9. Social Conditions In Bihar During The Eighties And Nineties

Before recording my experiences in Calcutta, I would recall my impressions, at this stage, of the relations between Hindus and Muslims, and also between the British and Indians, in Bihar-and for the matter of that in the whole of India-during the eighties and nineties of the last century. The relations between the Hindus and Muslims were not only good but cordial. One never heard in those days of Hindu-Muslim riots, with which we have unfortunately become but too familiar during the present century. Nor were then any political rivalries amongst the different sections, classes, or communities of the people. British rule had come to be regarded, at that time, as absolutely immutable, as if ordained by Providence like one of the laws of Nature, and any such idea in the mind of even advanced educated classes as that of Indian independence, or Dominion Status with right of secession from the British Empire, was wholly beyond their mental horizon, and even-unworthy of credit. By far the largest section of the press in those days had not even learnt to discuss any serious reforms in the administration of the country and filled their columns mainly with local grievances of the people. In fact, any political ferment worth the name had not appeared on the surface of Indian political horizon-until sometime after the first session of the Indian National Congress had been held, in Bombay, in the Christmas week of 1885, under the presidentship of Mr. W.C. Bonnerjee, the centenary of whose birth was duly celebrated, in Calcutta, in 1944. Ideas about social reform and progress-which are, comparatively speaking, backward in the country, even now-were not at all seriously entertained at that time, except by a few individuals, here and there. But though the country was very backward in social progress and political advancement, it was a redeeming feature of life, as then lived, that there was peace, amity, and good-will all round-between the Government and the people, on the one hand, and amongst the various sections, classes, and communities of the people, on the other-though, perhaps, it was the peace of the grave.

The only educated section of the people, in Bihar, then consisted of but two small communities-the higher strata amongst the Muslims, and the Kayesthas among the Hindus. It is these two communities which offered the largest number of recruits both for Government services, and the legal profession. But as the Biharees of that age did not know English, in sufficiently large numbers, the vast bulk of the public services were recruited from amongst natives of Bengal, who were then far ahead of the Biharees in knowledge of English. Not only the highest Judicial and Executive offices, but many of the ministerial posts also, were filled by Bengalees. The Biharees of those days had no higher aspirations in any sphere of public activity, and were content to play the second, or rather

the third, fiddle in their own province. They were content to take the then joint administration of the two provinces (of advanced Bengal and backward Bihar) as an act of God, which they could no more think of attempting to change than of stopping the course of the planetary bodies. In the administration of the district, the District Officer (invariably a British member of the Indian Civil Service) was practically supreme in all matters; and with him was associated the District Superintendent of Police, who also was generally a British officer. The District and Sessions Judge was also a British member of the Indian Civil Service, and so were the Joint Magistrates, and the Assistant Magistrates. The members of the Provincial Civil Services, Judicial and Executive, were content to serve under the Indian Civil Service officers. They could not look up to hold even officiating charge as the District Officer, or the District Judge, at any time during the course of their service, even when they were on the verge of retirement, and even though some of them were men of high administrative capacity, or long judicial experience.

But while the conditions of life, judged from the standpoint of today were highly depressing, with no bright ray of hope to cheer up even the educated classes, (to say nothing of the masses), there was the great redeeming feature that every one living in the Province-and for the matter of that in the country-was at peace with his environment. The social relations between Hindus and Muslims were cordial not only in the villages, but even in towns and cities. In spite of very great change for the worse that had come about, in the course of the present century, in this particular respect, and the great deterioration that had now come to exist in Hindu-Muslim relations, it is an unquestionable fact that in normal times the relations between the vast bulk of the members of the two communities in rural, and also to a less extent in urban areas, even today, are friendly, and this is a matter which cannot be missed by an open-minded visitor who goes about the country with an unprejudiced mind, even now. For instance, Mons. Alay, the leader of the Turkish Press Delegation (which visited India in the cold weather of 1942-43) when asked, on the eve of his departure for Turkey, his impressions of the country, made the significant declaration to an Indian press representative, that, "as far as they could see, there was no distrust in ordinary life between Muslims and Hindus, as often expressed in political statements of leaders of the respective communities, in the press". This is perfectly true, in spite of the communal organizations that had come into existence in the country, during the present century, many of the activities of which had produced very great acerbity in the once happy relations between the two great communities in the land. There was fortunately no bitterness in the eighties and the nineties of the last century, when not only in the villages but in towns and cities also, Hindus and Muslims lived together as members of one community, and displayed great tolerance for each other's religious sentiments,

rites and ceremonies, with the result that they lived together on most peaceful terms, sharing with each other their joys and sorrows.

Recalling the social condition in Bihar in the eighties and nineties of the last century as existing between Hindus and Muslims at that time, I should say something about the relations between the British and the Indians also. These were neither good nor bad, for the simple reason that there were absolutely no social relations, worth the name, between the two peoples. The British were then regarded (both by themselves and by the Indians) as belonging to a much higher order of humanity than even the best amongst the Indians. They had their own "home" institutions-including a church, and a club-to which they resorted for religious or social purposes. Thus there was no contact between the two peoples, though they were both in the eye of the law her Majesty's subjects. Macaulay, in his famous speech in the House of Commons, in the course of the debate on the Bill which was subsequently enacted as the Act of 1833, referred to the people of this country as "our subjects". Such language continued to be employed by British writers and speakers till 1858, when India passed from the control of the East Indian Company to that of the Crown. Queen Victoria's memorable Proclamation of that year-which was read out by Lord Canning, the first Viceroy of India, at Allahabad, on the 1st of November, 1858-asserted, for the first time, in distinct terms, the equal status of the Indian subjects of the Crown with Her Majesty's British and other subjects But while that was so constitutionally, yet, for all practical purposes, the Indians continued to be regarded both socially and politically as the subjects of each and every British man and woman. This attitude of mind on their part continued to be reflected in their conduct, speeches and writings, and in their treatment of Indians, in general until very recent times.

But recalling the condition of the times I am now speaking of, I may unresistingly state that any social and friendly relations between the British and the Indians were then quite unknown. The only contact between them was administrative and official, and decidedly no other. Even a quarter of a century had not then elapsed since the out-break of the Indian Mutiny, in 1857, and its suppression by Government with a severity which can be best gauged by a perusal of that well-known book by Mr. Edward Thompson called *The Other Side of the Medal*[59], or of Sir John Tenniel's famous cartoon in *Punch* (of 1858) on the subject, depicting the "British Lion" roused to full ferocity against the "Bengal Tiger". It is a weakness of human nature to persuade itself to believe (and the British are not free from it), after reach suppression of disturbance by the exercise of unnecessary force, that it had succeeded in crushing out any attempt on the part of a subject people to raise their head again. Precisely the same mentality was displayed by the British after they had suppressed, with

[59] Edward Thompson, The Other Side of the Medal, London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf (The Hogarth Press), 1930 (1925, first edition).

undue violence, the serious disturbances that broke out in certain parts of India in August, 1942, consequent on the sudden arrest of the Congress leaders and workers and until human nature undergoes a material change - of which there is little prospect at present-the same situation will, I fear, continue to arise, from time to time, in the relations of the ruling and the subject peoples. In the circumstances it need cause no surprise to anyone to be told that the British and the Indians lived in this country until the introduction of the Morley-Minto Reforms in 1909-as separately as if they inhabited two different globes. Occasionally, for instance, the celebration of a marriage, the British officials would be invited to a banquet at a rich Indian's house, and the catering would be placed with some celebrated firm in Calcutta. Not one Indian, however, would either be invited by the host, or would be allowed by the guests to be invited to such a feast, not only because the conventions of the time did not and would not allow it, but because of the non-existence of any social relations between the two communities.

I would recall, in confirmation of what I have stated above, but one memorable incident, out of many, of which I have personal knowledge, which also appeared in the press at that time, and created great sensation throughout the country. In 1854, Parliament had abolished the old system of nominations to the Indian Civil Service, and had thrown it open to competition. The first Indian to compete successfully, in the sixties of the last century, and enter the Indian Civil Service, by sitting at the examination in London, was Satyendra Nath Tagore, the elder brother of the poet, Rabindra Nath Tagore. I met him first in London, during the early nineties of the last century, when I was a student there, and he was enjoying his furlough. He served throughout his official career as a Judicial Officer in the Bombay Presidency. I used to meet him also, after his retirement from service, at Ranchi, the summer headquarters of the province of Bihar, where he stayed for long intervals. Some years after his entrance into the Indian Civil Service, a few Indians from Bengal, and one from Maharashtra, secured admission into the Indian Civil Service. One of them was the famous Surendra Nath Banerji, whose services were, however dispensed with after short official career, which was a memorable episode in the career of that great nationalist leader. The last of the first batch of entrants was Brijendra Nath De, popularly known (according to the then Anglo-Indian usage) as "B.N.De". He was serving in Bihar, when early in the eighties the then Maharaja of Dumraon retired from public activities owing to advanced age, and his son-Sir Radha Prasad Singh-was installed in his father's place, as the proprietor of the eatate, by the then Lieutenant-Governor, Sir Ashly Eden. Sir Ashley belonged to the same family as Lord Auckland, the Governor-General of India from 1836 to 1842 and so does Mr. Anthony Eden, Foreign Secretary, during the second Great War. To celebrate the installation suitably, a very large sum was spent on a magnificent banquet, to which not only the Lieutenant-Governor and his *entourage*, and

the Shahabad district officials, but almost the whole of the British community in the province of Bihar, were invited. My father as a chief legal adviser of the Dumraon estate was there; and he had also taken me with him. I was then about ten years old.

The arrangements for the banquet were complete, and the Lieutenant-Governor had arrived at Dumraon amidst a great show of magnificence, pomp and splendour. But there was a rift in the lute. It was that B.N.De, the young Indian civilian, who was the Sub Divisional Magistrate at Sasaram, and in whose jurisdiction by far the larger portion of the Dumraon estate was situated, had not received an invitation to the banquet. This discovery naturally caused great sensation, as the fact found its way into the *Indian Mirror* in Calcutta, and the other papers which used to be published at that time, at various important centres in North India, both in English and in Indian languages. De was present at Dumraon as a guest of the Maharaja, but the arrangement, for the banquet was mainly in charge of the District Magistrate, a British Civilian, who was believed to be responsible for the studious omission of the name of De as one of the invitees to the banquet. But in offering this studied insult to De, the official concerned in the matter had reckoned without his host, since the Indian Civilian was not a man to take it lying low. Accordingly, he sought an interview with the Lieutenant-Governor which, of course, was granted. In the course of conversation with His Honour, De represented to him that perhaps the only ground on which he had been sought to be slighted by his exclusion from the banquet was the fact that both in the European classics, and in English composition, he had been able to obtain at the open competition for the Civil Service, in London, ever so much higher marks than any of his British confreres who had appeared with him at that examination. De's contention was unanswerable. Sir Ashley Eden felt convinced that the exclusion of De from the banquet (which was to be given at the cost of the Maharaja of Dumraon, and not that of the District Magistrate who had been requested by the host to get up the function) was absolutely indefensible. Accordingly he spoke to the Commissioner of the Patna Division, and sent word through him to the district authorities that unless De was allowed to occupy his proper place at the banquet, he (the Lieutenant-Governor) would not be able to accept the position of the chief guest on the occasion. This was something for which the British officialdom assembled at Dumraon, were by no means prepared; but the Lieutenant-Governor having taken up the stern attitude he did, they had to give in and eat the humble pie. Sir Ashley Eden's attitude was justly appreciated by the public at large, which found expression in the Indian press. De's triumph was regarded as the first breach made by an Indian in the ramparts of the social citadel sought to be set up by the British official hierarchy, in India, to exclude even a pre-eminently deserving Indian, like De from a social function like the

one at Dumraon, where the host himself was an Indian, and the officials merely organisers on his behalf.

The question of social relations between the British and the Indians used to be, until the end of the first decade of this century, a subject of acrimonious discussion in the press of the country, sometimes with far from desirable results. In 1901, the then Maharaja Gaekwad of Baroda (Sir Sayaji Rao) contributed to that famous London periodical-*The Nineteenth Century and After*-a notable article called "My Ways and Days in Europe and India", in which he referred tactfully but pointedly to the then undesirable state of social relations between the Indians and the Britons in this country. The Gaikwad's article produced a great furore in Indo-British circles, because of the writer's very high position, and his caustic comments. The Pioneer of Allahabad (then most influential Anglo-Indian daily in the country wrote, in reply to the Gaekwad, a vigorously worded editorial which was not unjustly regarded by educated Indians as highly provocative. I defended the Gaekwad in an article in the *Hindustan Review* (which I had founded in the previous year, 1900) and I quote below a portion of it to illustrate the position as it existed at the beginning of the twentieth century:-

"The Pioneer Starts by saying that it is 'quite ready to admit in all courtesy that there are faults on both sides'. 'But the simple truth of the matter', asserts the *Pioneer*, 'is that the caste whims and prejudices of our Indian fellow-subjects stand in the way of friendships to an extent that renders all other difficulties utterly insignificant by comparison'. And it winds up by saying that 'no *rapprochement* is possible until we all get over the idea that there is an ignominy involved in sharing a meal together'. At first sight there seems to be some force in this contention, which, however, completely disappears on closer scrutiny. We have got now in every large city a number of educated Hindus-England-returned, and even non-England-returned-who have completely given up all caste restrictions in eating with non-Hindus, and yet we do not find their position any better in the way of closer social intercourse between them and the Indo-Britons than between the latter and the rest of the Indian community. If the Indo-Britons really cared to cultivate friendly feelings with their Indian fellow-subjects, one cannot understand why they should not fraternise with the ever-growing phalanx of educated Hindus of this class. And then there are our Muslim fellow-subjects, the educated classes amongst whom have got no scruples in the way of inter-dining with their Anglo-Indian fellow-subjects, prevails cordiality between them and the Indo-Britons.

We are quite sure that nowhere in India would a Hindu or Muslim, whatever his position or respectability-even though he lives in European style-be elected as a member of a European club, unless perhaps he happens to be a member of the Indian Civil Service. And we would recall to the *Pioneer*'s mind the incident that when Mr. Syed Mahmood - afterwards a most distinguished Judge

of the Allahabad High Court, and a son of the founder of that great educational institution, at Aligarh, Sir Syed Ahmad Khan - was taken to the Madras Club by the then Chief Justice, Sir Charles Turner, they had both to leave the club immediately as one of the members came up to Sir Charles and told him, to the face of Mr. Syed Mahmood, that '*no native* was allowed in the club'. This incident was related by Mr. Mahmood himself to Lieut.-Col. Graham, and is recorded by him in his well-known book-*The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmad Khan*.[60] The incident referred to therein is only a straw to show which way the wind blows, and we know hundreds of such instances that are occurring all over the country, from time to time, as the result of the habit of the average Briton in Indian to regard himself as the lord of the creation, superior in every respect to the 'native' of even the highest position-which not only keeps up but widens the ever-yawning chasm of isolation between the two peoples in this country. It is this spirit of keeping aloof from the Indian as an inferior race - instances of which crop up, almost from day to day, all over the country, on railways, steamers, in parks, theatres, at meetings-and other public places and occasions, where the two races come together, and not in the much-abused caste-system which is responsible for this state of affairs.

But caste is not the only obstacle that is said to hinder the growth of social communion and intercourse between the two races in the country. The Pioneer regards, what it is pleased to call, 'the degradation of and ensuing seclusion of women in India' as another stumbling block in the way. 'The two great obstacles' generalises our contemporary, 'in the way of a really happy amalgamation between the two races are thus summed up in a nutshell. They have nothing whatever to do with European characteristics. They are nothing other, or different from what we have said. Caste whims about food, and the ignominious treatment of the Indian women are the two causes of all the trouble". Special pleading to white-wash the Indo-Briton, and blacken still deeper the Indian character, could hardly go farther. We have already examined the alleged obstacle of caste as a means of hindrance to the 'happy amalgamation'. Let us now see what justification there is for the *Pioneer*'s offensive remarks about the so-called ignominious treatment of the Indian women. We shall be the first to admit that the condition of Indian women is yet susceptible of very great improvement, but it is nothing short of rank libel to say that their treatment is so ignominious as to be any real obstacle in the way of social intercourse between the Indo-Britons and their Indian fellow-subjects. 'In India', says the *Pioneer*, 'we are in the presence of conditions that are in all respects deplorably behind the results that have been achieved elsewhere. The customs that govern the establishment of women in life are still miserably destitute of thoughtful provision for their happiness'. We doubt if a grater calumny was ever perpetrat-

[60] G.F.I. Graham, The Life and Work of Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, London: Oxford University Press, 1974 (1885, first edition).

ed even by the *Pioneer*. In strong contrast to the calumnies of this are the testimonies of some of the greatest Anglo-Indian administrators, whose words will carry much greater weight than those of the Pioneer, with unprejudiced readers.

'Taking its own ground that the treatment of women in any country is the test that determines the place of that country in the path of evolution', let us see what treatment is meted out to the women in this country, as represented in the following passage from the greatest Anglo-Indian classic-Sir John, Strachey's *India*. 'Women in India', says Sir John, 'take a larger and more active share in the practical business of life than is usually supposed; in the management of family and house-hold affairs they probably exercise almost as great an authority and influence as women in Europe. They often manage estates and large commercial concerns, and show extreme acuteness and intelligence'[61]. Surely all this could not be the result of 'ignominious' treatment. But let us turn to yet another distinguished Anglo-Indian authority, Sir Lepel Griffin. In an introduction contributed by him to Mr. Pool's book, *Women's Influence in the East*, this is what Sir Lepel write:- "Indian women do not desire to go beyond the privacy of the *Zenana*, and would consider publicity as a disgrace. It is foolish to judge the customs of other people by our own, or to suppose that the society of London or Paris holds up an ideal which other races must attain to, or be considered uncivilised. The women of the East are not so much in evidence as those of Europe, but their influence within the legitimate circle of their domestic relation is quite as great, their manner as good and their morality as high. They do not try to do everything which men do, and conspicuously fail; they do not enjoy the delight of seeing their dresses, and their looks recorded in the impertinent columns of society newspapers; they do not rush to the Divorce Court to listen to the unsavoury details of the latest fashionably scandal; and those who know most of the results of this freedom of women in the West my well doubt whether the occidental or the oriental method of treating women is more in accord with practical wisdom"[62]. These two testimonies are conclusive.

And yet the *Pioneer* has had the hardihood to suggest that the customs which govern our relations with our women are still 'miserably destitute of thoughtful provision for their happiness and that their treatment is 'ignominious'. We commend to the *Pioneer* the convincing observations of Sir John Strachey, and the words of practical wisdom inculcated by Sir Lepel Griffin as to whether the treatment of women in India is not in certain respects even better than their much-vaunted treatment in Europe. We hope next time that our contemporary reverts to this topic of social intercourse between the two races, it would bring

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61 Sir John Strachey, India: Its Administration and Progress, London: Macmillan, 1903 (third edition, revised and enlarged), p. 250.

62 Sir Lepel Griffin, Introduction, In: John J. Pool, Woman's Influence in the East, London: Elliot Stock, 1892, pp. x-xi.

to the study of its subject a better knowledge of Indian and European customs and institutions in regard to the treatment of women, and a more impartial frame of mind, and that it will not raise Frankensteins of its own creation, but rather touch upon the real rift in the lute, the cancer that eats into all efforts at intended *rapprochement* between the two peoples which to borrow the happy phrase of the *Pioneer*'s is "nothing other or different from" the average Indo-Briton's spirit of hauteur and aloofness, and his deep-rooted habit or regarding himself as superior in the all respects, to Indians, his utter incapacity to see good in any custom and institutions other than his own, and above all his supreme contempt for the people of India of all classes and creeds. It deceives no one to ignore these 'European characteristics' which are the real obstacles to a 'happy amalgamation', and to fasten the blame on the shoulders of the much-abused caste and the much-maligned treatment of Indian women."

The long extracts made above from what I wrote in the *Hindustan Review* in 1901-now about half a century back-bring into prominent relief the social relations between the Indo-Britons and the Indian; at the dawn of the twentieth century. Things continued to be, more or less, the same until the close of the first decade. But in Calcutta an effort was made to bring about better social relations between the Britons and the Indians by the establishment of the Calcutta Club in 1907, which is now housed in a palatial building overlooking the Maidan, and is a flourishing institution, and of which I have been a member since 1909. Bombay, Madras, Delhi, and some other large cities, had followed since it the wake of Calcutta, in establishing similar clubs, which had materially conduced to improved social relations between the British and Indian communities in the country. But perhaps in a larger degree than even such social institutions had been the effect of the constitutional reforms introduced, from time to time, beginning with that known as Morley-Minto Scheme of 1909. The first elections under it were held towards the end of that year, and the first sitting of the new Imperial Legislative Council was held, early in January, 1910, at the Government House, in Calcutta, under the presidentship of Lord Minto, the then Governor-General and Viceroy. The new legislators were drawn from almost all classes, and comprised in their ranks some of the representatives of the most advanced sections of the Indian community. The British officialdom, at the time, were in a highly responsive frame of mind. The result was that, apart from political activities, a great impetus was imparted to improved social relations, between the two peoples, throughout the country. The Calcutta Club became the nucleus of much social intercourse and more than once even the Bengal Club-for over a century the citadel of British Bureaucracy, in Calcutta-allowed some of its members to invite Indian friends to dinner in the Club coffee room. I was a guest on one such occasion to a dinner given to his Indian friends by Sir Edward Baker, the then Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal. Since then there had existed improved social relations in the larger cities, in

particular, and even at many smaller places. But speaking broadly, there still exists a wide social gulf between the Indians and the British, which has got to be bridged over.