Surendranath Banerjee
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An Illustrious Life

Introduction

According to Bipin Chandra Pal “Surendranath was the only person who might justly claim an all-India leadership.” Shri Surendranath Banerjee was another worthy son of India. He played a very significant role in the development of the liberal tradition in modern India. His life and activities form an integral part of the history of the Indian National Movement. He did commendable service for the enlargement of the rights and liberties of the people.

Like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Dadabhai Naoroji, Justice M.G. Ranade and Gokhale, he belonged to the liberal school of thought. He was also an admirer of the British rule in India. He had faith in the British fair play and justice. According to Surendranath Banerjee, India could get peace, prosperity and advancement only under the British Empire. Like other liberal thinkers, he also had faith in the constitutional methods. He was a good orator and writer. He was regarded by many as the life and soul of the national movement in India.
The Profile

Surendranath Banerjee was born on November 10, 1848 in the Jaltola region of Calcutta. The atmosphere in the Banerjee family was one of a tie between the old world forces and the new. Surendranath’s grandfather was an orthodox Hindu and his father Durga Choran had deep faith in Western Culture and Civilization. He wrote in his autobiography, ‘A Nation in Making’, “Thus, in our home the two conflicting forces of those times met...” However, the peace of the family was not disturbed by this conflict. Brought up in such an atmosphere, Surendranath Banerjee represented a fine synthesis between the two extremes of Hindu conservatism and Western civilization. He inherited his father’s revolutionary zeal and his grandfather’s basic traditionalism.

Roots in the Village: Surendranath received his early education in a village Pathshala. Afterwards, he was admitted to the Dovetone college where he graduated in 1868. He had a distinguished educational career both in school and college. He was sent to England in 1868 where he joined the University College. He competed successfully for the civil service examination but was rejected on the ground of being overage. Surendranath appealed to the court of the Queen’s Bench. The court asked the Civil Service Commissioner to show reasons for his rejection. The result was Surendranath was restored and sent to India.

Brief Career in Service: Later on, he was appointed as Assistant Magistrate at Sylhet. But after two year, he was dismissed from service on some charges. Then, he went to London to plead his case before the authorities at the Indian Office, but he could not achieve success. Surendranath Banerjee’s dismissal from service created a nationwide resentment. In this connection, he wrote. “My case excited very strong feelings in the Indian community and the general belief among my country men was that if I were not an Indian I could not have been put to all this trouble and that the head and front of my offence was that I had entered the sacred premises of the Indian Civil Service, which so far had been jealously guarded against invasion by the children of the soil. Many years afterwards a Lieutenant Governor stated that it was a wicked proceeding.” But his removal from the service proved a blessing in disguise so far as the country was concerned. As C.Y.
An Illustrious Life

Chintamani remarks, “the loss of the government became the gain of the country.”

A Distinguished Teacher: In 1876, Surendranath was appointed Professor of English in the Metropolitan Institution. In 1881, he joined the Free Church College as Professor of English literature. For 37 years, i.e., from 1875 to 1912, Surendranath Banerjee was fully engaged in active teaching work. He loved his students. He was a great educationist with a missionary zeal.

Surendranath attached more importance to education than politics. Thus, he wrote, “political work it more or less ephemeral, though nonetheless highly useful. Educational work has in it the element of permanent utility. The Empire of a teacher is an ever enduring Empire, which extends over the future. The teachers are the masters of the future. I cannot think of a nobler calling than theirs.”

Birth and Early Life

Surendranath Banerjee was born in Calcutta, in the province of Bengal to a Bengali Brahmin family. He was deeply influenced in liberal, progressive thinking by his father Durga Charan Banerjee, a doctor. Banerjee was educated at the Parental Academic Institution and at the Hindu College. After graduating from the University of Calcutta, he travelled to England in 1868, along with Romesh Chunder Dutt and Behari Lal Gupta to compete in the Indian Civil Service examinations. He cleared the competitive examination in 1869, but was barred owing to a dispute over his exact age. After clearing the matter in the courts, Banerjee cleared the exam again in 1871.

Beginning of the Career

After his selection for ICS, he was posted as assistant magistrate in Sylhet. However, Banerjee was dismissed soon from his job owing to racial discrimination. Banerjee went to England to protest this decision, but was unsuccessful. During his stay in England (1874–1875) he studied the works of Edmund Burke and other liberal philosophers.
Career in Education

Upon his return to India in June, 1875, Banerjee became an English professor at the Metropolitan Institution, the Free Church Institution and at the Ripon College, founded by him in 1882. He began delivering public speeches on nationalist and liberal political subjects, as well as Indian history.

Stint in Journalism

In 1879, he founded the newspaper, *The Bengali*. In 1883, when Banerjee was arrested for publishing remarks in his paper, in contempt of court, protests and hartals erupted across Bengal, and in Indian cities such as Agra, Faizabad, Amritsar, Lahore and Pune. The INA expanded considerably, and hundreds of delegates from across India came to attend its annual conference in Calcutta.

After the founding of the Indian National Congress in 1885 in Bombay, Banerjee merged his organisation with it owing to their common objectives and memberships. He was elected the Congress President in 1895 at Poona and in 1902 at Ahmedabad.

First Political Platform

His second great contribution was the foundation, on 26 July 1876, of the Indian Association which was intended to be the centre of an all India political movement. This was principally achieved by the all-India political tour undertaken by Surendranath on behalf of the Association.

Its nominal object was to organise a public protest against the reduction of the age-limit of the competitors for the Indian Civil Service Examination from 21 to 19, but the true aim and purpose of the tour was the awakening of a spirit of unity and solidarity among the people of the different parts of India, through the sense of a common grievance.

The Demise

Banerjee died on Aug. 6, 1925, at Barrackpore. He is remembered and widely respected today as a pioneer leader of Indian politics - first treading the path for Indian political empowerment. He
published an important work, *A Nation in Making* which was widely acclaimed. The British respected him and referred to him during his later years as “Surrender Not” Banerjee.

But nationalist politics in India meant opposition, and increasingly there were others whose opposition was more vigorous and who came to centre stage. Banerjee could accept neither the extremist view of political action nor the non-cooperation of Gandhiji, then emerging as a major factor in the nationalist movement. Banerjee saw the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms of 1919 as substantially fulfilling Congress’s demands, a position which further isolated him.