert Museum.

The Cossimbazar Raj

From his first purchase of property (the produce of a jack fruit tree) in 1742 at the age of 22, Cantu (“brought up in a village community amidst Bengal’s commonest surroundings” according to his biographer) amassed a great fortune through his shrewdness, skill, hard work, persistence, strict economy and, notwithstanding his caution, ability to seize opportunities. Trading in silk was profitable (up to 300 per cent on some items) but his later investment in land and *Zemindaris* (*f.n. The Zemindari system was one whereby the Zemindar or land holder was responsible for collecting revenues on behalf of the rulers from land held by a number of cultivators while retaining a percentage – usually 10% - for himself*) was even more so. Working with and for powerful Company servants such as Hastings and Sykes did not in itself seem to have increased his wealth – what it did do was increase his power and influence as well as acting as an insurance against attack from his enemies. As his biographer puts it “He laid the foundation of his house by his own hands and then created the steel frame and the super-structure all by himself.” (*S C Nandy – Life & Times of Cantoo Baboo vol II p.407*).

Cantoo died in 1794 and was succeeded by his son Lokenath who, weak in health, only survived him by ten years. He was the first of the family to be styled “Maharajah”. Although, unlike Cantoo, he lived in a grand style, under his able management the estate thrived. A much-desired son and heir, Harinath, was born only two years before Lokenath died and consequently the management of the estate was taken under the Company’s Court of Wards in Calcutta during his minority. In 1809 the annual income of the estate was calculated at approximately 1.42m rupees, at the then rate of exchange equivalent to about £180,000. By the end of the 19th century the estate’s income had doubled to about 3m rupees, because of a falling exchange rate equivalent to about £200,000. Yet at times during the 19th century the very existence of the Cossimbazar Raj was threatened by inefficient management, personal extravagance, prolonged litigation and internecine feuds.

The estate was in acute danger during the four years after Cantoo’s great-grandson Maharajah Krisnanath (1822-1844) attained his majority in 1840. “He indulged tastes for horses, dogs, wine and the company of predatory European cronies, as well as more high-,minded ones for

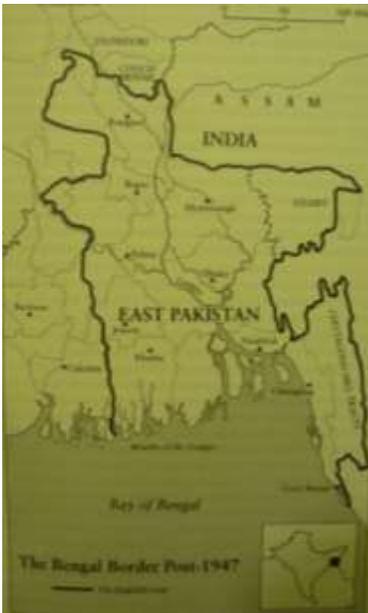
experiments in science, new technology and education.” (S C Nandy – *History of the Cossimbazar Raj vol I foreword*). However Krisnanath killed himself in 1844 and the management of the estate was in due course taken in hand by his 16 year old widow, Maharani Swarnamoyee (1827-1897) who had lived and continued to live in *pardah* (strict seclusion). Though initially illiterate she learned four languages in four years and developed sufficient tenacity and shrewdness to cope with immense challenges. After prolonged litigation she secured the estate for herself and her children (who predeceased her) and managed it in an exemplary fashion for the rest of her life. She was very philanthropic setting a trend which was followed by her successors for as long as resources would allow. Social reform, education and, paradoxically, emancipation of women were her greatest concerns.

Krisnanath’s line died out and on Maharani Swarnamoyee’s death the estate was inherited by Cantoo’s extremely distinguished great-great-grandson Maharajah Sir Manindra Chandra Nandy (1860-1929) when the prestige of the family reached its zenith. He was one of the leading Zemindars in India, a vigorous proponent of industrialisation, a generous philanthropist founding and endowing no less than 21 colleges and schools, a moderate member of Congress, a nationalist and friend of Gandhi. In a tribute to him after his death the Governor of Bengal, Sir John Anderson said “...Though a member of the most conservative class, the landed aristocracy of Bengal, he recognised in the light of a personal obligation the importance of developing the industrial and commercial resources of the Province and devoted much of his great wealth and influence to that end....His was indeed a happy blend of respect for the old world tradition with a very modern appreciation of the needs of the changing times.” Sadly, through excessive (but never begrudged) philanthropy coupled with mismanagement and fraud by his mainly British agents, in 1928 Manindra had to declare himself insolvent and apply for the Cossimbazar Raj estate to be administered by the Court of Wards.



Maharajah Sir Manindra Chandra Nandy

Manindra's son Srischandra (1897-1952) was the last Maharajah. He inherited an estate which was 30m rupees in debt and set about paying it off so that the estate could be released to him. This he ultimately achieved in 1944. Elected to the Assembly he became Minister of Communications and Works in the Government of Bengal. But Partition and Independence brought insurmountable problems not least the impending abolition of the zemindari system on



which so much of the estate depended. In 1951 the Cossimbazar Raj's East Pakistan zemindari estate was confiscated and this, combined with poor health and the uncertainties of the estate's future, led to his death in 1952. In the words of his son "The death became a landmark, ending the leadership of a special pattern of social, economic and cultural supremacy of Bengal. The idealism nurtured in the aristocratic families came to an end, ushering the age of free for all and selfish pragmatism."

Map showing the division of Bengal following Partition in 1947. Most of the zemindari estates of the Cossimbazar Raj were located in what became East Pakistan (now Bangladesh). Indian West Bengal is only a little over a third of the original area of Bengal.

Maharajkumar Somendra Chandra Nandy (Dr S C Nandy) was born in 1928 shortly before his grandfather's death. Aged only 23 he came into his inheritance faced with challenges greater than any of those which had gone before. Income tax arrears and estate debts totalled almost 10m rupees. Confiscation of the estate's zemindaris in five Indian states was not long in coming but before it did swift rearguard action ensured that properties were sold wherever possible so that debts could be paid and retrenchment costs discharged. The surplus was invested in the estate's stone quarries and china clay mines, which had been retained, and Dr Nandy even came to England to learn the china clay business at first hand and acquire much needed machinery.

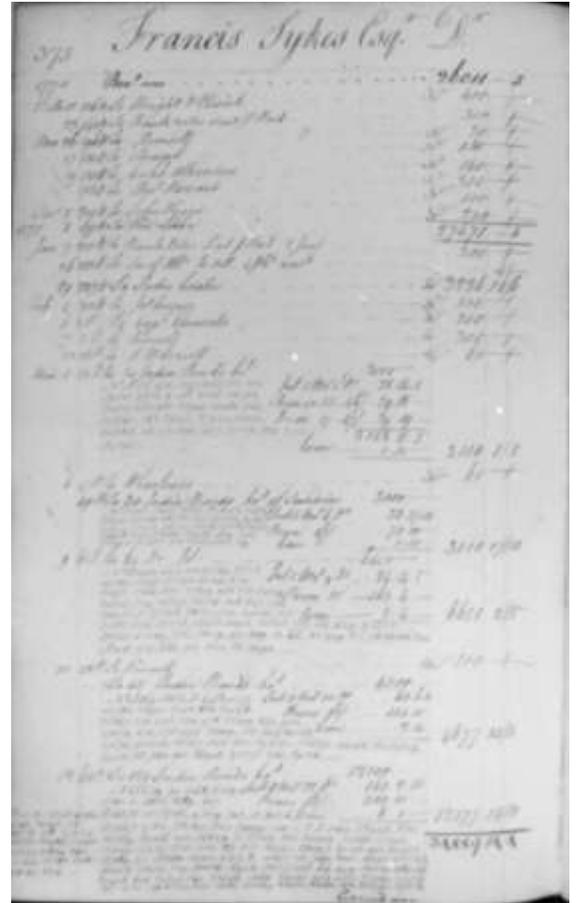
Dr Nandy is a remarkable man. At a time of radically altered personal circumstances and of profound change in the social system and economy of India, he transformed the Cossimbazar estate from the status of a great landowner to the thriving industrial and commercial enterprise it is today. He is also an academic historian and amongst his wide-ranging interests a lecturer, playwright, essayist and critic, writing in both Bengali and English. Thanks to his substantial family records, persistence and hard work in mastering a complex scenario, his four books on the Nandy family history are a magnificent achievement, a record of its triumphs and tragedies over 250 years.

The Sykes Family

The fortune brought back from India by Francis Sykes was reckoned by his contemporaries to be one of the largest, indeed second only to that of Clive. It was sufficient to enable him to buy two more large estates, [Basildon Park in Berkshire](#) and the Gillingham Estate in Dorset as well as a seat in Parliament and in 1781 a much coveted baronetcy. But his wealth was not destined to last. Even during his lifetime losses on his investment in East India stock, court proceedings, the rebuilding and decoration (never completely finished by him) of the house at Basildon Park, a ne'er do well elder son who ran up gambling and other debts (not to mention notorious and expensive court proceedings) meant that his estates were heavily mortgaged by the time of his death in 1804.

Page from Francis Sykes's bank account.
Goslings Bank 1770/1771 showing purchases of East India stock

His son, the 2nd Baronet, survived him by only two months leaving three small children, the eldest son being four years of age when he inherited the baronetcy and the estates. The inevitable mismanagement during his lengthy minority, coupled with protracted and presumably expensive court proceedings connected with family trusts, further depleted family resources, not aided by the 3rd Baronet's own expensive tastes and his marriage to a beautiful woman similarly inclined who was Disraeli's mistress for three years – indeed there is a strong possibility that Sykes money kept Disraeli out of a debtor's prison. Disraeli's novel *Henrietta Temple* (1836) was inspired by this love affair and contained many heartfelt personal references, eg. "To violate in her favour every duty of society; this is a lover, and this is love." The heroine's letters "are so like those of the real Henrietta that one is tempted to think that Disraeli transcribed them verbatim" (*Disraeli – by Robert Blake 1966*). For the 3rd Baronet and his wife (but not for Disraeli) the eventual outcome was social disgrace. The estates were sold off - the last, Basildon Park, in 1838. Henrietta's sons became successively the 4th, 5th and 6th Baronets and at each step the family money diminished. In 1879 the most valuable Sykes chattels (including the largest portrait Gainsborough ever painted) were destroyed in a devastating fire at the London Pantechicon, a supposedly fireproof storage facility, and this again was followed by court proceedings against its owners. The senior branch of the family died out and the descendants of the brother of the 3rd Baronet inherited the Baronetcy but without any of the money which had previously gone with it. The 7th Baronet was a tutor at Cheltenham, the 8th a country parson.



There is a family story that Francis Sykes was assisted in his escape from the English factory at Cossimbazar by an Indian princess (*vide the family crest above*) on the understanding that he would marry her. When he did not she cursed him with the words “From the land you came, to the land you shall return.” His father had been a Yorkshire farmer. The 9th Baronet (1907-1990), who worked as a teaplantier in Darjeeling before World War II (and was married in Calcutta Cathedral) and later in his career as an agricultural estate manager, reckoned that the curse had worked itself out with him. The curse, if that is what it was, is nothing if not



ambiguous but there is no doubt that the Sykes family was back to square one after only four generations.

The contrast with the fortunes of the Nandy family could not have been more spectacular.

Sir Francis Sykes 9th Baronet in Darjeeling c 1933

The Reunion

On 7 April 1978 Dr Nandy wrote to the 9th Baronet to introduce himself as the biographer of his ancestor, Cantoo Baboo, and the two families met the following month after a gap of 210 years. In a letter of 10 June 1978 Dr Nandy said “It was a pleasure to meet John again in London. The way we cropped the time together was almost like a romance in terms of reality. We felt so close, so known to each other that an outsider would take us to be friends for ages.”
(*f.n. S C Nandy to J Sykes*)



At Basildon Park 1978 – 10th Baronet (John), Dr Nandy, Charles Sykes, Lady Sykes (Susan) and 9th Baronet (Francis)

On 1 July 1983 Dr Nandy wrote “The seal of.....Sir Francis Sykes of 1765 is a little iron (*sic*) tablet with ‘Francis Sykes -6’ written in Persian.....The seal was the hall mark of a gentleman in 18th century Bengal (particularly as many of them were either totally or almost illiterate), when instead of thumb impression he or she was allowed to put the seal. It became customary to put the seal even after signing personally.” And subsequently on 25 June 1993 he wrote “I am so glad that you reminded me of the seal of Sir Francis Sykes (written Sikshi – as the Persian alphabets are very archaic) which we have decided to present you. This gift to you and your family will complete the circle of friendship that was begun 250 (*sic*) years ago.” (*f.n. Letters from S C Nandy to J Sykes*)

Dr Nandy has visited the 10th Baronet and his family almost every year since 1978 and has entertained the 10th Baronet at his home in Calcutta and at his palace in Cossimbazar on three separate visits, most notably for the marriage of his son Samit Chandra in Calcutta in 1988.



Sripur Palace, Cossimbazar



Presents for the bride

The Seal as Witness

The Seal speaks of power, of common interest, of the meeting of differing cultures, of trust and of friendship.

It is a vivid illustration of the way in which the East India Company and its servants operated in the early years of the British Raj, that is nominally as vassals of the Emperor in Delhi while actual power lay with the Company.

It witnesses the bond between the English Company Servant and the Banian, a business arrangement which progressed through shared aims to a friendship which lasted the lifetimes of the original participants.

It symbolises the trust placed by Sykes in Cantu Babu, a trust which rose above difference of race and apparent inequality of status, as evidenced by his leaving the seal with the latter after his departure for England. Dr Nandy has commented that it was the only European seal

amongst a collection of some thirty, any other European seals having been removed by their owners.

Paradoxically it reflects the similarity as well as the contrasting fortunes of the Nandy and Sykes

families in that wealth of itself brought trial and tribulation as well as the enjoyment and display of position and grandeur, especially in the way both families became mired in litigation and were sometimes brought low by unworthy or ill-starred inheritors.

Finally, while not the catalyst for the reunion, this small historic artefact does represent a remarkable connection between two families from two different continents, of two different religions and widely contrasting backgrounds, fortunes and cultures, which has transcended the centuries.

