

14. British Royalty I Have Met

When I was born in November, 1871, the good Queen Victoria was on the throne of the British Empire. When I reached London early in February, 1890, to qualify myself as a barrister, the good Queen-then Queen Empress-was still on the throne, and had celebrated three years before her Diamond Jubilee, in 1897. At that time not only in Britain and her colonies, but even in India, her reign was regarded as something akin to “Ramrajya”. After I had been called to the Bar, in the last week of January, 1893, and was on the point of returning to India, it was impressed upon me by a high British official at the India Office (who was said to be Aide-de-Camp of the Secretary of State for India) that etiquette demanded that I should present myself at the Queen’s Levee-dressed in Indian costume. The said officer recalled that all my Indian friends, from Behar, had done so before returning home and I knew that they had attended the Queen’s Levee accoutred in Indian presentation costume.

But the fact of the matter was that for about two years before, both Mr. Hasan Imam and I had fallen into the company of nationalist students, and had developed a new mentality in such matters. Mr. Hasan Imam and I had no objection to appear before the Queen at her Levee; but the India Office insistence in our appearing in Indian apparel, which we did not possess, was rather galling to us. True, we did not possess the British Court dress either, nor were in a position to get it made, because it was a costly affair; but all that apart it was the insistence on the part of the India Office that we could not be allowed to appear in any other clothes but Indian that rubbed our back on the wrong side, and so both of us returned to India-Mr. Hasan Imam in 1892 and I in 1893-without being privileged to pay our respects (as we say in this country) to good Queen Victoria.

Her son, the then Prince of Wales, who ascended the throne on his mother’s death, in 1901, as King Edward VII, had paid a visit to India in 1875 when I was but four years old. My father had attended the Darbar held on that occasion on the famous *maidan* (open space) at Patna, but I had naturally no lot or part in it. When, therefore, it was announced that a great Darbar would be held at Delhi to proclaim the accession of King Edward VII, I thought I would have a chance of looking at him, if not meeting him. But the King fell ill soon after, and had to undergo a serious operation before his complete recovery. Doctors then advised him not to come out to India, to preside over the Darbar, and that duty consequently devolved on his Viceroy, Lord Curzon. The King deputed, as his personal representative, his younger brother, the late Duke of Connaught, and it was the Duke and the Duchess who attended the Delhi Darbar, which was held, at Delhi, on the 1st of January 1903. The public seemed to be highly satisfied that in the absence of the King-Emperor himself, his family was to be

represented by his younger brother, and I have no doubt (from what I saw of the function) that much of its success was due to the Duke's presence; although Lord Curzon monopolised the credit of the success of the Darbar to himself. I was an invitee to that Darbar as the editor of the *Hindustan Review*, the English monthly which I had founded at Allahabad in 1900, and at which I am still plodding and drudging, after nearly half a century.

King Edward VII passed away after a short reign of less than ten years, in 1909, and was succeeded by his second son, who ascended the throne as King George V. It fell to his lot, as the only British monarch, to come to India to hold and preside over a Darbar, to proclaim his accession as the Emperor of India. This great function, the greatest of its kind held during British rule in this country, came off on the 11th December, 1911. There is a large literature relating to this historic Darbar chronicled by officials and non-officials. As an elected member of the Imperial Legislative Council, I was amongst the invitees to this Darbar, and with the rest of my colleagues was given great prominence, our seats being arranged in the first row (facing the throne) in continuation of that arranged for the Ruling Chiefs and Princes, headed by the present Nizam of Hyderabad, who had succeeded his father but a short time before. I was introduced to the King on the various functions which had been arranged in connection with the Darbar, but it was also arranged that the Members of the Imperial Legislative Council would be introduced to him at His Majesty's Levee in Calcutta by the Viceroy himself, as the President of the Imperial Legislative Council. The King returned to Calcutta in the last week of December, 1911, and in the first week of January, 1912, our introductions were by Lord Hardinge, the then Governor-General and Viceroy, and at the close of the Levee, each of us got a chance of few minutes' talk with King-Emperor George, who was extremely affable and genial.

Before, however, he reached Calcutta from Delhi the King paid a visit to my native town, Arrah, and also to Patna, which had been raised to the dignity of the capital of the Province of Bihar and Orissa; the announcement about which had been made by the King-Emperor himself, at the Delhi Darbar, on the 11th December, along with that of the revocation of the partition of Bengal. King George V stayed, for some time, at my native town, Arrah, on his way from Delhi to Calcutta (to be able to attend Divine Service at the Memorial Church) soon after His Majesty's declaration, at the Delhi Darbar, of the separation of Bihar and Orissa from West Bengal, and their constitution as a full-fledged Provincial Government. As a member of the Imperial Legislative Council I was invited by the District Authorities to be present on this memorable occasion, in the fortunes of my native town, and I shall never forget the scene of genuine and unparalleled enthusiasm amongst the vast mass of humanity that had mustered in force to have a *darshan* of His Majesty, and of His Royal Consort. The crowd, which had been trooping in at Arrah, from the neighbouring villages, since the

dawn, and had assembled round the Memorial Church, was an enormous one, which was estimated to be from about forty to fifty thousand. But there was no disorder until after the service was over. Then, as His Majesty's car slowly drove out of the Church compound, there was an attempt made by the crowd to rush the cordon set up by the police, which induced the latter to offer opposition for maintaining it. The people were naturally anxious to catch a glimpse of their Majesties by going closer to their car. But as the police would not allow it, the situation was becoming acute, and any moment it might have led to *fracas*. The situation was thus a serious one.

No one knew what to do, or what would happen. The Police Officers had their orders to carry out, which was to maintain their cordon at all cost; the people were no less insistent by reason of their intense desire to see the Emperor and the Empress, by pressing as close to their car as they could, in spite of the police and their opposition. Just then, when the situation had become acutely tense, one of the officers accompanying their Majesties came out of the car, and announced to the Senior Police Officer in charge that His Majesty desired the cordon to be removed forthwith, which was no sooner said than done. The crowd set up a hilarious uproar, as they were able to obtain thereby a good view of their Majesties, who graciously stood in the car, which was halted sufficiently long to enable the people to come forward, and have *darshan* of their Sovereign to their hearts content. The crowd then dispersed peacefully shouting at the pitch of their voice "Jai Jai" ("Victory, Victory") to the Emperor and the Empress.

Thus a serious situation was tactfully averted by the gracious act of His Majesty George V, and the incident had left an abiding impression on my mind, as showing to what an enormous extent the exercise of imagination, sympathy, and tact can help in the solution of Indian problems-whether those affecting the illiterate masses, or the educated classes. It may be recalled that King-Emperor George V, on his return home, in 1905, after his visit to India as the Prince of Wales, had (in the course of a speech delivered at the Lord mayor's banquet in the Guildhall) declared that what was wanting in the British administration of India was sympathy with the legitimate aspirations of the people. He himself was evidently the very embodiment of such sympathy; but, being a constitutional monarch, he was naturally unable to influence the policy of the British Government in relation to India; with the result that ever since the dawning of national consciousness amongst the educated and politically-minded classes in the country, there had existed bitter relations between them and Government, until the establishment of India's Independence on 15th August, 1947.

From Arrah, the King and the Queen came to Patna. During their short visit to Patna they passed along, on a steamer, the whole of the river front, covering several miles, and were accorded, by tremendously big crowds standing on the banks of the Ganges, a great ovation and an enthusiastic reception.

From Patna we all followed their Majesties to Calcutta, where also, apart from attending the Levee at the Government House, we met the King on various other occasions, like lunches, dinners, at-homes, and garden parties. Both at Delhi and in Calcutta those of us who were invited to partake of meals with their Majesties (as I was) did so in plates made of gold. This set, for one hundred guests, had been evidently made for the functions connected with the Darbar, as it was believed at that time that to offer Indian Princes food in plates made of something less costly than gold would not be commensurate with their importance, rank, and dignity. There can be no doubt that the Royal banquet, both at Delhi and Calcutta, presented a grand spectacular scene. Long tables, seating a hundred guests, covered with spotless Irish linen, and cutlery with mother-of pearl handles, embellished with cut glass cups and tumblers of the highest workmanship, and laden with masses of flowers arranged skilfully by trained decorators in picturesque vases, all these-and very much more-presented, under floods of electric light, a most gorgeous pageant. And when the dinner began to be served in the Royal plates, the whole table looked ablaze and aglow as one burnished sheet of living gold, and the mouths of the gods themselves must have watered, for once, at it, loaded as it was with the choicest viands, daintiest sweets, and luscious desserts, under which it palpably groaned. I lack courage even to refer to the delicious drinks served from His Majesty's cellars, lest after having gained our Independence, on the basis of the new Government's pro-Prohibition policy any such reference may land me in His Majesty's Jail! It was the same gold service, I believe, that was kept at the Delhi Government House, which under the present His Majesty's instructions, the last British Governor-General, Lord Mountbatten, presented to the first Indian Governor-General, Shri C. Rajagopalachari, to be kept as a present from the King to the people of the Indian Union and as a memento of his father's visit to his once great and glorious Indian Empire.

About ten years later, King George's son-afterwards King Edward VIII-came to India, as the Prince of Wales, in the winter of 1920-21. The visit of the Prince to Patna came about in December, that is, after Lord Sinha had resigned the Governorship of Bihar and Orissa, in the previous month, and Sir Havilland LeMesurier, the then senior Member of the Executive Council, had assumed office automatically as the Acting Governor, under then Government of India Act. Lord Sinha had looked forward to the Prince's visit with very great interest, and had been making preparation for it, ever since he assumed office, in December of the previous year. But he was not destined to receive his Royal Highness, and to accord him a welcome, on behalf of the people of Bihar and Orissa. Sir Havilland Le Mesurier did his best to do the honours on behalf of the province. But the British officer-in-charge (a Civilian) bungled, and there was one serious *contretemps*, the treatment accorded to the two Indian Ministers of the Governor at the time-the late Sir Mohammad Fakhruddin and the late Mr.

Madhusudan Das-which led to an unfortunate controversy, and provoked much ill-will and adverse comment. The following extracts from the Patna daily, from its issue of the 25th December, 1921, brings into relief the main aspects of that unfortunate incident, which was widely regretted.

Wrote that paper:- "His Royal Highness emphasised, while replying to the address of the Bombay Corporation, just after landing at Bombay, that he was here to know India and her aspirations. Judging, however, from the programme drawn up for him at Patna, it can hardly be said that he has gone back with any real idea of Indian aspirations and feelings. We realise that it was but a short visit, but the fact nevertheless is that the Prince came and went without knowing much of life here. Did he meet any leading non-official Indian, with whom he could converse and know things? Indeed, we have been astounded to learn that even the two Indian Ministers were not shown the courtesy of having been invited to the dinner at the Government House, and they were found, to the wonder of all, jostling along with the crowd gathered for the after dinner reception! As a matter of fact, they were among the very last batch to be introduced to the Prince. We are surprised that the Ministers at all went to the reception - their proper course should have been to abstain from attending the reception of the ground that if they were not good enough for invitation to the dinner they had no desire to be tossed about in the crowd gathered for the reception, many of whom were their subordinates".

Continued that journal:- "We do not imply that any deliberate insult was meant to be offered to them, but the fact that no insult was meant reveals the inability to realise what is due to those whose feelings should be respected. While many of the commonest officials sat to dinner, the two Indian Ministers were kept cooling their heels till a late hour of the night, before they had the privilege of being introduced to His Royal Highness. After this treatment accorded to the Ministers, whose status and position are in no way inferior to those of the members of the Executive Council, one need hardly refer to the exclusion from the banquet of members of the Legislative Council. In short, while His Royal Highness was shown pageant and pomp, care was taken to see to it that he might not see either the Indian side of Patna, or meet in interview leading non-official Indians, even a few who could have enabled him to learn what he had come to India to do". As there was obviously much force in the sober and sensible criticism, quoted above, no attempt was made to issue an official communiqué contradicting or explaining away the statement on which the strictures on the official bungling were based. But the Governor-a very sensitive soul-was miserable for days.

But besides the serious official mistake which justified the press criticism, there was another incident, which was the subject matter of conversation for weeks, mainly due to the great amusement it caused to the public. At the evening party given by the Governor to His Royal Highness, a reception was

arranged rather suddenly, at the Government House. Information was sent round rather hastily that all persons invited to the function would be accorded the privilege of being received by the Prince. The place fixed upon was a narrow arcade in the Government House, between the drawing and the dining rooms, where a dais was temporised for the occasion, Sir Havilland asked me to take my stand right opposite His Royal Highness with a view to obviate tactfully any unnecessary overcrowding in the narrow passage, and to assist people in passing in front of the Prince in orderly file. A number of persons had not been able to bring their cards not knowing anything of the reception; and so blank cards were handed round to enable them to put down their names for being called out by the Secretaries in due form. Now it so happened that an Indian landlord and titleholder as a 'Rai Bahadur' (of which he was obviously proud) did not know English, and he wanted someone, who knew that language to put down not only his name but his minor title in full, so that His Royal Highness may know all about him and his position in the social world!

Accordingly, he got hold of a rising young Barrister to write out his name and title on his card. Unfortunately it so happened that this youth was given to perpetrating practical jokes, but in this particular instance he was probably led on to it by the Rai Bahadur himself. When asking him to write out his name and title, the Rai Bahadur insisted that his title, should be written even more prominently than his name and he emphasised it so much that the writer took it into his head at once to indulge in a practical joke, which he would not have possibly thought of otherwise. He wrote out the card and handed it back to the Rai Bahadur, assuring him that he had carried out his instruction of giving even greater prominence to his title than to his name. The Rai Bahadur, who was dressed in his full Darbar costume, expressed his satisfaction and sincerely thanked the young man. Soon after the reception began I saw the Rai Bahadur coming up majestically looking quite self-satisfied as if at peace with the world. He came up to the first Secretary, bowed, and presented his card and looked quite apoplectic. He hastily passed it on to the second officer without making any serious attempt to call out the name. The second officer did the same, and looked even more miserable than the first. All this astounded and unnerved me, as I suspected that there was something wrongly written on the card.

But before I could recover myself the third officer read aloud the name of the card as 'Mr. He-Ass' I very nearly collapsed; but the Rai Bahadur, who was too much excited to notice how he was being introduced to His Royal Highness, bowed very low, made his obeisances in right royal Indian style by almost sprawling himself on the ground, got up, and passed on. But even before the party had broken up this incident had become the subject-matter of conversation in that large gathering. The Governor was naturally very much put out, and enquiries were instituted as to how such a practical joke came to be played. But the Rai Bahadur had gone down to Calcutta immediately after he

had been received, and it was not till some days later that the facts came to light, when it was too late to take any action.

Another interesting incident which, I may recall in connection with the visit to Patna, in 1921, of the Prince of Wales was that which related to the reading of the address to be presented to His Royal Highness. The question was: "Who was to read the address?" According to convention, it should have been the Maharaja who (as the proprietor of perhaps the largest Zamindari in India) was expected to be requested to read the address at the Darbar, at Patna, on the occasion of the Prince's visit. But the Governor had his own idea of doing things. A Medical College-to be named after the Prince of Wales-was going to be established, at Patna, and although the Maharaja had promised a handsome donation of five lakhs of rupees towards its establishment, the Governor thought that it was rather a small amount for a man of his princely fortune and lavish income to pay.

Accordingly, the Governor suggested to the Maharaja that he should donate a sum of another two lakhs to the College. The Maharaja, perhaps not unjustly, felt that he was being subjected to a mild coercion; and he did not, therefore, agree to the Governor's proposal. But being unable to resist His Excellency's demand either at a personal interview, or in correspondence, he conceived the idea of going on a long pilgrimage, and for some time his address was unknown, with the result that his enforced extradition became a topic of conversation throughout the province. As I felt that something should be done, in the circumstances, I remonstrated with the Governor. But I found he was adamant. "What is seven lakhs to him", said the Governor to me "it is what seven rupees is to you or to me". I reasoned with him, but found him inexorable. At last a week remained to the date of the Prince's arrival, and no arrangements had been made till then for the reading of the address.

As I had been mainly responsible (as the President of a Committee for preparing the draft of the address) I felt it was time to bring the matter again to the Governor's notice, which I did. "Supposing", I said to him, "the Maharaja does not come back from his pilgrimage in time, what is to happen in that case". The Governor said: "Whether he is here or not, he shall not read the address, but a representative man will do it". I asked the Governor. "Yourself", said he immediately! "How am I representative", I asked him, rather taken aback; and he promptly said: "because you are not only the Indian Member of Government, but also the President of the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council, the most reprehensive body in the province. It is, therefore, that I have made up my mind that you, and no one else, will read the address". I found that his mind was not only made up, but more than made up; and it was no use arguing with him any further. I did not pursue the matter.

At last the long-looked-for day arrived. From the earliest dawn vast masses of humanity, also Military troops and the highest officials and non-officials, began

to assemble on the maidan (the large open space) which is a striking feature of Patna. The Darbar *shamiana* had been pitched in the centre of the lawn, and at one end of it there rose a magnificent pavilion, covered with a splendid canopy embroidered in gold and silver. As I had to appear (as a member of the English Bar) in my “old-stale” court dress, which it is a job to don or doff, I rose early, and was at the Darbar betimes, accounted in my court dress-blue, velvet coat with cut steel buttons, knee-breeches with gaiters to match, ruffles, black silk hose, pumps with cut steel buckles, and other paraphernalia, including, of course, the sword dangling at the side. The audience could hardly recognise me in what to them was a ridiculously fantastic costume. Indeed, the court dress is so seldom worn in India that it was looked upon, when I appeared in it, as the grotesque habiliment of a clown.

At the fixed time the Prince arrived by a steamer from across the river, and the Governor escorted him from the entrance to the platform, when the vast audience rose to do him homage. As soon as he sat down I stepped forward and read out the fairly long address, and presented it to the Prince. Having in my younger days, while a student in London in the nineties of the last century, taken a course in elocution from a famous elocutionist, I managed to read the address distinctly and with proper accentuation. There were no loud-speakers available at Patna at that time, but I managed to read the address in a pitch, loud enough to be heard clearly by that vast gathering. After the Prince had replied to it in suitable terms, I was privileged to introduce to him the darbaries, namely, those who were on the Government’s Darbar list for presentation on such occasions. The first on that list was, of course, the self-exalted Maharaja himself. I turned round to see if he was there, and I was agreeably surprised to find that he had returned from his enforced pilgrimage, and was present to be the first recipient of the honour of being introduced to his Royal Highness. Later, when I enquired about his health he said facetiously that his health was all the better for his having been able to outwit the Governor in his attempt to levy upon him a coercive impost of another two lakhs of rupees for the Medical College, in addition to five lakhs which he had already gladly paid towards its establishment!

Before coming to Patna, the Prince had attended University functions at Allahabad and Benares, at both of which I happened to be present. The upheaval in the political consciousness of the country, during the decade that had elapsed since his father’s visit in 1911, had led the Congress to proclaim a *hartal* on the occasion; and there had been a pretty serious riot in Bombay on the day the Prince landed in that city. Lord Reading’s Government took prompt action, and there were no riots thereafter. But the sullenness of the vast bulk of the people continued, and manifested itself at almost every place visited by the Prince. It was very acute at Allahabad, and perhaps no less intense at Benares. For want of transport facilities at both these cities my nephew (a Railway Officer,

then posted at Lucknow) had to take me in his saloon from Allahabad to Benares, and I attended the Benares University Convocation (at which a degree *honoris causa* was conferred on the Prince) while staying in the railway saloon. Patna, as a Congress stronghold was even ahead of other places in organising a rigid *hartal*. But here the leading Zamindars came to the Government's rescue, and they deluged the city by bringing over from their villages hundreds of thousands of their tenants to accord a welcome to His Royal Highness.

