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THE INDIAN INDEPENDENCE

(By Devananda Bharali, B.A. Jorhat)

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In commemorating the Republic Day of India it will not be out of place to review briefly the story of the national evolution that had been in progress for nearly a century before it culminated in the attainment of political freedom by one-fifth of the human race, an event unparalleled in the history of mankind. It will also add to the enhancement of our own merit as human beings to remember in gratitude those selfless heroes who fought and died in the country's cause and for the liberation of their fellow beings. To-day we should pay our dutiful respect to the memory of those foreigners who have laid us under obligation not only by their wise counsel but also by many barriers that lay in our path to political progress. Let us to-day turn back in reverence to the glory of those of our leaders who infused life and the fire of patriotism into the hearts of our countrymen who with their characteristic oriental indifference to politics and absolute dependence on Fate were slowly but surely marching along the path leading to slavery. Let us not in our forgetfulness of memory and narrowness of mind delude ourselves with the belief that the independence of which we can now boast is the achievement of the present generation alone. It is quite possible that individual and party egotism may so far blind us as to forget that the India of to-day is born of the India of yesterday

Emancipation of the oriental mass mind began with its contact with the Western mind and culture. That the government of a country could be undertaken by the people themselves instead of by one or a few forming an oligarchy was never conceived by the Eastern mind although we have read in history of the existence of small republics with a Pramukha to guide it in the past which has become misty by long distance of time. The idea of a national government identifiable with democracy has come to the East with its contact with the West. But the vitality which the Indian mind has shown in reacting to such a contact instead of succumbing to it is really admirable. Many other nations have gone down as a result of such impacts in the past. Many others are still struggling to poise themselves in all fours. As far back as 1832 Raja Ram Mohan Roy The Pioneer Reformer went to England as a political missionary to lay before the British people the grievances of the Indians and succeeded in introducing some slight reforms in the administration of India. But this was a solitary cry to which the caravan of the Company's misrule loaded with corruption and tyranny paid little heed. The accumulated atrocities and indignities and disdainful indifference to religious susceptibilities of the people by the officers of the Company burst forth in the form of the great Mutiny in 1857. To-day we must not forget that those brave sepoys were the first to assert the Indian determination to regain freedom by the most concrete method. Although this patriotic attempt was mercilessly crushed with many acts of vengeance such as the judicial murder of men like Maniram Dewan of Assam these did not lay their lives in vain. The attention of the British public which the pleadings of Edmund Burke on behalf of the 'voiceless millions' of India in his famous Impeachment of Warren Hastings failed to move was perforce drawn by this armed protest to the mis-government of the country by the Company. Queen Victoria took over the sovereignty of India and issued her famous proclamation which till the other day was the Magna Charta of India. The good Queen cried halt to the ever increasing appetite of the British people for further territory, more power and greater glory. But although flagrant injustice and corruption in administration disappeared under the Crown the condition of the people began to deteriorate. Indigenous industries died out under stress of foreign competition; exploitation took various shapes such as high military charges under the hallucination of the Russian bogey; princely salaries to members of the ruling class; unwarranted expenditure on such items as thebyssinian campaign, the Afghan war; all these resulted in recurring

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famines which decimated the people by their thousands. The employment of qualified Indians in the higher services, a clause embodied in the Proclamation remained a dead letter.

Even with so much to complain against the British people who took no interest in Indian affairs, we cannot be stinted in our praise for and in expression of our gratitude to the few noble-minded Britishers who wholeheartedly fought our battles on the floor of the House of Commons. Notable among them were John Bright, Henry Fawcett and Charles Bradlaugh. It was John Bright with his heart full of sympathy for the Indian people who inspired the great Proclamation mentioned above. Henry Fawcett vehemently opposed all measures that were taken by Parliament to saddle India with the cost of all extraneous ventures. In gratitude the people of India raised a subscription to meet his election expenses in 1874. Charles Bradlaugh was a Labour leader in the House of Commons who took keen interest in the welfare of the Indian people and went to the length of assuming the title 'Member for India', of course with the consent of his constituency. He with the help of William Wedderburn and Dadabhai Naoroji, two members of the House of Commons, formed the India Parliamentary Committee within the House, to bring pressure on the Government of India through the Parliament.

But God helps only those that help themselves. The educated Indians who were always belittled as a 'microscopic minority' by the bureaucracy were not sitting idly. Several Associations of a political character came into being: the Bombay Association, the Mahajana Sabha of Madras and the Sarvajanic Sabha at Poona. In Calcutta in the year 1876 the Indian Association rose out of the ashes of its predecessor the British Indian Association, which was started as far back as 1851 by Prasanna Kumar Tagore and others. At the instance of the Indian Association Surendranath Banerjee made long tours throughout India to rouse political consciousness in the educated community which he successfully did with his powerful oratory. Nor was the Indian Press sitting tight. Newspapers and magazines grew up like mushrooms all over the country. In 1875 their number rose to four hundred and seventy eight. Most of them being in the vernacular were voraciously read. They purveyed all sorts of news from the birth of triplets to the latest legislative enactment. They spread throughout the country the new spirit of patriotism and the desire for more freedom. The Government became nervous and passed the Vernacular Press Act demanding heavy security. Thus was public criticism of Government measures controlled; the British officers became more and more overbearing in their dealings with the native in general and the educated community in particular. Every European arrogantly reminded the Indian whenever they came into contact in the different walks of life that the former belonged to the ruling class and the latter to the ruled. The young officers who came out to govern India with a steel frame mentality intent on keeping this country under tutelage for all time-- little did they think that reared in the atmosphere of parliamentary government some among them might spread the moral contagion among a subject race. Prominent among such worthy sons of Britain were A.O. Hume, W. Wedderburn and H. Cotton.

Hume resigned his services as a ~~secretary~~ the Government of India in the Home department even refused to accept a Lieutenant Governorship in order to serve a portion of mankind whose moral degradation which invariably follows political subjection deeply touched his Christian heart. After retiring from service he issued an appeal to the graduates of the Calcutta University in fervent language to strike a blow, to make a resolute struggle for the country's freedom. As a result of this appeal the Indian National Union was formed in 1883. He became the guiding spirit of the new movement. After two years of labour and surmounting many obstacles and misunderstandings he established the Indian National Congress of which was acclaimed as the 'father'.

The first Congress was presided over by W.C. Bonerji the Doyen of the Calcutta Bar with 72 delegates from different parts of India. Anglo-Indians at first pooch-pooched the idea of a united India in face of the great diversity of the people in various respects. They declared the Congress as the temporary effervescence of some

of some disappointed place-seekers. But the nation proved the falsity of their malicious statements by sending more and more delegates to each succeeding session of the Congress. The second session was held under the presidentship of the Nestor of India Dadabhoi Naoroji who brought to bear on the deliberations of the meeting his wide and direct knowledge of British politics as a member of the House of Commons that he was for a long time representing an English constituency. Twenty years after this the G.O.M. of India again presided over the Congress held in Calcutta and was the first Congressman to declare 'Swaraj' as the ultimate aim of that national organisation.

Sir William Wedderburn and Sir Henry Cotton were the two other I.C.S. officers who developed a strong love for the Indians. They supported the aspirations and did not believe in the theory of 'benevolent despotism'. After retiring from service they devoted their energies to help the Indian people in the realisation of their dreams. They requited them both by electing them to the presidential chair of the highest public organisation in the land.

To Henry Cotton Assam should remain especially grateful for saving her from her doom that menaced her about 1895. It is not perhaps generally known that Ward who was the Chief Commissioner of Assam at that time sent up a proposal to the Government of India for the transfer to Assam of all that portion of Bengal which lies to the east of the Brahmaputra from its estuary up to Dhubri, so that the whole might form a Lieutenant-Governor's province. The idea was greedily seized by the Supreme Government who were thinking of some means of relieving the L.G. of Bengal of his heavy charge which included Bihar and Orissa also. Fortunately for Assam Ward was succeeded at that critical juncture by Cotton. He sent up a strong protest against this proposed transfer as he saw it would be prejudicial to the interest both of the Bengalese and the Assamese people. Had the proposal been carried into effect Assam would have been overrun by Bengalese at a time when education had made little progress in that province. The Assamese public heaved a sigh of relief when the proposal was dropped; and they expressed their deep gratitude to Cotton by his enthusiastic triumphal march of Sir Henry Cotton through the carpeted roads of Sibsagar lined on both sides by school students singing 'Rule Cotton rule the waves'. The whole town was illuminated. A raft aglow with a hundred lights went sailing across the serene expanse of the gigantic tank. A wreath of lights was placed round the golden cupola of the Shiva temple at a height 135 feet above the ground.

xxxxxstages. The political evolution of India can be considered in three stages. In its first stage the people demanded nothing more than the separation of the Judicial and the Executive services; inclusion of non-officials in the Legislative Councils and the employment of more Indians in the higher services. The second stage began with the partition of Bengal--a measure which roused the whole of Bengal in rebel against the authorities, the Bengalees though physically divided became morally united more than ever. Repeated rejection of petitions for the annulment of the measure drove the agitation under ground resulting in the bursting of bombs, murder of police officers and shooting at high government officials. The Government replied by passing more repressive measures but without success. The Indian National Congress took up this as an All-India question and strongly demanded its repeal and took exception to the policy of flouting public opinion. Mr Hardie the Labour friend of India in the House of Commons heckled the then secretary of State for India on this issue into resignation of his post and his promotion to the Upper House.