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Defying Boundaries: The Legacy of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee

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Abstract: *Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee was a great educationist, true patriot, national leader, statesman and great parliamentarian born in Bengal in 1901. The partition of Bengal had impact in his life. The ideas of Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Bankim Chandra Chatterjee had shaped his political life. He was youngest to become Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University because of his illustrious educational career. His remarkable political career began when he became a member of Hindu Mahasabha under the influence of Vir Savarkar. His nationalist outlook was well praised by Mahatma Gandhi. Syama Prasad Mookherjee was against the partition of India on communal line. In post-independent India he joined Nehru Cabinet as Minister Industries and Supply with the invitation of Mahatma Gandhi, but had a disagreement with Congress on Kashmir issue and later resigned and formed Jan Sangh Party. In 1949, he resigned from the Hindu Mahasabha due to the killing of Mahatma Gandhi and formed the Jan Sangh Party and became its president. The Jan Sangh Party contested first general in 1952 and became a leader of opposition party. All leaders of political parties deeply admired him and lovingly used to call him the "Lion of Parliament." For unresolved Jammu and Kashmir issue he fought tirelessly for unity and integrity of India and became martyr. For Syama Prasad Mookherjee's passionate love for motherland and affection to Indian people still unfolding in Indian mind and he is revered as a great nationalist leader.*

Keywords: *Bengal, Syama Prasad Mukherjee, Career, Patriot, Vice-Chancellor, Krishak Praja Party, Hindu Mahasabha, Veer Savarkar, Jana Sangh Party, Jawaharlal Nehru, Akhand Bharat, Praja Parishad, Jammu and Kashmir, Sheikh Abdullah*

I. INTRODUCTION

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee, a great educationist, patriot, human being, statesman, philanthropist and one of the leading figures of free India. He vehemently fought for united India. [1] In India's struggle for independence Syama Prasad Mookherjee played a crucial role and has left a deep imprint on Indian politics. [2] He was a true patriot, became martyr for the national unity. M.R. Jaykar remarked that "all his life he fought valiantly for the country's freedom, social and economic as well as political, for the civil liberties of the people, for the unity of the motherland, after the dawn of independence, and for the protection of democracy against the growing fascism of the men in power. He ultimately laid down his life for these. He truly became a martyr to civil liberties, to democracy, and to the unity of India. Like a true 'Karma Yogi,' he lived as a soldier and died a martyr. He was great in life, greater in death".[3]

II. EARLY CAREER AND POLITICAL LIFE

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee was born in a Brahmin family at Bhowanipur, Calcutta on 6 July, 1901. Sir Ashutosh Mookherjee, his father was a great academician, scholar and practiced law and eventually occupied the position of a Judge in Calcutta High Court and Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University. Asutosh Mookherjee had a phenomenal influence in the public life of Bengal. Smt. Jogamaya Devi, mother of Syama Prasad Mookherjee had a religious bent of mind and worshipper of Hindu deities. Though Syama Prasad Mookherjee born and brought up in a religious atmosphere due to family background but he was open to listen to discussions on the most modern and scientific subjects as many religious scholars used to visit his father for religious discussions. He had a great respect to traditional Indian culture but respected western thoughts and ideas and that largely shaped his political career of [4] in post-independent India. During twentieth century the nationalist ideas and thoughts had impacted the life and outlook of young Syama Prasad Mookherjee. Bal Gangadhar Tilak's unfathomable belief on idea of "freedom is my birth right and I shall have it" and nationalist hymn of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee to the motherland-Vande Mataram- had deeply touched the heart and mind of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee. Simultaneously, the partition of plan of Bengal in 1905 with the idea to divide and rule, the economic colonization of British and the idea of swadeshi had lasting impact on minds of young Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee. When the partition of Bengal was annulled, there developed a separatist tendency in Indian politics.

The Muslim League with the support of British colonial power advocated communal idea and to create separate homeland, resulting division of India in 1947. Syama Prasad Mookherjee being a true nationalist leader strongly opposed the idea of creation of separate homeland for Muslims which was supported by the British power. [5]

In his childhood Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee was a brilliant student. He completed his B.A. from Presidency College, Kolkata, in 1921 with English honors, but did not pursue his Master's Degree in English as he had nationalist bent of mind. Consequently, he did his Master's in Vernacular- Bengali language and he got a first class degree in 1923. While Syama was doing his M.A. he got married to Sudha Devi in 1922 and had four children. But unfortunately Sudha Devi died in 1934, leaving the family with in despair. Syama Prasad, at that time was a young man of only 33, however, decided not to marry again.[6] In 1923 Syama Prasad Mookherjee was appointed at Calcutta University as Fellow of the Senate. Later after his father's death in 1924, young Syama Prasad became a member of Syndicate, Calcutta University. After the death of his father, Asutosh Mookherjee he enrolled himself as Advocate in Calcutta High Court in 1924. After two years i.e. in 1926 he went to England to study law and joined Lincoln's Inn and a year later he joined the Bar, 1927. Due to his academic brilliance at the age of 33, in the year 1934 Syama Prasad Mookherjee joined as VC of Calcutta University. He remained as VC till 1938 and Syama Prasad Mookherjee till today hold the record of youngest person to become Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University.[7] During his Vice-Chancellorship period, Rabindra Nath Tagore visited Calcutta University and delivered convocation address in Bengali. Rabindra Nath Tagore's convocation in vernacular Bengali brought to end western English language superiority over Bengali and other Indian languages. The convocation address thus had tremendously influence Syama Prasad Mookherjee. Though Syama Prasad Mookherjee resigned from the Legislative Council in 1930, during civil disobedience movement but to serve the larger interest of education and Calcutta University soon joined as an independent candidate. [8]

III. SHYAMA PRASAD MOOKHERJEE: A TRUE PATRIOT

When he was in England for legal studies, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee came in contact with Dr. S. Radhakrishnan. In 1927 he returned back to India started practicing law. In 1929 he became a member of Bengal Legislative Council. [9] But in 1930 he resigned from it when the Congress decided to boycott the legislature, later joined as independent candidate to the University of Calcutta. He came to active politics in 1938. His patriotic zeal, courage and determination brought him to politics to provide service to the people of India [10] In 1937 Syama Prasad Mookherjee got elected an independent candidate from Calcutta University Constituency. He was leader of opposition in the Bengal Assembly when Fazlul Haq (Praja Krishak party) formed a coalition ministry.[11] Later due to the efforts of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee's the Nationalist Party and Krishak Praja Party of Fazlul Haq formed new coalition ministry in 1940., ousting Muslim League. [12] In the coalition ministry Syama Prasad Mookherjee joined as Finance Minister in December 1941 and resigned on 20th November 1942 Indeed that was the most crucial period of Bengal politics. During this crucial period of Bengal politics Shyama Prasad emerged as a true leader of Hindus.[13] Furthermore, he stood like rock solid when Lord Linlithgow let loose a reign of terror during 1942 August Movement. Thus all these circumstances leading for the emergence of Syama Prasad Mookherjee as a seasoned and far-sighted Hindu leader of great Indian nation. [14]

In 1939 he joined Hindu Mahasabha, and in his personal diary he has lamented all details between 1937 and 1941- the provincial government in Bengal and its communal biases. His first grievance against the Congress was that it failed to serve the interest of the Hindus in Bengal and pursuance of policy of appeasement towards Muslim League. Secondly, in the 1940s, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee accused the Congress on partition of India on communal basis. [15] The third factor responsible for his decision to join the Hindu Mahasabha was the divide and rule policy persuaded by the alien British forces. Syama Prasad Mookherjee even served as acting President at Calcutta session of Hindu Mahasabha due to continued ill health of Veer Savarkar held in December 1939 [16] When Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee joined the Hindu Mahasabha, Mahatma Gandhi praised his move and stated that "somebody was needed to lead the Hindus after Malviyaji". [17] Thus began a remarkable political career of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee in the Hindu Mahasabha and in Indian political arena A top Congress leader remarked and wrote to him "active politics is like riding a tiger; you can ride it all right, but it becomes impossible to climb down from it". However, despite his hectic political engagements, for his intellectual acumen Syama Prasad remained deeply associated with various educational and cultural associations such as in University of Calcutta, the Royal Asiatic Society of Bengal, the Indian Institute of Sciences, Bangalore, and the Mahabodhi Society of India and became their guiding force till to the end of his illustrious life. [18]

As a humanist, he had a great sympathy for the suffering people of Bengal during 1943 famines. Alongwith that he was very much concern towards the people of Midnapore as it ravaged due to severe cyclone in October, 1943. In Bengal there was the rise of food prices by 25% and the colonial government dismissed the Fazal-Ul-Huq ministry and put a coalition ministry under Muslim League. [19]

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee took humanitarian steps and under his mentorship, Bengal Relief Committee and Hindu Mahasabha Relief Committee were formed to which provided help to the famine affected people of Bengal. It was due to his sincere efforts, funds were raised and the Arya Samaj, the Marwari Society, Ramkrishna Mission extended their support to the people of Bengal in that hour of despair. The role of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee during these critical hours was unparalleled, winning the hearts of the people of Bengal and it would not be wrong to say that he was a great philanthropist, humanist and friend of the poor.

His resignation from Bengal Assembly in 1943 proved that nothing could tempted and deflect him from the path of national duty. That proved that he was a undisputed leader of Bengal and Hindu Mahasabha. In his resignation letter to Sir John Herbert on 16 November 1942 Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee wrote" First as I intimated to you at the earliest opportunity, on 9th August last, I disapprove of the policy adopted by the British Government of India with regard to the present political situation in the country. I am aware that you, as a provincial Governor, have hardly any responsibility for formulation of this policy. But my second reason mainly concerns you. And that is connected with the manner, in my opinion unwarranted, in which you have interfered with the work of the ministry and have rendered thee so called provincial autonomy into meaningless farce."[20]

Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee made his correspondence with Lord Linlithgow, urging him to release all leaders arrested during the August Movement and appealing to create a National Defence Force for safety of the country during World War II that shows his concern for mother India. He was critical to the idea of Congress, Muslim League and opposed to Cripps Mission plan (1942) to divide India on communal line and urged for united India. He strongly opposed C.Rajgoalchari Formula of vivisection India that was practically accepted for India. Shyama Prasad Mookherjee in the 25th Session of Hindu Mahasabha held at Amritsar in 1943, finding it a dangerous development. He strongly condemned the plan and attempted to organise nation-wide protest to dismantle the Anglo-Muslim game of divide India. But due to imposition ban on procession on Hindu Mahasabha by the DM of Amritsar and few other developments Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee dropped the idea of protest for which he was not happy. Syama Prasad Mookherjee in the All-India Arya Samajist Congress held from 20th to 22nd February 1944 at Delhi opposed Muslim League's demand of Pakistan and appealed for unity of Hindus and Hindustan [21] When he opposed the Poona resolution of Congress Working Committee but was given assurance that the Congress would not accept the Muslim League's demand on partition by which he extended his support to Congress in the Provincial election in 1946. He was deeply unhappy when he came to know that the Congress Working Committee's acceptance of partition plan i.e. fulfilling Muslim League's demand for Pakistan. He powerfully advocated non partition of Bengal to safeguard the larger interest of Bengali Hindus. His movement was so powerful that the Congress, Muslim League even the colonial government failed to resist him.[22]Despite the efforts of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee the partitioned plan was not stopped. He made last desperate attempt to the Cabinet Mission Plan for undivided India with all his logical and convincing arguments but failed as the plan was already accepted by the Congress and the Muslim League as per Poona resolution.[23]Now he directed his energies to save Bengal and Punjab, the two key provinces which the Muslim League was eyeing. But it was due to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee's efforts parts of Punjab and Bengal were saved and replied when he was asked; "Congress partitioned India and I partitioned Pakistan".[24]

In independent Syama Prasad Mookherjee joined Nehru Cabinet as Minister of Industries and Supply in 1947 with the invitation of Mahatma Gandhi, with a hope to influence the policies of free India and to safeguard the larger interest of Hindus who left back to Pakistan. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and Shri N.V. Gadgil were the great supporter of Syama Prasad Mookherjee during this period. Nehru entrusted that responsibility to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee because of his deeper understanding economic problems of new India and under his able leadership three industries were set up in India- the Chitranjan Locomotive Factory, the Sindhri Fertilizer Corporation, and the Hindustan Aircrafts Industry, Bangalore. [25] Thus, the responsibility he was entrusted with did that efficiently and effectively proving himself as a unparalleled administrator and parliamentarian of free Hindustan. [26]But his difference of opinion with Congress and Pandit Nehru came on broad matters of policy, particularly regarding Pakistan, Hindu refugees, land transfer from East Pakistan to India, and last but not least, the Nehru-Liaquat Ali Pact of 1950 and accordingly resigned Nehru Cabinet on 19th April 1950. [27]

This resignation of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee from the Central Ministry was decisive move, led to the beginning of alternative politics in free India. The people in general appreciated it, and that created a stir in the country. There was no organized opposition party within or without the parliament except the Communist and Socialist parties. The Ram Rajya Parishad was confined to the erstwhile princely states of Rajasthan and MP. The RSS was banned due to the assassination of Mahatma Gandhi on 30th January 1948. By 1949, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee had disassociated himself from the Hindu Mahasabha and resigned from the Executive. In January 1951, Syama Prasad Mookherjee founded the Bhartiya Jana Sangh Party—Indian People's Party—which had a nationalist outlook with a special need to deal with the problems of East Bengal, Punjab, Patiala, East Punjab States, Delhi,

Jammu, and Kashmir. The outlook and idea of the newly formed Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party was to form "Hindu Rashtra," which had geographical and historical connotations. [28]

The final shape of the Jan Sangh Party came into being in October 1951, when the general election to the constituent assembly was around the corner. The first formal meeting of the party was held at Pusa Road, New Delhi, attended by Lala Hansaraj and Pandit Mauli Chander Sharma. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee took the responsibility to lead the party and stated, "It is a great responsibility that you want to shoulder. I will try to do it in the spirit of humble duty to my motherland. But before I accept it, I want to be clear in my mind about the character and the future working of the organization you want me to lead." He emphasized that the Jan Sangh Party is open to everyone who had affinity to India-culture and tradition essentially Hindu in nature. Finally, at Ragho Mal Arya Girls High School, New Delhi, a convention was held and the All India Bharatiya Jana Sangh Party was formally constituted, which had its own constitution and manifesto, with Syama Prasad Mookherjee as its first President. His attempt was to unite the nationalist forces and make the organization an alternative political party and explained "one of the chief reasons for the manifestation of dictatorship in Congress rule is the absence of well-organized opposition parties, which alone can act as a healthy check on the majority party and can hold out before the country the prospect of an alternative government." His vision to have a separate organization was to build an alternative party and to create Akhand Bharat. [29]

Since the inception of the All India Jan Sangh Party, it has faced a lot of challenges from various quarters, including the then Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru. However, the Jana Sangh Party fought the election in 1952, and only three candidates, including Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee and U.M. Trivedi, were elected out of 93 contested candidates. Though many factors were responsible for the poll's failure, but that had given a befitting fight to Nehru and the Congress Party's rule. [30] Thus Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee return back to parliament in 1952. However, he was not a man of despair. His pre-eminence is accepted by all. He was widely accepted and admired by the opposition party and friends alike and was chosen as chief spokesperson of the opposition party in the parliament. He formed National Democratic Party by uniting small parties- Ganatantra Parishad of Odisha, the Akali Dal of Punjab, the Hindu Mahasabha, and a number of other independents parties. Due to his oratory and eloquent skills all political parties considered him to be their chief spokesman allowing him to reply all pertinent questions in the parliament on behalf of the opposition party-the communist. The ruling Congress looked upon Syama Prasad Mookherjee as the unofficial Leader of the Opposition in the parliament. He earned great reputation as statesman due constructive approach to the problems facing India at that time. In true sense he was undisputed leader, great parliamentarian having with outstanding and oratory skills. [31] He was revered as a remarkable parliamentarian and in Lok Sabha Secretariat as was popularly known as "The Lion of the Parliament." It is said, "Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee rules the parliament, though Nehru may rule the country." Further "and to all those interested in the progress of democracy in the country, he was the coming man, the man to watch, the prospective prime minister, and the hope of millions in the country". [32]

The last but most momentous part of Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee's political career as leader began when he was re-elected as president of the Jana Sangh Party in the last week of December, 1952. When he reached Kanpur to preside over the Jana Sangh Session he got to know about the struggle of people of Jammu and Kashmir during Sheikh Abdullah ministry. He extended his full support to the Praja Parishad of Jammu and Kashmir to celebrate 14 December as Jammu and Kashmir Day all over India. For Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee and the Jana Sangh Party, that was an opportune movement to protect the rights and liberties of the people of India. He had all support to the people of Jammu and Kashmir, East Bengal and refugee's problems in the country. He had full sympathy and support for Praja Parishad's satyagraha movement in Jammu and Kashmir. He appealed Jawaharlal Nehru and Sheikh Abdulla to negotiate with Praja Parisad Party relating various problems in Jammu and Kashmir and to arrive at a settlement.[33]

As a parliamentarian life his final act came in 1953 when very closely connected with the problem of integration of Jammu and Kashmir and separatist movements. Very boldly he took up the integration of Jammu and Kashmir with India and made a visit to Jammu in August 1952, he once said in a mammoth meeting, "I will get you the Indian constitution or lay down my life for it." His words proved prophetic. He decided to visit Jammu again in May 1953 to study the prevailing situation by himself. [34] The Jana Sangh Party in the Kanpur session extended its support to Praja Parishad fighting for integration of Jammu and Kashmir. Syama Prasad Mookherjee several protracted communications to Jawaharlal Nehru and Sheikh Abdulla regarding the issue. His correspondence with Jawaharlal Nehru began on 9th January and concluded with his letter to Sheikh Abdulla on 23rd February, 1953 relating to problems and the integration of Jammu and Kashmir. Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee's whole correspondence reflects "Mookherjee was a man of reason." [35]

When he began his journey on 8th May 1953, accompanied by Vaidya Guru Datt, Sri Atal Behari Bajpayee, Shri Tek Chand, and a few others, rail compartment was fully decorated with flowers and Jana Sangh flags. The people chanted slogans with "*Bharat Mata Ki Jai*" and "*Bharat Keshari Dr. Syama Prasad Mukherjee Ki Jai.*" Though he was advised not to go and did not have an entry permit to Jammu and Kashmir, he was quite determined to reach because he was a man of action. "Explaining his object in going to Jammu, he said: My object is going to Jammu is solely to acquaint myself with what exactly had happened there and the present state of affairs". He further stated, "if I am allowed to enter the, I for my sake do not rule out the possibility of even meeting Sheikh Abdulla and have a personal discussion with him". Thus it was clear to him that he was proceeding in a mission to establish peace in Jammu.[36]

As he was nearing Ambala Cantonment, he informed Sheikh Abdulla through a telegram to Sheikh Abdulla of his visit to Jammu, and the same copy to Government of India, as IPC Section 144 was imposed refraining to conduct public meetings but when he reached at Phagwara through Bombay Express he received a reply from Abdulla which stated, "I am afraid your proposed visit to the state at the present juncture inopportune and will not serve any purpose." While he was travelling from Jullundur to Amritsar, an elderly person told him the Punjab Government had decided not to allow him to reach Pathankot, which was a clear indication that he would be arrested. Vaidya Gurudatta, a physician, was accompanied. But he wanted a young companion for his personal comfort; therefore, Tek Chand, an energetic worker, was selected for that purpose. Thousands of people came forward and greeted Syama Prasad Mookherjee on his way to Jammu. At Pathankot a gentle lady nearly a ninety-years-old extending her blessing to him said in Punjabi with the following words: "*We Putra! Jit ke avin, aiwan na avin—My son! Do not return until you are victorious.*" When Syama Prasad Mookherjee finally arrived at Madhupor Check Post on the Ravi bridge at 4 pm, the Dy. Commissioner handed him a letter of Chief Secretary dated 10 May 1953, banning his entry into the state. But Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee refused and said "I intend to go to Jammu", thereupon the IG, Police arrested him on 11 May, 1953 alongwith Vidya Gurudatt and Sri Tek Chand. The rest of the members in group were sent back. His last message to his fellow group members and countrymen was that "I have entered Jammu and Kashmir State, though as a prisoner". The people of Jammu came forward in thousands to rescue Syama Prasad Mookherjee at Tawi Bridge but the closed jeep carrying him passed the bridge at dusk and reached at Udhampur at 10 PM and at 2 AM he reached at Batot, where he spent the night. Next day Syama Prasad Mookherjee was put into the Central Jail of Srinagar Central. He spent last forty days of his life in the prison before getting martyrdom on the 23rd of June 1953.

The news of his arrest stirred the entire country. Protest demonstrations were held in Delhi and many other parts of the country, shouting the slogan "Jammu Chalo." During his stay in jail, he was not well treated and fell ill. Though the medical treatment administered was not adequate, and later it created a lot of controversy. During his time in jail, he spent his time reading, writing, meditating, and occasionally chatting with co-detainees over subjects from culture, spiritualism, politics, etc. Even then he wrote a biography of his father, Asutosh Mookherjee, which he had long desired. During his detention periods it was unfortunate that none of his relatives, including his son, were permitted to visit Syama Prasad Mookherjee. Only S. Hukam Singh, MP on political ground and U. M. Chaturvedi a Barrister, MP as his Counselor was allowed to meet him. [37] His love for country and passion to keep Jammu and Kashmir with Indian Union proves that he was a great son of India and died as martyr's death to the cause of Indian unity. His name will remain golden page in the history of India. In Lok Sabha when Syama Prasad died remorsefully, "He was one of our great patriots, and his services to the national cause have been equally great. The situation in which he passed away is tragic. It was God's will, and who could help otherwise? His ability, sincerity, masterly manner of handling his subject, eloquence, and above all, patriotism and love for his countrymen entitled him to our respect." Even Jawaharlal Nehru made references to the circumstances of his death as 'peculiarly unfortunate.' Nehru had to accept about Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee that "We differed sometimes very deeply on many issues, and we agreed too on many issues, and it is a matter of peculiar regret and grief to me that in the last days of his life an occasion arose on which there was very considerable difference between him and me. However, we are deprived of the personality who had played such a notable and great part in the country and who was, after all, fairly young and who had a large and good stretch of years before him. But that was not to be ..." [38]

IV. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The country was shocked by the unfortunate and tragic death of a great son, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee. The day was a national mourning. The people Jammu and Kashmir went mad with grief and sorrows. Everyone felt that Dr. Syama Prasad Mookherjee has become a martyr to their cause—the cause of Kashmir's integration with the rest of India and the cause of Indian unity. The people of Bengal naturally felt the tragedy most. The people of Calcutta and from various parts of the country flew in millions to pay their last homage to a great patriot of India. In Keortala burning Ghat, where Syama Prasad Mookherjee's last funeral took lakhs of people with great love, showered flowers and shed tears from balconies, which was something unprecedented even in human history. [39]

Perhaps his long-cherished dream of the integration of Jammu and Kashmir—Akhand Bharat—has now been realized by the present Modi Government, when Article 370 was evoked in 2019. This may be a befitting tribute to Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee's fight and sacrifice for the unity and integrity of the great Indian nation. Thus, Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee, a legend and martyr stood for 'Akhand Bharat'—the United India. His contribution to India's unity and integrity will be remembered in many generations to come.[40]

ENDNOTES

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