

## Notes for a Study on the Early Scientific Work of the Asiatic Society of Bengal\*

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### I. Introduction

India, among the major Asian societies, experienced the most intense, varied, and prolonged contact with Europe from the 16th through the 19th centuries. Yet, with notable exceptions, few Indians seem to have taken Western science seriously prior to the middle of the 19th century. This situation was probably due in part both to the manner in which the various groups of Europeans intruded themselves into the subcontinent, and to the social and political conditions which prevailed there and in Europe when these several intrusions occurred.

The Portuguese, who began to establish their enclaves on the West coast of India in the last decade of the 15th century, were primarily interested in trade and in Christianizing the local population. During the following century the Moghul Empire became the dominant political power in North India. Akbar the Great received the first of three Portuguese Jesuit missions at his court in 1580.<sup>1</sup> Although Antonio Monserrate, the leader of the first two of these missions, wrote detailed accounts of his impressions of the Court and of his conversations with Akbar, there is no evidence that the emperor was either aware of or interested in developments in European science. The pragmatic, heterodox Akbar eagerly sought new ideas regardless of their origins. However, the Portuguese Jesuits (whose first mission to Akbar occurred twenty nine years before Galileo published his first telescopic discoveries) would probably have been neither equipped nor motivated to tutor the emperor in Western science. For his part Akbar, whose reign marked the zenith of Moghul power, would probably not have felt from his contact with these Jesuits that Europe had anything tangible to offer his empire.

The French Jesuits who established their missions in the French enclaves at Chandernagor and Pondicherry during the mid-17th century would have been

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Maclagan, Edward. *The Jesuits and the Great Moghul*, London: Burns, Oates and Washbourne, Ltd., 1932, p. 23-68. Hosten, H. "Mongolicae Legationis Commentarius, or the First Jesuit Mission to Akbar by Fr. Anthony Monseratte, S. J." *Memoirs of the Asiatic Society of Bengal*, III, #9, pp. 513-704 (1914).