



FORSTER, GEORGE

FORSTER, GEORGE (b. 1752; d. Nagpur, 5 January 1791), traveller, writer, and diplomatist, was an [East India Company](#) civil servant of the Madras Presidency from 1770-91. Details of his birth and parentage remain frustratingly unknown. His name is included as one of the 37 signatories to a letter of the 29 August 1776 to George Stratton and the Madras Council, dissociating themselves as civil servants from the military coup that had removed Lord Pigot as Governor. In 1778, Forster is mentioned as being in joint possession of a number of banksalls (warehouses) in Madras's Black Town.

The enterprising Forster emerges more clearly in his entertaining narrative of a difficult and dangerous overland journey to Europe. Unlike the more usual route, adopted, for example, by William Francklin in 1786 and described in his *Observations Made on a Tour from Bengal to Persia* (1788), which first involved sailing in an East Indiaman to the Persian Gulf, Forster proceeded northwards. The full title of Forster's *A Journey from Bengal to England, through the northern part of India, Kashmire, Afghanistan and Persia and into Russia, by the Caspian Sea* indicates his more demanding itinerary. The first volume was published by Cooper and Upjohn at Calcutta in 1790; the second volume was completed posthumously from his travel journal and published by Faulder in London in 1798, together with a second edition of the first volume. The work was translated into German by the Gottingen philosopher Christoph Meiners (1747-1810) and into French by the Orientalist Louis-Mathieu Langlès (1763-1824).

Forster's preface records his debt to Colonel Antoine-Louis Henri Polier



(1741-95) for “large historical tracts of the Sicques [Sikhs], and of the life of Shujah ud-Dowlah”; to John Bristow, resident at the Court of Oudh (AVADH), for further information on Šojā‘-al-Dawla (r. 1754-75), *nawwāb* of Oudh; and to Francis Wilford of the Bengal Engineers for compiling the map from his journal records. Textual materials were subsequently amplified by local information. Forster reveals that “During my journey through Persia, I had an opportunity of conversing with some of the inhabitants of Nishabur, who bore indisputable testimony to the ancient rank of the family of Shujah ud-Dowlah,” enabling Forster to correct Alexander Dow’s description of the *nawwāb* as “the infamous son of a still more infamous Persian pedlar” (II, p. 380) as the product of Dow’s pique at “having been refused the salt-petre farm of the Allahabad districts” (Forster 1798, I, p. 132).

The contribution of Forster and Polier to increasing knowledge of the Sikhs, of their religion, and especially of their military significance and cavalry carbine tactics, augmented the 1788 publications of Charles Wilkins and Major James Browne, and was widely appreciated. The commercial and political details of Forster’s commentary and route were closely studied in London by Lord Mulgrave, Commissioner for Indian Affairs, and the cartographer James Rennell. Rennell’s *Memoir of a Map of Hindoostan; or The Mogul Empire* (1788) makes more than thirty references to Forster, benefitting from his accurate computations of distances, and especially his comments upon the course, navigability, and fordability of rivers, many of which represented, in Forster’s words, “strong barriers against the Mahrattah, Seick, or Moghul cavalry” (I, p. 85). Politics were not foremost in the mind of the Alexander Hamilton, the Sanskrit scholar, in his somewhat condescending review of Forster’s *Journey*. Hamilton acknowledges its geographical importance but identifies minor historical inaccuracies, while confusing his author with (Johann) Georg Adam Forster, the naturalist on Cook’s second circumnavigation of the globe (Hamilton, p. 361).

Forster’s preface establishes his Enlightenment perspective: a dispassionate curiosity, free from “partiality for any sect or body of men” (Forster 1798, p. x). He set out from Calcutta on 23 May 1782 and, as he sails through Company-controlled territory, he mingles descriptions of innovative manufacture with descriptions of the picturesque ruins of former imperial grandeur. As a man of commerce, he decries the shortage of specie; as a responsible colonist, he suggests the British “should no longer account themselves sojourners in this country” (p. 3). At Banaras he spent three months furthering his investigations



into Hinduism, which he considered, like many of his contemporaries, as essentially monotheistic; this research he subsequently published in London as the well-received *Sketches of the Mythology and Customs of the Hindoos* (1785).

Forster had made elaborate plans for his journey, obtaining bills of credit from merchants in the major cities on his route but, unlike later travellers, he was not accompanied by an armed band of sepoys. Having dismissed all but one of his servants at Lucknow, he travelled incognito in a range of disguises, most frequently as a Mughal merchant, utilizing the often limited protection afforded by the *qafila* (*qāfela*) or [caravan](#) system and relying upon his substantial knowledge of Persian, Hindustani, and Marathi. Anxious not to be apprehended as infidel or spy, Forster could use no scientific instruments, and his notes along the way were completed in Persian or in private. The epistolary nature of his *Journey* facilitates informality and expressions of *sang-froid* such as: “unhurt by the Sicques, tygers, or thieves, I am safely lodged at Nourpour” (Forster 1798, I, p. 215). But the dangers were very real. Subsequently knocked from his mule and violently assaulted by Afghan freebooters, Forster was only saved by the urgent pleadings and cash of a generous Hindu, “of the family of the Dewan of Kashmire” (II, p. 56). His narrative is enlivened by comedy, self-ridicule, and some moments of significant lyricism; a dominant theme is the kindness of strangers. Having been ill-advised by a Georgian to abandon his Muslim disguise, he joins a night-travelling camel *qafila* near [Kabul](#), his fellow-passengers on the cramp-inducing “kidjahwah” (*kajāva*) or pannier of a sickly beast are a crying child and a scolding nurse, and later “a theological and very clamorous disputant” who delights in berating an infidel. Sheltering from a fierce snow-storm in a fort at Ashkara, Forster is moved by another traveller’s spirited recital of “[Jami](#)’s story of [Joseph](#) and Zuleicha, which for its scenes of wondrous pathetic adventure, and the luxuriant genius of the poet, is happily adapted to soften the rigors of a winter’s day” (II, p. 145).

The indefatigable and inquisitive nature of this scholarly and pioneering adventurer continues to fascinate, but Forster’s observations concerning the emergence of new powers in northern India, and of the civil war attendant upon the decay of the [Zand dynasty](#) were of significant political importance to contemporary readers. He details evidence, gleaned in [caravanserais](#) and cooks’ shops, where “all the news-mongers, idlers, politicians, and disbanded soldiers, of the quarter, resort” (I, p. 191) of the mercantile Hindu, chiefly



Multani, diaspora at Herat, Kandahar, Toršiz (“Turshish”) and the Caspian port of Baku, trading indigo to Turkistan merchants via both overland caravan and Indian Ocean routes. On visiting their “Atashghah, or place of fire” where Hindu mendicants use subterranean volcanic fire for worship, cookery, and heating, Forster’s knowledge of Hinduism ensures his reception “among these sons of Brimha, as a brother” (II, p. 228). He appreciates the strategic importance of Herat; describes the powerbase established by Āgā Moḥammad Khan Qājār at Sāri; and provides the latest intelligence of the Russian presence on the Caspian sea, their monopoly of the Šervān silk trade, and their “jealousies of the English establishment in Persia.”

Forster arrived in London in July 1784 and, whilst completing his *Sketches of the Mythology and Customs of the Hindoos* for publication, attracted the notice of Henry Dundas, senior member of the Board of Control. Dundas, impressed with Forster’s thorough knowledge of Marathi and other languages, requested him to communicate intelligence concerning the politics of the Carnatic. On his return to India in 1785, Forster accordingly sent a series of letters detailing the situation in Mysore and Tipu Sultan’s expansionist ambitions, the Maratha states and rulers, and details of convenient routes. In a letter of 22 April 1786 (PLATE I), after discussing political information from “our Native agents in the interior” and the commercial importance of Negapatam on the Coromandel coast, Forster reveals his own ambition of being appointed successor to David Anderson at the court of Mahadji Sindhia. The East India Company Directors recommended that Forster be employed as Marathi interpreter and, on Forster’s return to India in 1787, governor-general Lord Cornwallis lost no time in sending him as Resident to Nagpur, together with Lieut. James Nathaniel Rind to survey the route. They arrived on 15 January 1788. Cornwallis instructed Forster to negotiate a defensive alliance with Mudhoji Bhonsla, raja of Berar, secure free passage through Cuttack for Bengal troops, and promote amicable relations with the Sikhs. Forster reported the limited nature of Mudhoji’s influence with the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Peshwar (*pišvar*) or titular chief of the Marathas. Although he judged the Berar cavalry “among the choicest troops of the Deccan,” Forster was unimpressed by the undisciplined condition of elements of Mudhoji’s army and the depleted nature of his treasury. He also revealed the eclipse of Mahadji Sindhia and the startling rise to power of Ghulam Qadir (Ġolām Qāder) as *amir-al-omarā*, “or Captain General,” at Delhi.

Following the death of Mudhoji, Forster was recalled in early 1789, but he



returned in June 1790 as Resident at the court of the eldest son, Raja Raghoji Bhonsla II. Such was Cornwallis's interest in acquiring the Cuttack that Lieut. James Davidson surveyed the route through this district, producing a "very valuable geographical communication." Forster continued to pursue a policy of argument and conciliation, vehemently protesting against Bhonsla raids upon Midnapur and at Raghoji's rivalry with Rajaram Pandit, which was impoverishing the Cuttack. Forster's sudden death from fever at the age of 39 at Nagpur in 1791 deprived Cornwallis of a competent and conscientious resident who brought the *nous* of an eminently practical man of the world to the dubious and often duplicitous world of inter-Maratha rivalries and British-Maratha relations.

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