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Smitten by the land and language

Remembering JPL Gwynn, the British ICS officer whose love for Telugu language is well known.

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During the initial years after the formation of Visalandhra - Andhra Pradesh in 1956, there was in the Secretariat at Hyderabad, a British I.C.S. officer known to read, write and converse in impeccable Telugu. Outside his chamber, his name board was conspicuous for being in Telugu script while every other board in the Secretariat was in English. This Telugu proponent, JPL Gwynn, was the only British national to have served in India in an executive position even after Indian independence. He was District Collector, Secretary in the Education Ministry and held the position of the Second member of the Board of Revenue, before returning to England in 1968 after serving in India for 30 years.

The reason for James Peter Lucas Gwynn, popularly known as JPL Gwynn, to continue in India even after independence was primarily due to his passion for India and for its people. His Irish background gave him sympathy for Indian national cause. As one interested in Indian languages, he wanted to pursue his interests remaining in India. Moreover, the government of India had offered the British officers to stay for indefinite period if they so desired. JPL Gwynn probably was the only bureaucrat to take this offer wholeheartedly.

Early life and career

JPL Gwynn, called Peter by his friends, was born in London on June 22, 1916 in a distinguished family. His maternal grandfather was the famous British architect, John Sedding who had built the Holy Trinity Church in Sloane Square, in central London. Peter's father, John Tudor Gwynn came from a prominent Irish family. Tudor Gwynn joined the Indian Civil Service in Madras Presidency but choose to retire in 1921 and returned to England with family primarily for his son's education.

JPL Gwynn, the only son of his parents, studied at the prestigious Dragon School at Oxford and then went on to do M.A. in Classics from Trinity College, Dublin securing a gold medal. He spent a year at Oxford studying Sanskrit after winning a scholarship.

Following the footsteps of his father, Peter joined the I.C.S. in 1939 as it was considered to be a prestigious career. After a year of training, he arrived in Madras and served in several Districts. He worked in Andhra State and



then in Andhra Pradesh till he returned to England in 1968. He spent another eight years in British government service in London before superannuating in 1976. He settled down in retirement in Bromley, Kent, close to London.

JPL Gwynn, having worked in several Telugu speaking districts, developed an enduring passion for Telugu language and its people. This led, after retirement, to the compilation of his magnum opus the Telugu-English Dictionary, published by the Oxford University Press in 1991. He worked hard on this project funded by the Charles Wallace Trust, and assisted by Prof. J. Venkateswara Sastry of Osmania University. This dictionary is rated by far the most authentic one. Earlier in 1986, he also published, *A Grammar of Modern Telugu*, in collaboration with Prof. Bh. Krishnamurthy. He also wrote on C.P. Brown, Veeresalingam and Sir Arthur Cotton. He closely worked with American scholars interested in Telugu language, like Peter Schmitthenner and John Leonard. He also gave lectures on Telugu Language at several American Universities on the invitation of Robert E. Frykenberg of Wisconsin University.

Personal life

JPL Gwynn's marriage in 1959 with Patricia Margaret, known to family and friends as Peggy Satur, was a happy part of his life as they shared an active, varied and eventful life together. Peggy belonged to a prominent family, the Saturs, settled in Madras. Her father Andrew Satur, was a successful businessman. Peggy and all her siblings were educated at Xavier related schools in Nilgiris and colleges, in Madras. Peggy served in

several multinational companies in secretarial position in Madras, Delhi and Calcutta but gave up working after marriage to JPL Gwynn.

Her brother, Stanley Satur, was a police officer at Eluru, in West Godavari and JPL Gwynn was, at that time the District Collector there. That was how Peter came to know of the Satur family and of Peggy. It was the love for India which brought JPL Gwynn and Patricia together. Their two sons have been very successful, the elder, John, married to a Bengali, works for an international NGO, Oxfam, while the second, Robert, went into British Foreign Service.

JPL was highly devoted to all the members of his family and was an indulgent father and grandfather. Peggy was a great connoisseur of classical Hindustani music and a passionate admirer of Ustad Vilayat Khan's recordings.

JPL Gwynn died on September 14, 1999 in Kent. The most important aspect of his life was his simplicity and modesty, which endeared him to everyone who came to know of him.

As the Education Secretary, in Andhra Pradesh, JPL Gwynn, mooted State compulsory primary education, considered most progressive step at that time. It was on his initiative, a separate Telugu Akademy, first of its kind in India, for furthering Telugu language and literature was established in Hyderabad. He also served as a member of the governing body of the Salar Jung Museum after it was shifted to the present site in Afzalgunj. He was honored at the World Telugu Conference held in Hyderabad in 1975.

To share a personal note, this writer had the pleasure of having an engaging correspondence with JPL Gwynn during his dictionary days. His abiding interest in the architectural features of buildings in Hyderabad, his child-like enthusiasm and concern for preservation of heritage structures in the twin cities, the keen interest he had for the history and culture of the city, were highly revealing in his well crafted lengthy letters.

Hyderabad city, where he built a hangal on the picturesque slopes of the Banjara Hills, always remained dear to him.

A real tribute to the memory of JPL Gwynn, whose birth centenary is being observed now, will be to give fillip to research and teaching facilities in Telugu language, at the Universities in the twin Telugu speaking States of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana.

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