

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Stuart Blackburn, Ph.D.

Mahomed, Dean

Introduction

The British gained a foothold in India as merchants during the 17th century (when Banarasidas was writing his autobiography), though they were largely confined to port cities. By the mid-18th century, however, they had militarily conquered large parts of the subcontinent, including the rich province of Bengal. But the British (in the form of the East India Company) were not only army roaming around Bengal at this time, and small wars were fought between Indian rajas, both Hindu and Muslim, the Dutch, the French and the East India Company. Most soldiers, both European and Indian, were mercenaries, who attached themselves to whoever paid them. Regiments crisscrossed the countryside, moving from camp to camp, campaign to campaign, from local ruler to colonial power. In this volatile and chaotic India, some local people found opportunities. One of these was Dean Mahomed (or Mahomet), who served in the East India Company's army as a camp-follower and officer, emigrated to Ireland, married an Anglo-Irish woman and finally settled in England, where his medical therapies became popular with the British royal family.

Published in Ireland in 1794, Dean Mahomed's story is probably the first autobiographical writing by an Indian in English. Presenting a young man's life as a soldier in north India in the form of letters to an imagined friend, it offers an unparalleled picture of this dramatic period of Indian history through the eyes of one individual. Since Dean Mahomed rarely speaks of himself, we might think of his book as a 'memoir.' The 100 or so pages, which are filled with descriptions of camps, manoeuvres, towns and garrisons, also resemble a travelogue. While in its recording of cultural customs, it approaches ethnography. Although its style is not engrossing, the attention to detail and the self-confessed desire of the author to 'acquaint' Europeans with his early life has produced a powerful portrait. The reader is able to visualise India more than two hundred years ago, through the eyes of a young Muslim man.

Themes

colonialism; identity; narrative form

Essay Questions

1. Discuss the influence of colonialism on this text. How, for example, does it affect the author's motives and intended audience?
2. Is this text more a personal history or a social history?
3. Citing the passages in which the author describes his family life, personal feelings and reactions, analyse Dean Mahomed's representation of himself as an Indian, a Muslim and a man.

Readings

Fisher, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, pp. 31-134 or
Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English*, pp. 1-110

Supplementary Readings

The remainder of either of the above books by Fisher
Robinson, *Cambridge Encyclopaedia of India*, pp. 107-116
Metcalf, *A Concise History of Modern India*, pp. 44-81
Bose and Jalal, *Modern South Asia*. pp. 45-59
Bayly, *Indian Society*, pp. 7-45

