

8. A Lively Calcutta Meeting In 1889

Although it is now nearly fifty-six years since I was a student in Calcutta in December, 1889, I still vividly recall a very amusing incident which transpired a few days before I embarked for London on board the steamer. His Royal Highness, the Duke of Clarence and Avondale-the eldest son of the then Prince of Wales, after-wards King Edward VII-was on a visit to India in the cold weather of 1889-90, who (but for his premature death) would have succeeded his father as the King-Emperor of India. Naturally much enthusiasm was displayed in connection with his visit throughout the country, and particularly at the places he visited, in according to him a reception worthy of his august position as the eldest grandson of Queen-Empress Victoria. He was to arrive in Calcutta early in January, 1890, and the then capital of India was agog in making preparations for according to the Prince a suitable, reception. Accordingly a public meeting of the citizens of Calcutta was announced to be held in the famous Town Hall of the city, which was to be presided over by Sir Stuart Bailey, the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa. It was, of course, expected that all the great landlords and titled noblemen of the three provinces would flock to the capital to attend that meeting. It was announced that the organisers intended to raise a very large sum, which was to be spent on the reception to be accorded to the Prince-the main items of which were to consist of various social functions and public ceremonials in conformity with the then established usage of oriental receptions in honour of Royalty, or of the highest members of the official hierarchy. As such it was given out that the chief items in the programme were to consist of garden parties, at-homes, and evening receptions; also displays of fireworks, and several other similar functions, in which prominence was given to the eternal *nautch* parties by professional dancing girls.

Surendra Nath Banerjee, the popular leader of Bengal, could not bring himself to approve of these proposals, and he launched a series of attacks on the organisers in the columns of his journal (*The Bengalee*) which was then a weekly, but was converted by him later into a daily, and which even then exercised considerable influence on public opinion in Bengal. Opposing the scheme of the organisers, Surendra Nath put forward the proposal that the funds raised should be applied to the establishment and maintenance of an asylum for people suffering from mental diseases-the said institution to be located in the suburbs of Calcutta. And so it came about that the two factions came to be known, in popular parlance, as the *nautch-wallas* and the *lunatic-wallas*! The former included the vested influence, British and Indian combined-the biggest landlords, and titleholders of the various Orders of the Star of India, of the Indian Empire, and others, the big merchants in Calcutta, and, last but not least, the rank and file of officialdom; while the latter comprised almost all the

educated and intellectual sections of the Indian community, led by Surendra Nath Banerjee, who being the principal of the Ripon College, the most thriving and successful educational institution at that time-had issued a fiat to come round to his standard - not only to the students of the Ripon College, but of all the other colleges in Calcutta. With the students thrown into the scale, it became a fight of youth against age, and naturally produced tremendous excitement, which grew more and more intense as the date of the meeting came closer and closer.

At last the long-looked-for day arrived; the students had received their marching orders to capture and occupy all the available seats in the Town Hall a couple of hours before the meeting was to be held at 5 o'clock in the afternoon. I was an active participant. Knowing that it would be a long day's business, I stuffed myself before going to the City College, to join my comrades in arms. Various processions of students started from different colleges in the direction of the Town Hall, and were punctually at the gate by 3 o'clock. The custodians of the building, and the agents of the organisers, got alarmed, as the police (who had mustered strong on the occasion had no instructions to keep out the students, since it was to be a public meeting. Fortunately for us, it was the pre-telephone period, and so they could not obtain instructions quickly, with the result that no obstruction was offered to us, and we all marched into the hall, occupied by far the greater part of it, leaving but a small area round about the platform for our opponents. They began to arrive at about 4 p.m.,-to find, to their despair, the greater portion of the hall in the possession of the youthful enemies of the *nautchwallas*. They were nonplussed, and did not know what to do or say. They sat down in the smaller area which remained unoccupied, and a number of the most prominent ones occupied seats on the platform, but their faces betrayed considerable chagrin and disappointment. The mighty British merchants world-and one of whom became later a much bigger figure as Lord Inchcape-looked awfully scandalised, and seemed to regard us as so many devils incarnate. But even they could not come to a decision as to what to do with the thousands of students occupying the hall. Punctually at 5 there was a move from the platform towards the main gate to receive His Honour the Lieutenant-Governor-a tall, venerable, and benevolent-looking Scotsman-who was deferentially escorted to the presidential chair. We all showed him courtesy by rising from our seats. It was formally proposed and seconded that His Honour should preside on the occasion, and (as we had no instructions to oppose that proposition) it was said to have been carried by acclamation.

The gathering assembled on the platform was undoubtedly a notable one, comprising as it did all the leading figures in the social, political, and economic world of not only Calcutta, but of the three provinces of Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa-both British and Indian. Amongst notable Indians on the platform were Maharaja Sir Jotindra Mohan Tagore, Knight of the Exalted Order of the Star of

India, Maharaja Sir Narendra Krishna Dev, Knight of the Most Eminent Order of the Indian Empire, and several Knights of other varieties, including (the lowest ones) Knights Bachelor, as also Nawab Abdul Latif, Companion of the Order of the Indian Empire, who was regarded as the leader of a large section of Muslims in Calcutta. All the leading Bihar zamindars were there, headed by the then Maharaja of Darbhanga. The intelligentsia and the intellectuals were also equally well represented by numerous educationists, pressmen, publicists, journalists, public-men, and leaders of the Calcutta Bar. I do not remember to have seen in the audience even a single representative of the Marwari community, which has since played a very important part in the public activities of the city. The inaugural speech of the Lieutenant-Governor was on routine lines, and provoked no comment from any quarter. He called upon Maharaja Sir Narendar Krishna to move the principal resolution, which was to the effect that with a view to accord a fitting reception to His Royal Highness, a committee be constituted to organize the various functions. Accordingly the Maharaja came forward to the front of the platform and began to move the resolution in the terms stated above. We allowed him to read out the opening lines of the text of the resolution, but as soon as he came to the words "to organise", all the students assembled in the hall yelled out at the highest pitch of their voice "a lunatic asylum". The poor Maharaja, who had been brought up in the old-world traditions of the East, was nonplussed, and very nearly collapsed under our vociferous shouts; but he pulled himself together and tried to read out the resolution again. By that time, however, our youthful exuberance was at its height, and our patience was exhausted; so instead of allowing him to come to the words "to organise" before shouting our slogan of "a lunatic asylum", we began to shout it simultaneously with the Maharaja's reading of the text of the resolution-which evoked tremendous discordance, throughout the three bays of the Town Hall.

The result naturally was-what Indian newspapers are even now very fond of writing in their editorial comments-"the place was turned into a pandemonium". The *nautchwallas* were aghast at what they regarded as our gross impertinence and studied misbehaviour but they did not know what to do, or to say. The situation created was so new to them that they were flabbergasted. A hurried consultation was seen to be going on between the Lieutenant-Governor and the leaders on the platform. Suddenly as the result of the discussion, the Lieutenant-Governor called hurriedly Surendra Nath Banerjee to his side, and spoke to him with an appealing look. Surendra Nath then came forward, and asked us not to interfere with the proceedings of the meeting, but to cast our vote, at the right time, in favours of the amendment he was going to move, when it was put to the vote. As the result of this appeal, we desisted from disturbing the meeting further by shouting our "lunatic asylum" slogan; and the Maharaja, his seconder, and his supporters, were allowed by us to proceed with their

speeches. Then came the turn of Surendra Nath to move his amendment. His (we all thought) was the speech of the day, as he brought down the very walls of the famous, old, Town Hall. We applauded vociferously and cheered him to the echo. We clapped and yelled the loudest. At last, when the amendment was put to the vote, we the students supported it with enthusiastic acclamations, accompanied by such tremendous noise and intense discordance as carried all before it. By this time the people on the platform were obviously disgusted with our turbulent behaviour and objectionable tactics. They appealed to the President to adjourn the meeting, which he did at once, coupling it with the announcement that on a later date another meeting of the supporters of the original proposition would be held, to which there would be admission by cards only. We once again yelled out, at the highest pitch, our protests against the sun-dried bureaucrats and their unpatriotic Indian henchmen, and the meeting thus ended in a fiasco, and came to an end in the midst of turmoil and confusion-each party claiming to have been the winner.

The proceedings of that afternoon became for days and days, the bone of contention between the Anglo Indian Press-represented at the time by several dailies-and the Indian Press represented by only one daily, in English, the Indian Mirror. Recriminations between the two sections lasted for several days, and were still going on when I embarked for London on board the steamer on the 26th December, 1889. This was my first experience of a contentious public meeting, though I have seen since several others, far worse; particularly the session of the Indian National Congress at Surat, in 1907, in which a shoe was flung by an excited Congressman, of advanced views against Sir Pheroz Shah Mehta, the leader of the Moderate Section of Congressmen, at that time. But there can be no doubt that in the India of 1889, such an incident as occurred in the Calcutta Town hall was the first of its kind, and revealed a new spirit of youthful exuberance. We did what we did not so much because we were put up to it, but as the result of a conviction that the representatives of vested interests were going to waste large funds raised from the public on frivolities while we were the up-holders of a great public cause for the relief of suffering humanity. Things have since changed for the worse, judged from the standard of Indian decorum; and many of our meetings are now far more lively and boisterous, and not unoften transgress the bounds of civic propriety. But it is not yet well-known in India that in western countries many meetings-specially those held for political purposes, at the time of general elections-not unoften end in a free fight. Nor are University functions in the West usually so quiet as are generally the convocations of the Indian universities. Anyway, when depressed by sorrow, or the worries of the world, I have often recalled this lively incident of my college career in Calcutta and felt cheered up by visualising what

I have tried to portray in this sketch. It has always reminded me of Longfellow's pathetic stanza⁵⁸:

They've perished, the blithe days of childhood have perished,
And all the gladness and all the peace I knew:
Now I have but their memory fondly cherished;
God, My I never, never, lose that too.

⁵⁸ This is the last stanza of H.W. Longfellow's poem "Childhood".

