

A NATION IN MAKING

Being the Reminiscences of Fifty Years of Public Life

By
SIR SURENDRANATH BANERJEA

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TO THE MEMORY OF THE FOUNDERS AND THE EARLY BUILDERS OF

THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, WHOSE ACHIEVEMENTS

THE PRESENT GENERATION IS APT TO FORGET, BUT WHO HAVE PLACED INDIA FIRMLY ON THE ROAD TO

CONSTITUTIONAL FREEDOM
TO BE ATTAINED BY

CONSTITUTIONAL MEANS

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED BY AN OLD COLLEAGUE WEO HAS LIVED TO WITNESS THE PARTIAL FRUITION

OF THEIR LABOURS,

DESTINED TO CULMINATE
IN FULL DOMINION GOVERNMENT FOR INDIA

PREFACE

I HAVE for some time been thinking of writing the Reminiscences of my life. I have been encouraged in the idea by some of my friends, who think (and I share their view) that they may throw light on some of the most interesting chapters in our current history and help to elucidate them from the Indian standpoint. I belong to a generation that is fast passing away; and I have been in close touch, and I may add in active association, with some of its most illustrious men, devoted workers in the public cause, who by their labours have largely contributed to our own Province and to foster the beginnings of a real national life throughout the country. Their work lies buried in the forgotten columns of contemporary newspapers. Perhaps a generation hence it will all be forgotten. I hope in these pages to do some justice to their honoured memories; and these Reminiscences will not have been written in vain if I am able even in part to accomplish this object.

The need for Reminiscences such as these has become all the more pressing in view of recent developments in our public life, when unfortunately there is a marked, and perhaps a growing, tendency among a certain section of our people to forget the services of our early nation-builders—of those who have placed India on the road to constitutional freedom to be achieved by constitutional means.

SuBanerjer

CONTENTS

CHAPTER I

ΜV	BOYHOOD	AND	RADIV	DAVS

EL DOLDOOD AND BREEL DAIS	
My parentage—Early influences—School and College life—Evils of Child-Matriage—The Brahmo-Samaj movement; Keshub Chunder Sen—The Temperance movement; Peary Churn Sircar—Re-marriage of Hindu widows; Pundit Iswar Chunder Vidyasagar	
CHAPTER 11	
MY FIRST VISIT TO ENGLAND	
The voyage; obstacles and prejudices—Successful in the Civil Service Examination, 1869—Disqualified; the Commissioners' mistake—Public resentment in India—Lawsuit and my re-instatement—My father's death, 1870—Sripad Babaji Thakur, Romesh Chunder Dutt, and Behari Lai Gupta—My English tutors	
CHAPTER III	
MY HOME-COMING AND OFFICIAL CAREER, 1871-1874	
London to Brindisi—Taken for German spies at Versailles—Calcutta again: socially ostracized by orthodox Brahmins—Work as Assistant Magistrate at Sylhet—Racial prejudices—The circumstances of my dismissal from the Service	22
CHAPTER IV	
1875–1882	
My second visit to England-Exclusion from the English Bar- Return to India, 1875-Educational work; my joy in it-Mr.	
A M. Bose	31
CHAPTER V	
THE INDIAN ASSOCIATION	
Need for a political Association to represent educated middle	
classes—Inaugurated, July, 1876—Mazzini's influence—The Civil Service agitation, 1877—My tour in North India—Sirdar Dayal Sing Majectia and the Tribuse—Tour in Western India, 1878-79; meeting with Mr. Ranade—The first Indian Deputation to England; Mr. Lalmohan Ghose—The Maharaui Swanamoyee, 'Lady Bountiful of	
Cossimbasar '-Success of the Deputation	40

CHAPTER VI

The
VERNMENT AND ITS CONSEQUENCES
tary of State—The Vernacular Press Act—on—Dr. K. M. Banerjee—A letter to Gladabar to promotion—Lord Ripon and local Ser vision and a higher platform 56
CHAPTER VII
JOURNALISM
the Hindoo Patriot—I become proprietor re, January 1, 1879—Ashutosh Biswas—Sir 68
CHAPTER VIII
EMPT CASE: IMPRISONMENT
e Bengalee—Prosecuted for Contempt of —The trial—Condemnation and imprison- sympathy; attitude of the Statesman— 1'—A National Fund—My life in prison—
CHAPTER IX
AL ACTIVITIES, 1883-1885
tional Conference—A second tour through or Unity—Lord Dufferin Viceroy—Sir Henry and the Outstill System—Public meetings 85
✓ CHAPTER X
DIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS
ress, 1886—Congress in Madras, 1887— anagram—The Allahabad Congress, 1888— idia 98
CHAPTER XI
ESS DEPUTATION TO ENGLAND
s own expenses—First meeting at Clerken- stone; the elective principle—Members of te at the Oxford Union—Return to India;
ersy 111

CHAPTER XII

MV	TRACICIATIVE	COUNCIL.	WADE

						P	AGE
Expansion of the l	Legislat	ive Coup	cils, 189	2-My el	ection	to the	
Bengal Legislative Con					•		
pal Act-Sir Edward	Baker-	-The Ho	ouse of	Common	s and	simul-	
taneous examinations	***	***	•••	***	***	•••	123

CHAPTER XIII

THE INDIAN NATIONAL CONGRESS, 1894-1896 \

The	Madra	Congr	ess—' Shou	ld student	s discuss	politica	· ? '—	
Presiden	of the	Poona	Congress,	1895-Prep	aration (or the l	Presi-	
dential s	peech—.	Reflexio:	ns on orato	y-Sir Ron	nesh Chu	nder Mit	iter—	
Develops	nent of	the Con	gress mover	nent	240	***	***	135

CHAPTER XIV

TWO CLOUDED YEARS

Evidence before the Welby Commiss	sion—Briti	sh publ	ic add	ressed	
on Indian questions-My return to In	idia : elec	ited to	the I	Sengal	•
Council-The Congress of 1897 : case of	f the Nati	brothe	rs—Fa	mine,	
plague, and deportations-Lord Curzon	assumes	office-	The l	fadras	
Congress : Mr. Ananda Mohan Bose	***	•••	***	277	150

CHAPTER XV

THE STRUGGLE FOR RECOGNITION

Simultolla's attractions-Tragic death of Dr. Suresh Chunder Sircar: 'grievous hurt' by British soldiers-Lord Curzon's policy: Local Self-government in danger-Congress at Lucknow: making India known in England-My Congress tour in the Punjab: interracial concord: Kali Prosanna Roy-Officialdom and the movement-Exclusion of Indians from higher appointments-W. C. Bonnerjea ... 159

CHAPTER XVI

1900-1901

Rise of the Bengales: a devoted Manager: journalism in India-I am again President of the Congress: successful Ahmedabad meeting -The Coronation Durbar-Viceregal profession and practice-Commission on Universities: abolition of law classes in colleges ... 170

CHAPTER XVII

TUT	UNIVERSITIES	A CT
THE	UNIVERSITIES	ALI

	THE UNIVERSITIES ACT	,
PAGE		
: -	ipon College made over to trustees: from Proprietor I become lent of Council: public appeal for funds—Farewell to teaching: I taught—My membership of the Senate: an inexplicable electule—English literature without English history—Mr. Justice osh Mukherjea as Vice-Chancellor—I cease to be a member of engal Legislative Council	wh tion Asi
	CHAPTER XVIII	
	THE PARTITION OF BENGAL	
f	former Partition—The Civil Service case for further division— energy of Lord Curzon: his visit to East Bengal—Contempt of c opinion: the secret despatch—Astonishment and indignation ngalee-speaking public; we make our plans	pu
	CHAPTER XIX	
	THE BOYCOTT AND 'SWADESHI' MOVEMENTS	
	enesis of the Boycott—New note of practicality in agitation—the Swadeshi movement spread; enthusiasm of the student unity—Industrial revival	
•	CHAPTER XX	
	SWADESHISM AND 'BANDE-MATARAM'	
: . :	on-Co-operation: a comparison—My ideals in public life—saign in the country: roughing it for the cause—Kabyavisarad: alist, composer and patriot—Beginning of repression: Governcirculars—Bande-Mataram forbidden—A pan-Indian cry: its ing and origin	jou me
	CHAPTER XXI	
	BY-ISSURS OF THE 'SWADESHI' MOVEMENT	
	stimulus to journalism—Industrial activity: Government's cted opportunity—The Banga Luxmi Cotton Mill—Banking and ance—Public inauguration: the ball set a-rolling	
	CHAPTER XXII	
	THE SETTLED FACT	
3	the Partition takes effect—Proposal for a Federation Hall: gy of Alsaee-Lorraine—The stone-laying: swan-song of Ananda n Bose—Sir Gurudas Banerjee—Our proclamation—Sir Bampfylde r's administration—Strictures by the High Court	Mo

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XXIII

B	٨	R	T	٩	۸	T

					7	AGE
Programme of the Conference Police attack the procession:			-			
alone'-Wounded magisterial						
by the police: our indignation	***	***	***	274	***	220
			_			ŧ

CHAPTER XXIV

AFTER THE BARISAL CONFERENCE

The Swadeshi vow: an inspiration—My visit to the Chakravartis of Rahamatpore; the police are foiled—Liyakat Hossain—Mr. A. Rasool, President of the Barisal Conference—Indian public opinion stirred—Anarchy in Bengal: the provocation—A sinister interview—An unpopular Lieutenant-Governor—Rowdylsm at the Surat Congress. 228

CHAPTER XXV

PASSIVE RESISTANCE

The Congress united—Entry of Mrs. Besant: her internment—
The Home Rule League—Passive resistance discussed at Bombay
Congress: conditions not favourable for success—A Calcutta meeting
forbidden for astonishing reasons—Interview with Lord Ronaldshay:
the true reasons—The prohibition withdrawu—My speech at the
Town Hall 237

CHAPTER XXVI

THE REVOLUTIONARY MOVEMENT IN BENGAL

The Mozufferpore murders—Deportations under Regulation III:
Mr. Morley's attitude—How orders from Home have been exceeded—
The Morley-Minto Reforms—The new Councils—My disqualification removed, but I decline to stand before the Partition is modified ... 248

CHAPTER XXVII

MY VISIT TO ENGLAND IN 1909

I am invited to the Imperial Press Conference—Ripon College in safe keeping—The first function—Irrelevance of Lord Cromer: my reply and its effect—Warwick Castle; Stratford-on-Avon; Oxford—When and why I smoked—I speak at Manchester—A visit to Windsor—Work after the Conference—I speak on the Partition: repression condemned—Breakfast and speeches at Sir William Wedderburn's—The assassination of Sir William Curzon-Wyllie—Meeting at the New Reform Club—Conference at Mr. Stead's house: my 'last words' to the British public—Return to Calcutta, August, 1909 ... 257

CONTENTS

CHAPTER XXVIII

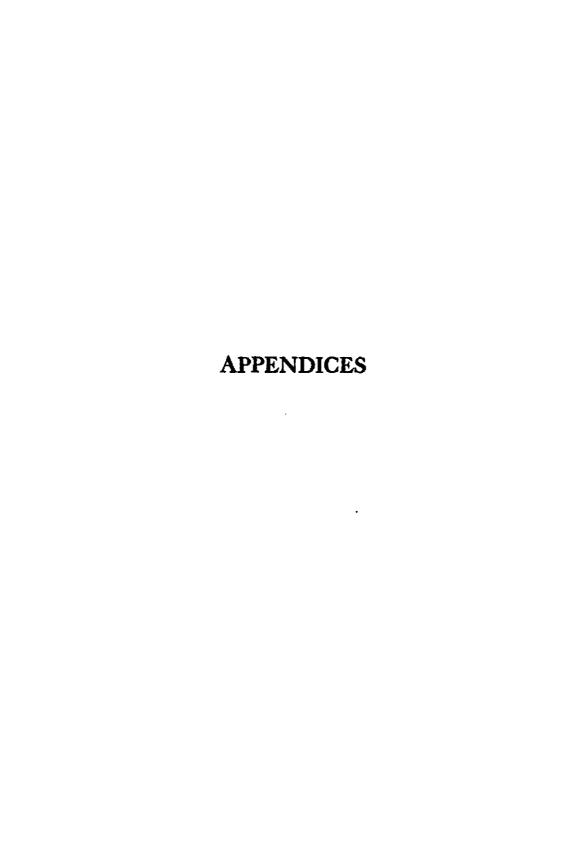
THE ANTI-PARTITION MOVEMENT	
Lord Hardinge Viceroy—My first interview with him—The Delhi	AGE
Durbar, 1911—Modification of the Partition—Outstanding personali-	
ties	283
CHAPTER XXIX	
WORK IN THE IMPERIAL COUNCIL	
Sundry Resolutions-Reform of Calcutta University-Local Self-	
Government-The Bengal Internments-Provincial Autonomy-	
Recruiting work	292
CHAPTER XXX	
THE REFORMS AND THE GROWTH OF EXTREMISM	
Grant of responsible government, 1917-Mr. Montagn in India-	
The Montagu-Chelmsford Report-Cleavage between Moderates and	
Extremists-Speech in the Imperial Council on the Reforms-Inter-	
view with the Viceroy-What the Moderate party stands for-The	
Franchise Committee—Unveiling of the Dadabhai Naoroji portrait	303
CHAPTER XXXI	
DEPUTATION OF THE MODERATE PARTY TO ENGLAND, 191	9
Importance of the occasion-The Joint Committee-The Indian	
witnesses-Necessity for responsibility in the Central Government-	
Diarchy-Reflex action of Punjab Government-Other activities in	
London	321
·	
CHAPTER XXXII	
MY RETURN TO INDIA AND MINISTERIAL APPOINTMENT	
Return to India, September, 1919-Non-Co-operation-The Rotary	
Club-Appointed Minister of Local Self-government-My.colleagues-	
Relations with Lord Ronaldshay	333
•	
CHAPTER XXXIII	
MY WORK AS MINISTER	
European colleagues-The Medical Department-Atmosphere of	
the Secretariat-Hostility of the Non-Co-operators-Local Self-	

(ヘネ	JТ	E-	``	rc

χŸ

CHAPTER XXXIV

	1	MUNICI	PAL LE	GISLAT	ION		*	AGE				
The Calcutta Municipal Act: my part in it—The Swarajist party— Mr. C. R. Das and the Calcutta Corporation—Bengal Municipal Bill.												
		CHA	PTER	XXXV	7							
	MY W	ORK AS	MINIS	TER—(d	ontinue	ď)						
Indianization tions with the method of attack	Modica	l Depa	rtment-	Medical	achools	-A fan		368				
		CHA	PTER	xxxv	I							
			DIARC	нү								
Diarchy the diarchy failed?												
eolaniae	***	***	***	***	***	***	***	380				
		CHA	PTER	xxxv	II							
		C	ONCLU	SION								
The secret			•									
countrymen	*** '	465	•••	***	***	•••	***	392				
APPENDII APPENDII		***	4##	•••	5+1	***	***	407 410				
INDEX	***	***	***	•••	170	***	***	411				



APPENDIX A

MR. HUME'S ARTICLE IN India, 1893. (see p. 30.)

- 'The election of Babu Surendra Nath Banerjea by the Calcutta Corporation, to a seat on the Bengal Legislative Council, completes happily the first act of a drama of real life which at one time threatened to evolve in a painful tragedy.
- Mr. Surendra Nath, the greatest of our Indian orators, was many years ago recognized by his tutors in England, which he visited to compete for the Indian Civil Service, as one of the most talented and at the same time amiable and lovable young men with whom they had ever had to deal. He passed the examination with great credit and in due course returned to India as a member of the Covenanted Civil Service. All for a time went well. Then, certain charges of rendering untrue returns of the state of his files, with a view to concealing a certain laziness which was alleged to be his leading foible, were considered by the local Government to be of sufficient importance to require investigation by a special official Commission. The special Commission, thus appointed, found that certain irregularities were proved against him, and the Government then and there dismissed him from the service.
- Now in the first place, many then in India, ourselves among the number, who had the opportunity of seeing all the papers. while not dissenting as regards most of the facts that the Commission found to be established, differed altogether as to the interpretation to be placed upon them, and held, and still hold. that Babu Surendra Nath was guilty of nothing more than a certain carelessness and laziness, that might well have been passed over, in a quite young officer, with a mild rebuke, and an exhortation to be more zealous in future. But putting this aside. the judges themselves—and one of these repeated this to us only last week-considered that even for the faults that they held to have been established, suspension from promotion for a year would have been an adequate punishment, and no one, not even Surendra Nath himself, was more astonished than were these judges when the terrible sentence of expulsion from the service was pronounced against him by the Government.
- To English readers it is necessary to explain that Mr. Surendra Nath was one of the pioneers of the Indians into the Covenanted Civil Service. Almost throughout the bureaucracy, the admission of Indians within their sacred pale was viewed with the utmost jealousy and disapproval, and this summary expulsion of one of the most distinguished of the invaders was

utilized as the basis for paeans glorifying the British officials and their foresight in opposing the introduction of Indian colleagues. Virtually, what all the Anglo-Indians said was this, "Oh yes, clever enough, but just as we told you, a d—d set of rogues, utterly unfit for the Civil Service, the noblest, most upright, and most essentially gentlemanly service in the world. Here is the crack man of the Indians, and Government has to expel him before he has been three years in the service!"

'How far this widespread feeling had any share in bringing about the monstrous sentence passed upon poor Surendra we cannot say, but certainly it did prevent any fair hearing for his appeals for justice and mercy. He protested and appealed, as did thousands of his countrymen for him, but all in vain.'

And then Mr. Hume proceeds to contrast my treatment with that of a European Civilian who had been guilty of a much graver offence:—

'What to those of us who were impartial in the matter seemed to cast a very lurid light on the transaction was this. Not long after the events above referred to, an English Covenanted Civilian was found guilty, by the officers appointed to investigate his case, of offences far more grave—involving pecuniary vagaries unparalleled in the modern history of the Service—than any that even his judges thought to be established against Mr. Surendra Nath. Was this officer dismissed the Service? No. he was compelled to refund a sum of money belonging to Government that had somehow found its way into his private accounts, and he was suspended for a period of twelve or fifteen months, thereby suffering a considerable loss of salary for the time, but almost immediately on the expiration of the period of suspension, he, being a relative of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, was jobbed into the favourite, and one of the highest paid, appointments in the province, an appointment to which, even had there been nothing against him, he would not have been entitled either by standing in the Service or ability.

'The establishment of the British Committee of the Indian National Congress has rendered the unpunished perpetration of any similarly atrocious job at the present time almost impossible, but it illustrates the very different modes in which Indians and Europeans have been systematically dealt with by the Indian officials; and the fates of these two officials are thoroughly characteristic examples of the spirit which has for the last quarter of a century pervaded the majority of the bureaucracy.'

Mr. Hume thus concludes his article:-

'In the meantime how fared it with Surendra Nath? Crushed, utterly disgraced, and almost a pauper (for nearly all

his means had been expended on his visit to England and his education there) had he committed suicide in despair, who could have marvelled? But, like the brave man and dear good fellow that he is, he set himself to the nobler task of fighting out the battle to the last, and living down the injustice that thus clouded his early years, and disproving by his life the mistaken estimate that had been formed of his character.

'Few in England can realize the almost hopeless character of the struggle, in India's official-ridden land, of one under the official ban seeking once more to recover a decent position in public life. For years Mr. Surendra Nath fought on like Grant, determined to fight along this line until death or victory crowned his efforts. He founded a school and taught in it; he started a paper and both edited and managed it; he spoke at every popular meeting and established his reputation for those oratorical powers which, inter alia, so endear him to his countrymen. But for long he made little or no progress, though he bravely still kept his head above the waters and swam on in dogged earnestness.

'Truly is it said that all comes to him who knows how to Suddenly for Surendra Nath appeared the Deus ex machina -to cut the knots of the cords of neglect and disgrace in which he was bound-appeared in the shape of the Calcutta High Court, a bench of which clapped him into prison on a charge of contempt of court, in consequence of certain editorial comments of his on their proceedings. Then the tide turned; backed up by a majority of his fellow-citizens, his school widened into the largest independent college in India; his paper, the Bengalee, became gradually acknowledged as one of the very best and most just and moderate papers in the country. Elected to the Calcutta Corporation, his industry, his integrity and uncompromising independence extorted first the admiration and finally won the confidence of even the official Chairman of the Corporation: and now his long years of resolute labour have been fitly crowned by his election by that Corporation as their first representative to the Legislature—a representation to which his magnificent oratory has not a little contributed, though indirectly, to extort from an unwilling and retrograde Government.

'Surely this story is a noble one, instinct with noble lessons; but best of all is the fact to which all of us privileged to call him friend can testify; that never amidst all his labours, trials, and sufferings has he ever varied in his love for, and loyalty to, Great Britain; never has he spoken bitterly or unreasonably even of those who condemned him. He has ever accepted his troubles as the decree of Fate, an evil fate that it behoved him to fight against—a fate he has fought against and defeated.

Long may his triumph last I long may he live to enjoy the

fruit of his great courage and his manly perseverance I it will not be many years, we hope, before he sits upon the Viceregal Council; and as time runs on a younger generation shall hail him in the British Parliament, where we may hope that his magnificent gift of oratory may avail to awaken the House to some sense of India's wrongs; some fixed and honourable resolution to see justice at last fairly meted out to India's people.'

APPENDIX B

A note on my colleagues on the Wrlby Commission (see p. 150)

The names of my colleagues, who were witnesses before the Commission, will pass into the history of their times. Gopal Krishna Gokhale was one of the greatest political leaders of his generation, a true-born statesman in the front rank of Indian public men. A leader of the Moderate party, his premature death was a heavy loss to the country. Mr. G. Subramanya Iyer was one of the makers of modern Madras. He too died early, mourned by his province and by his countrymen in other parts of India. In 1914. I had the melancholy satisfaction of unveiling his portrait. which was subscribed by the people of Madras as a token of their affection and gratitude. Of Sir Dinshaw Wacha, who is happily still amongst us, no one can speak without admiration for his personal worth and public character. His long life has been dedicated to the service of the motherland, and in the evening of his career, he draws to himself, in an unstinted measure, the love and esteem of all who know him. He was one of the founders of the Congress, attended its first meeting in Bombay in 1885. and throughout served it with unsurpassed devotion and fidelity. He has since seceded from the Congress, with the rest of the Moderate party, but his services to that body will be cherished by his grateful countrymen, when the heat and the dust of the present controversies shall have been allayed.

INDEX

Aborigines Protection Society, 54 Abul Hossain, Moulvi, 249, 250 Academy of Bengalee Literature, Adamson, Sir Harvey, 293 Aftab Mohamed, Mr., 315, 316 Agasti, S. K., 35 Agricola, 203, 204 Ahmed, Sir Syed, 48, 49, 108 Ajit Singh, Sirdar, 155 Ajodhyanath, Pundit, 48, 109 Akbar, 339 Albert Victor, Prince, 105, 106 Aligarh College, 48, 49 Alipore Conspiracy Case, 71, 309 Allen, Charles, 162 All-India Congress Committee, 239-All-India Moslem League, 388 Ameer Ali, the Rt. Hon. Syed, 98, Amrita Bazar Petrika, 41, 222 Amritsar, 328 Anandamatha, 206 Anarchism. Revolutionary tactics Anglo-Indian Defence Association, Anti-Circular Society, 221, 222, 230 Anti-Malarial Co-operative Society, 355, 356 Anusilan Samiti, the, 244 Argyll, Duke of, 57, 89 Arms Act, 58, 107 Army Department, 315 Army expenditure, 280 Assam and the Partition, 184-5 Asquith, Mr., 268, 275 Athletic exercises, Indian, 4-5 Averst, Lieut., 154 Ayurvedic medicine, 386

Bajrajogini, 101
Baker, Str Edward, 29-30, 71-2, 131-2, 164, 177-8, 249, 253-8, 292
Bande-Mataram, 141, 205-6, 213, 215, 220-6, 231, 286
Banerjea, Captain Jitendranath, 5
Banerjee, Abinash Chunder, 45
Banerjee, Dwaraka Nath, 141
Banerjee, Mr. Justice Gurudas, 175, 176, 215

Banerjee, Kali Churn, 41, 147, 173 Banerjee, Dr. Krishna Mohan, 41, 61, 62, 308 Banerjee, Dr. Satis Chandra, 45 Banerjee, Tarapada, 81 Bangabasi, 80 Banga Luxmi Cotton Mill, 209 Barisal and the Barisal Conference (1906), 186, 205, 219, Chap. xxiii, 229, 231-3, 240, 242, 249, 288, 309, 331, 351-2 Baroda, Maharaja of, 19 Barua, Anandaram, 18 Basu, Bhupendra Nath, 106, 222, 223, 229, 287, 300, 309, 330-2 Bayley, Sir Stewart, 105 Beachcroft, Mr. Justice, 299 Behar University Act, 295 Bell, John D., 14 Benares, Raja Shiva Prosad of, 109 Benevolent Society, the, 144 Bengal Legislative Council, Chap. xii, 150, 153, 182, 183, 185, 243, 254-6, 258, 292, 293, 297, 304, 326, 337, 383, 387, 389, 407 Bengal Local Self-Government Act, 356, 357 Bengal Municipal Act, 127-9, 356-7, Bengal National Bank, 209 Bengalee, 47, 68-74, 82, 84, 93, 96, 100, 139, 145, 163, 170-3, 175, 216, 281, 285, 286, 292, 409 Bengalee Literature, Academy of, 144 Bentinck, Lord, 284 Bentley, Dr., 345, 355, 378 Berhampore Conference, 135 Besant, Mrs., 237-9, 241, 305, 306, 321 Bhatpara, 101 Bhukoylas, 105 Birmingham, 329 Bishamber Nath, Pundit, 48 Biswas, Ashutosh, 70-2, 126, 139, 162 Blackburn, Mr. Justice, 15 Blair, Fraser, 188 Biunt, Wilfrid Scawen, 86 Bolshevism, 275 Bombay University. 295 Bompas, Mr., 353

412 INDEX

Bonnerjea, W. C., 11-12, 29, 69, 75, 98, 111, 121, 136, 168-9, 283 Bose, Ananda Mohan, 35, 38-40, 42, 62, 80, 157-8, 169, 214-7, 287 350 Bose, H. M., 274 Carnot, 52 Bose, Sir Jagadish, 364 Bose, Babu Jogendranath, 80 Bose, Khudiram, 248-9 Bose, Sir Koylas Chunder, 373 Bose, Nanda Kishore, 35 Bose, Rai Pashupatinath, 217, 232 Bose, Raj Narayan, 7 Bose, Sachindra Prosad, 221, 249, 251 243 Boundary Commission, 362 Boycott, the, Chap. xix, 204, 209, 288, 301 Bradlaugh, Mr., 110, 111, 166 Brahmachari, Dr. U. N., 373 Brahmo Public Opinion, 74-5 106. Brahmo Samaj, 6, 7, 35, 41, 45, 60, 249, 397, 398 Brennus, 226 Bright, John, 52, 54, 139 British Indian Association, 40, 51, 299 60, 66, 69, 98, 101, 102 Brittain, Sir Harry, 264, 266, 268 Brodrick, Mr., see Lord Midleton Brojomohan College, 227, 249, 288 Buckingham, Duke of, 133 206 Bengai under the Buckland's Lieutenant-Governors, 72 Buddha, 141, 396 Burdwan, Maharaja of, 124 Bureaucracy, 58-9, 67, 84, 88, 184-5. 195, 204, 238, 239, 249, 307 Burke, 56, 141, 142, 154, 280, 313, 341, 349, 397 Burnham, Lord, 259 288 - 9Byles, Sir William, 267 Byron, 263 Caine, W. S., 96, 150, 163 Calcutta Corporation, 61, 77, 89, 90, 102, 120, 123-6, 129-32, 139, 152, 165, 174, 304, 310, 363-5, 367, 369, 341, 393 400, 407, 409 Calcutta Improvement Trust, 353, 366, 385 Calcutta Municipal Bills, 123, 125, 127, 144, 151, 152, 164, 165, 318, 350, 356, 359-65
Calcutta University, 106, 117-8, 120-4, 142, 176-82, 204, 257, 258,

325; as

295, 296

Cambridge Union, 137 Canadian Constitution,

Canning, Lord. 58, 284

model for India, 279, 280

Capital of India, transfer of the, 286 Carlyle, 139, 143 Carmichael, Lord, 292, 293, 341, 342, Caste-feuds, 302 Cecil, Lord Hugh, 115 Central Mohamedan Association, Chaitanya, 101, 141, 396 Chakervarti, Syam Sunder, 155 Chakie, Profulla, 248-9 Chakravarti, Byomekesh, 35, 242, Chakravarti Zemindars (of Rahamatpore), 229 Chamberlain, Austen, 340 Chambers, Mr., 321 Chambers of Commerce, Bengal, 310; Bombay. European, in India, 311; Manchester, 112 Chandpur, 375-7 Chandravarkar, Sir Narayan, 167, Charlu, Ananda, 104 Charter Act, 309 Chatterjee, Bacharam, 68, 69 Chatterjee, Bankim Chunder, 52, Chatterjee, B. C., 221, 379 Chatterjee, C. C., 371 Rai Kedarnath, Chatterjee. Bahadur, 159 Chatterjee, Dr. K. K., 373, 377 Chatterjee, K. M., 16-7 Chatterjee, Nagendra Nath, 45 Chatterjee, Satis Chunder, 249, 251, Chatterjee, Sitala Kanta, 47 Chaudhuri, Sir Ashutosh, 167, 172, 198, 216, 217 Chaudhuri, Jogesh Chunder, 146, 198, 209, 217, 226 Chelmsford, Lord, 107-8, 328, 331, Chesson, Mr., 54 Child-marriage, 5, 100, 398 Chintamanı, Mr., 321 Chirol, Sir Valentine, 321 Chowdhury, Kissory Mohan, 81, 285, 375 Chowdhury, Nawab Newab Ali, 338-9 Chowdhury, Ramkali, 48 Chowdhury, Maharaja Surya Kanto Acharya, 186, 192, 287-8 Chunder, Hurrish, 48 Churchill, Winston, 262 Circulars, Government, 204-5, 221

City College, Calcutta, 35-6 Clarke, Mr., 329 Clywd, Lord, 165 Cochrane, Mr., 32 Cockburn, Sir Alexander, 15 Colvin, Sir Auckland, 88, 108-9 Commons, House of, 132, 258, 287, 302, 306 Commilla Rioting Case, 218 Communal Representation. 283. 304-5, 316 Comrade, 294 Indian National, 30. Congress, 49-51, 85-7, 89, 92, Chap. x, Chap. xiii, 154-6, 164-5, 167, 197-8, 236-8, 248, 273, 281, 290, 305-7, 313-4, 401, 408; All-India Committee, 239-41 : British Committee, 133, 408; Deputation, 109, Chap. xi, 389; Exhibitions, 146, 198, 225; Volunteers, 104. Congress, Indian National, at Ahmedabad (1902), 160, 173-4, 314 Allahabad (1888), 92, 108-9, 146 Amraoti (1897), 153-5 Benares (1905), 314 Bombay (1885), 98-9, 409 (1915), 237 (1918), 388 Calcutta (1886), 101-2, 331 (1890), 121, 146 11 (1896), 145, 198 , , (1906), 146, 198, 202, 281 Karachi, 99 Lahore (1900), 165-7 Lucknow (1899), 147, 164-5, 202 , (1916), 236, 238, 290, 317 Madras (1887), 103-4, 107-8 (1894), 135-6, 138 **s** † (1898), 156, 158, 164 ** (1914), 149, 237 Nagpore (1891), 146-7 Poona (1895), 138-9, 142-4 Surat (1907), 138, 235, 248 Contempt Cases, 74-85, 172, 196, 224-5 Cooch Behar, Maharaja of, 35, 45. 146 Coronation Durbar, see Durbar Cossimbazar, Maharaja of, 173 Cotton, Sir Henry, 51, 90, 112, 120, 124, 127-8, 151, 254, 269-71 Cotton, H. E. A., 112, 188, 258-9 Councils, see Bengal Legislative, Imperial Legislative, etc. Courtney, Lord, 262 Cow-slaughter, 108 Criminal Investigation Department, 46, 64, 96, 244, 249

Criminal Justice, 86, 119-20, 293
Criminal Law, 299
Criminal Procedure Code, Indian, 123, 226, 289
Cromer, Lord, 259-61
Cross' Bill, Lord, 113
Cumming, Mr., 137, 241
Curtis, Lionel, 303-4
Curzon, Lord, 57, 63, 129-30, 142, 149, 155-7, 164-5, 174-5, 183, 185-91, 261, 265, 279, 288, 306, 340
Curzon-Wyllie, Sir William, 134, 173, 274-6, 402

Daily Mail, 266 Daily News, 259 Daily Telegraph, 259 Dall, Rev. C. H. A., 8 Dalvi, Mr., 319 Dante, 206 Das, Bhubon Mohan, 75 Das, C. R., 75, 242-3, 304, 363-4, 390 Das, Durga Mohan, 35 Das, Govind Churn, 87 Das, Rajani Kanto, 227 Das, S. R., 378 Das-Gupta, Kedarnath, 268, 273, 330-1 Dayal Singb College, 47 De, Fanindralal, 379 Deare, Major-General, 347 Deb, Raja Benoy Krishna, Bahadur, 144 Decentralization Commission (1908). Defence of India Act, 299 Delhi Assemblage (1877), 59 Demosthenes, 271 Deportations, 95, 279-80, 288-9, 298 154-5, 249-51. Derby, Lord, 57 Despatch (of August 25, 1911), 57 276, 285, 300 Devonshire, Duke of, 57 Dhingra, 273-5, 402 Dhur, Bishen Narayen, 42 Diarchy, 303-4, 314-5, 326-7, Chap. XXXV Dickens, Charles, 20, 263 Digby, Everard, 268 Dilke, Sir Charles, 254, 271, 276 Dinajpore, 353-4 Disraeli, 61-2 Dominion Status, 280, 359, 402 Doveton, Captain, 3 Dube, Mr., 265 Dufferin, Lord, 89, 92-3, 103, 109 Duke, Sir William, 178

Durbar, Coronation, 174, 285

Durga Puja, 159

Durham, Lord, 325

Dutt, Aswini Kumar, 81, 155, 219, 223, 233, 249, 251, 253, 275, 288-9

Dutt, Rai Haridan, Bahadur, 371

Dutt, Michael Madhu Shudan, 10, 121

Dutt, Romesh Chunder, 4, 10, 18-9, 22, 25, 124, 165, 293, 399

Earthquake (of 1897), 152-3 East Bengal, 186-7, 205, 218, 220-2, 226, 236, 255, 285, 288, 290, 353 East India Company, 251 East Indian Association, 38, 341 Eden, Sir Ashley, 72-3, 130 Educated community, Indian, 51, 91-2, 100, 125, 145, 174, 182, 270, 273 Education, 86, 99, 174, 277, 294-6; author's connexion with, 34-8, 43, 87, 139, 142, 179-80, 264-5; Commission on (1882), 175; Hindu Educational movement, 237 Edward VII, 252, 267 Elgin, Lord, 162 Elliott, Sir Charles, 19, 106-7, 120, 127-9, 133, 137, 151-2 Elphinstone College, Bombay, 319 Ely, Talfourd, 12 Emerson, Mr., 223-4, 229, 351-3 England, author's visits to, 10-22, 31-33, Chap. xi, 150-2, Chap. xxvii Englishman, 188, 194 European Association, 306 Executive Council, Bengal, 103, 279, 309, 319 Executive Council, Madras, 239 Provincial, 252

Faridpore College, 291
Fawcett, Mr., 39
Federation Hall, 212-6
Finance, 277, 279-80, 294, 297, 357, 383
Fletcher, Mr. Justice, 172
Fowler, Sir Henry, 56, 132, 152, 165, 167
France, 23-4, 179
Franchise Committee, 315, 318, 321, 338
Fraser, Sir Andrew, 185-6, 234-5
Fraser, Lovat, 57, 257
Free Church College, 36

252, 292, 295-6

Friend of India, 50

Viceroy's, 131,

Froude, 142
Fuller, Sir Bampfylde, 218, 233-4
Functions Committee, 315, 338
Furdoonji, Nowroji, 66

Gandhi, 239, 302 Gangasagar Mela, 355 Ganguli, Dwarakanath, 41, 53 Gardiner, Mr., 259 Garibaldi, 206 Garth, Sir Richard, 76, 293 George V, 285 George, Lloyd, 330, 369 Ghaznavi, Halim, 210 Ghosal, Janokinath, 121 Ghosal, Lalitmohan, 223 Ghosal, Mrs. Sarala, 121 Ghose, Amrita Chunder, 171 Ghose, Debendra Chunder, 217 Ghose, D. C., 274, 297, 379 Ghose, Lalmohan, 17, 52-5 Ghose, Monomohan, 10, 11, 75, 111, 119-21, 293 Ghose, Motilal, 42, 222-3, 242, 246 Ghose, Ram Gopal, 6, 7, 392 Ghose, Sir Rash Behari, 103, 182, 236, 241-6, 340 Ghose, Sisir Kumar, 41 Gladstone, 58, 62-4, 107, 113-4, 141 Gokhale, Gopal Krishna, 30, 150-1, 154, 314, 393-4, 409 Goldstucker, Professor, 19-20 Goode, Mr., 367 Gossain, Raja Kissori Lal, 103 Gourlay, Mr., 243, 337, 342 Government of India Act, 333, 349, 380 Graham, Sir Hugh, 261 Grand Trunk Road, 362 Grant Duff, Sir Mountstuart, 104 Greer, Mr., 142 Guha, Auath Bandhu, 81, 189, 289-90 Guha, Chittaranjan, 222, 225 Guha, Monoranjan, 222, 225 Gup and Gossip, 80 Gupta, Behari Lal, 4, 10, 13, 18-9, 22, 25, 72, 78, 82, 137 Gupta, J. N., 368, 399 Gupta, Rajani Kanto, 43

Habeas Corpus, 279
Hailey, Sir Malcolm, 315
Haldane, Lord, 262, 281
Halders, of Kalighat, 224
Halifax, Lord, 92
Hall, R. N., 113
Hannen, Mr. Justice, 15

INDEX

Hansard, Captain, 138 Hardinge, Lord, 5, 149, 188, 283-4, 292-3, 300 Hare, David, 1-2 Hardie, Keir, 269 Harrison, Sir Henry, 89-91, 93, 120 Hartington, Marquis of, 57 Hastings, Warren, 56 Herbert, Mr., 132 Himayetuddin, Mr., 378 Hindoo Patriot, 59-60, 68-9 Hindu College, the, 1-2 Hindu-Moslem Pact, 360, 366 Hitabadi, 137, 170, 202 Hobhouse, Lord, 293 Hogg, Sir Malcolm, 310, 315 Holroyd, Major, 29 Home Industries Association, 218 Home Rule League, 237-8, 244 Honey, Augustine, 113 Hossain, Liyakat, 230 Huda, Nawab Sir Shamsul, 258 Hume, Allen, 30, 99, 109, 111-5, 128, 254, 270-3, 408 Hume, Joseph, 114 Huq, Maulavi Faziul, 242-3, 389 Hyder Ali, 339

Ilbert Bill, 19, 72, 79, 82, 85, 90 Imam, Hassan, 388 1mam, Syed Ali, 114 Imperial Legislative Council, 37, 98, 114, 124, 171, 173, 176, 179, 182-3, 238, 251, 281, Chap. xxix, 310, 314 Imperial Library, Calcutta, 171 Imperial Press Conference, 63. 257-68, 277 India, 162 1ndia Council, 252, 294, 315 India Office, 132, 191, 239, 251, 253 India under Ripon, 86 Indian, affairs in Parliament, 56-7, 132; psychology, 152, 199, Chaps. xx and xxi, 214, 222-3, 238, 263; students among Englishmen, 3-4, 12, 15, 19-21; unity, 85, 87, 96, 108, 231, 305 Indian Association, 35, 41-4, 48, 52-4, 60-4, 69, 71, 81, 89, 98, 101, 105, 144, 156, 167, 189, 238, 268, 283, 296, 340-1, 349 Indian Civil Service, age-limit, 12, 14, 44, 54, 56, 58, 87, 88; agitation, 44-54, 85, 96, 103, 136, 138; author and, 12-16, 22, 27-31, 89, 131, 292, 405-6; and Congress, 273; discipline of, 63, 129, 148; Minor Civil Services, 152, 167; and Partition of Bengal, 184-5:

Simultaneous Examinations. 132-4, 152, 167-8 Indian League, 41, 61 Indian Medical Service, 345-6, 372-4, 386 Indian Mirror, 70, 193 Indian National Conference, 85, 87, 96, 108 Indian National Congress, see Congress Indianization of Public Services, 133, 136, 151, 167-8, 298-9, 309, 346, 368-74 Industrial activity, 146, 198-200, 207-9, 217-8 Internment, 298-9 Ironside, W. A., 310 Irving, Sir Henry, 393-4 Iyer, G. Subramanya, 104, 150, 410

Jack, Mr., 219
Jah, Hon. Humayoon, Bahadur, 50
Jallianwallabagh, 328
Jenkins, Sir Lawrence, 167, 294
Joint Parliamentary Committee
(1919), 321-7, 341, 382, 385, 389
Journalism, 68-80, 128, 170-3, 203, 207, 262
Jubilee, Queen Victoria's, 103
Jung Bahadur, 339
Jury Notification, 107, 128, 131

Kabyavisarad, Kali Prosanna, 137-8, 147, 153, 202-3, 223-4, 227 Kala-azar association, 355 Kamat, Mr., 321 Kemal Pasha, 330 Kemp, Mr., 223-6 Kenya question, the, 349 Kennedy, Pringle, 248 Khan, Major Hidyat, Bahadur, 45 Khaparde, Mr., 136 Khilafat question, the, 330, 338, 355 Kimberley, Lord, 128 Kingsford, Mr., 248 Kitchener, Earl, 253 Kitchlew, Dr., 328 Knight, Robert, 78 Krishna, Maharaja Komal, 144 Krishua, Maharaj Kumar Neel, 144 Krishna, Maharaja Sir Narendra, Bahadur, 40, 44 Kuar Singh, 216

Lahore Indian Association, 46 Lajpat Ral, Lala, 155 Lalkaka, Dr., 273, 462

Larymore, Mr., 77-8 Law, Joygovind, 125 Law, Romanath, 68-9 Law department of colleges, 117, 175-9, 182, 257-8 Lawrence, Lord, 51 Lawrence, Sir Walter, 157 Lee Commission, 331 Lees, Mr., 224 Legislative Councils, 30, 98, 103-4, 110-1, 113, 123, 126, 164, 185, 188, 255-6, 275, 283, 287-8, 292, 304, 317-8. See also Bengal, Imperial, Leper Asylum, 105-6 Lethbridge, Mr., 60 Liberal Party, English, 57, 113, 149, 262, 276 Lindsay, Mr., 329 Local Self-government, 64-5, 89, 92, 99, 103, 124, 127, 129, 151, 164, 296-7, 304, 309, 329, 337, 356, 358, 368, 386 Lords, House of, 253, 306 Lutyens, Lady, 322 Lyon, Mr., 137 Lytton, Lord (Viceroy), 57-8, 63, 107, 133 Lytton, Lord (Governor of Bengal), 57, 346, 357, 384

Macdonald, Rev. K. S., 61 Macdonald, Ramsay, 254, 269, 271 Macdonnell, Sir Anthony, 133, 147 McGhee, Mr., 115 Mackarness, Mr., 262, 269 McKenna, Mr., 259 Mackenzie, Sir Alexander, 129-30, 150 Mackenzie, Sir Donald, 93 Mackenzie, Mr., 266 Mackenzie Act, 129, 132 Maclean, Sir Francis, 162 McNeill, Swift, 269 Madras University, 295 Mahmudabad, Raja of, 48, 389 Maiti, Gurdit, 163 Majeetia, Sirdar Dayai Singh, 46 Majumder, Ambika Churn, 81, 147, 217, 255, 284, 287, 290-1, 353 Malavya, Madan Mohan, 136, 239. Manchester Courier, 267 Manchester Guardian, 262, 306 Mandlik, Hon. Mr. Vishanarain, 49, Martineau, Harriet, 392 Mazumdar, Protap Chunder, 6 Mazzini, 41, 43, 141, 206

Medical College, Calcutta, 122, 372-3, 377 Medical Department, 337-40, 378 Mehta, Sir Pherozeshah, 49, 111, 173, 236 Mellish, Mr., 14-5 Mellor, Mr. Justice, 15 Meston, Lord, 322, 325 Meston Award, 380, 383 Metcalfe, Lord, 261 Metropolitan Institution, 31, 36, 45, Meyer, Sir William, 300, 329, 391 Middle-class community, Bengal, 40, 61-2, 73, 124-5, 217 Midleton, Lord, 187, 268, 323 Midnapore Conspiracy Case, 172 Ministerial salaries, 387-9 Minto, Lord, 60, 146, 155, 225, 250, 252, 283, 295 Mitter, Raja Degumbar, 66, 102 Mitter, Mr. Justice Dwarakanath, Mitter, Kalinath, 125-6 Mitter, Kissory Chand, 26, 45 Mitter, Nilcomol, 25, 45 Mitter, Peary Chand, 2 Mitter, Sir Provash Chunder, 337-8, 340, 378 Mitter, Raja Rajendra Lal, 14, 66, 102 Mitter, Sir Romesh Chunder, 49, 76-9, 118, 145 Mitter, Sarat Chandra, 159 Mitter, Taraprosanna, 153, 170-1 Mitter, Dr. Trailakyanath, 107 Mittra, Krishoa Kumar, 80, 95-6, 155, 221, 226, 230, 249, 251, 253, 275, 378-9 Moderate Party, 99, 255, 291, 297, 304-7, 310-4, 328, 336, 388, 410; Conferences, 305, 319, 388; Conferences, Deputation, 321 388; Mohamed, 141, 339 Mohamed, Hon'ble Nawab Syed, Bahadur, 231 Mohamedan community, 49, 108, 124, 201, 285, 304, 315-8 Montagu, Mr., 270, 280, 303, 321, 323-4, 327-31, 352, 371 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, 46, 291, 294, 305-6, 310, 313-4, 317-8, 325-6, 349, 351, 370-1, 380, 382-3, 386, 388-9 Montriou, Mr., 29 Mookerjee, Joy Kissen, 102 Mookerjee, Sir Rajendra Nath, 160 Mookerjee, Dr. Sambhoo Chunder, 42 Moriapukur Conspiracy, 249

Morley, Professor, 19-?] Morley, Lord, 56-7, 95, 142, 148, 186, 239, 250-4, 260, 262, 269, 275-6, 279-83, 287, 296, 309, 356, 366 Morley-Minto Reforms, 57, 131, 239, 252-4, 276-7, 283, 317 Mozufferpore murders, 248-9 Mudholkar, R. N., 111, 114, 153, 271-2, 303 Mukherjen, Sir Ashutosh, 76, 100, 181-2, 258 Müller, Max, 20 Muller, Miss, 137 Mullick, Surendranath, 368-71. 378-9 Muralidhar, Lala, 165-6 Murray, Professor Gilbert, 261 Mutiny, the, 58

Nabadwipa, 101 Naidu, Ranga, 104 Nair, Dr., 231 Nair, Sankaran, 153-4, 295 Napak, Guru, 216 Naoroji, Dadabhai, 54, 66, 102, 112, 114, 132, 150, 152, 281, 319-26 Napoleon, 52, 212, 312, 397 Narayan Singh, Aiswarya, 48 National Fund, 81, 85, 87, 217 National Liberal Federation, 382 Nationalist Party, Indian, 236-7, 291 Natore, Maharaja of, 124 Natu brothers, the, 154-5 Nehru, Motilal, 388 Nevinson, Mr., 259 New India, 51, 305 Nibilism, 275 Nivedita, Sister, 213 Non-Co-operation, 200, 207. 210. 300-4, 307, 309-10, 332-5, 338, 351, 354, 403 Norris, Mr. Justice, 74-6, 79 Northeliffe, Lord, 280 Northcote, Sir Stafford, 57 Norton, Eardley, 109, 111, 114-5 Nulkar, Rai Bahadur, 49

O'Connor, T. P., 262 O'Dwyer, Sir Michael, 328 Official Secreta Act, 309 Olivier, Lord, 382 O'Malley, Mr., 344 Oratory, 140-3, 271 Orthodoxy, Hindu, 1-2, 5, 7-8, 25-6, 71, 75, 79, 82, 100, 121-2, 224, 265, 396-8 Outstill System, 93-4, 96 Oxford Mission, the, 37 Oxford Union, 62, 90, 114-5, 137

Paikpara Rajas, 28 Pai, Bepin Chunder, 227, 278 Pal, Rai Kristo Das, Bahadur, 14, 25, 32, 40, 59, 66, 68, 72, 102, 173, 19**8, 392** Pal, Satya, 328 Palit, Sir Taraknath, 14, 17-8, 118, 182, 213 Pail Mail Gazette, 280 Panideb incident, the 90 Parckh, Mr., 268 Parental Academic Institution, the, Parisad, the, 144 Partition of Bengal, 57, 59, 63, 79, 292, 300, 309, 351, 361, 400 Passive Resistance, Chap. xxv, 286 Patel, Mr., 310, 321, 389 Patriotic Association, 49, 108 Payne, Mr., 342, 368-9 Peacock, Sir Barnes, 77 Pedler, Sir Alexander, 181 Peile. Sir Louis, 151 Pentland, Lord, 149 Petheram, Sir Comer, 120 Pioneer, 176 Piague, 147, 154-5 Polak, Mr., 329 Police, 23-4, 76, 95, 214, 218-9, 222-3, 225-7, 232-3, 235, 247, 249, 251, 286, 295, 298 Postord, Mr., 27-8 Press Act (1913), 294; (under Lord Minto) 60, 295; Vernacular, 58-65, 72, 107, 133 Press Conference, Imperial, 63, 151, 257-68 Press, the, 68, 70, 193-4, 199-200, 205, 249, 259-61, 275, 281, 299. See also Journalism Prinsep, H. T., 29 Proclamation (of 1858), 57, 66, 133, 309 Prosad, Raja Shiva, of Benares, 109 Public Services Commission, 49, 88, 133, 151 Public speaker, author as, 34, 37-8, 41-2, 48, 86-7, 94, 105, 107, 110, 112-3, 115-7, 124, 136-44, 152, 160, 166, 174, 201, 210, 230, 235-6, 260-1, 266-70, 271, 275-7, 311, 319, 336, 352-3, 360-1, 488-10 Public Works, 277, 280 Pugh, Mr., 205

Larymore, Mr., 77-8 Law, Joygovind, 125 Law, Romanath, 68-9 Law department of colleges, 117, 175-9, 182, 257-8 Lawrence, Lord, 51 Lawrence, Sir Waiter, 157 Lee Commission, 331 Lees, Mr., 224 Legislative Councils, 30, 98, 103-4, 110-1, 113, 123, 126, 164, 185, 188, 255-6, 275, 283, 287-8, 292, 304, 317-8. See also Bengal, Imperial, Leper Asylum, 105-6 Lethbridge, Mr., 60 Liberal Party, English, 57, 113, 149, 262, 276 Lindsay, Mr., 329 Local Self-government, 64-5, 89, 92, 99, 103, 124, 127, 129, 151, 164, 296-7, 304, 309, 329, 337, 356, 358, 368, 386 Lords, House of, 253, 306 Lutyens, Lady, 322 Lyon, Mr., 137 Lytton, Lord (Viceroy), 57-8, 63, 107, 133 Lytton, Lord (Governor of Bengal), 57, 346, 357, 384

Macdonald, Rev. K. S., 61 Macdonald, Ramsay, 254, 269, 271 Macdonneil, Sir Anthony, 133, 147 McGhee, Mr., 115 Mackarness, Mr., 262, 269 McKenna, Mr., 259 Mackennie, Sir Alexander, 129-30, Mackenaie, Sir Donald, 93 Mackenzie, Mr., 266 Mackenzie Act. 129, 132 Maclean, Sir Francis, 162 McNeill, Swift, 269 Madras University, 295 Manaudabad, Raja of, 48, 389 Mairi, Gardit, 163 Majeetia, Sirdar Daval Singh, 46 Majumder, Ambika Churn, 81, 147, 217, 255, 284, 287, 280-1, 353 Malavya, Madan Mohan, 136, 239, 388 Munchester Courier, 267 Manchester Guardian, 252, 306 Mandlik, Hon. Mr. Vishanarsin, 49, 38 Martinean, Harriet, 392 Marandar, Protap Chunder, 6 Mamini, 41, 43, 141, 206

Medical College, Calcutta, 122, 372-3, 377 Medical Department, 337-40, 378 Mehta, Sir Pherozeshah, 49, 111, 173, 236 Mellish, Mr., 14-5 Mellor, Mr. Justice, 15 Meston, Lord, 322, 325 Meston Award, 350, 383 Metcaife, Lord, 261 Metropolitan Institution, 34, 36, 45, 289 Meyer, Sir William, 300, 329, 391 Middle-class community, Bengal, 40, 61-2, 73, 124-5, 217 Midleton, Lord, 187, 268, 323 Midnapore Conspiracy Case, 172 Ministerial salaries, 387-9 Minto, Lord, 60, 146, 155, 225, 250, 252, 283, 295 Mitter, Raja Degumbar, 66, 102 Mitter, Mr. Justice Dwarakanath, 41 Mitter, Kalinath, 125-6 Mitter, Kissory Chand, 26, 45 Mitter, Nilcomol, 25, 45 Mitter, Peary Chand, 2 Mitter, Sir Provash Chunder, 337-8, 340, 378 Mitter, Raja Rajendra Lal, 14, 66. 102 Mitter, Sir Romesh Chunder, 49. 76-9, 118, 145 Mitter, Sarat Chandra, 159 Mitter, Taraprosanna, 153, 170-1 Mitter, Dr. Trailakyanath, 107 Mittra, Krishna Kumar, 80, 95-6, 155, 221, 226, 230, 249, 251, 253, 275, 378-9 Moderate Party, 99, 255, 291, 297, 304-7, 310-4, 328, 336, 388, 410; Conferences, 305, 319, 358 Deputation, 321 Mohamed, 141, 339 Mohamed, Hon'ble Nawab Syed, Babadur, 231 Mohamedan community, 49, 108, 124, 201, 285, 304, 315-8 Montagu, Mr., 270, 280, 303, 321, 323-4, 327-31, 352, 371 Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms, 46, 291, 294, 305-6, 310, 313-4, 317-8, 325-6, 349, 351, 370-1, 380, 382-3, 386, 388-9 Montrion, Mr., 29 Mookerjee, Joy Kissen, 102 Mookerjee, Sir Rajendra Nath, 160 Mookeriee, Dr. Sambhoo Chunder, Moriapukur Conspiracy, 249

Morley, Professor, 19-21 Morley, Lord, 56-7, 95, 142, 148, 186, 239, 250-4, 260, 262, 269, 275-6, 279-83, 287, 296, 309, 356, 366 Morley-Minto Reforms, 57, 131, 239, 252-4, 276-7, 283, 317 Mozufferpore murders, 248-9 Mudholkar, R. N., 111, 114, 153, 271-2. 303 Mukherjen, Sir Ashutosh, 76, 100, 181-2, 258 Müller, Max, 20 Muller, Miss, 137 Surendranath, 368-71. Mullick, 378-9 Muralidhar, Lala, 165-6 Murray, Professor Gilbert, 261 Mutiny, the, 58

Nabadwipa, 101 Naidu, Ranga, 104 Nair, Dr., 231 Nair, Sankaran, 153-4, 295 Nanak, Guru, 216 Naoroji, Dadabhai, 54, 66, 102, 112, 114, 132, 150, 152, 281, 319-20 Napoleon, 52, 212, 312, 397 Narayan Singh, Aiswarya, 48 National Fund, 81, 85, 87, 217 National Liberal Federation, 382 Nationalist Party, Indian, 236-7, 291 Natore, Maharaja of, 124 Natu brothers, the, 154-5 Nehru, Motilal, 388 Nevinson, Mr., 259 New India, 51, 305 Nihilism, 275 Nivedita, Sister, 213 200, Non-Co-operation, 207. 300-4, 307, 309-10, 332-5, 338, 351, 354, 403 Norris, Mr. Justice, 74-6, 79 Northcliffe, Lord, 280 Nurthcote, Sir Stafford, 57 Norton, Eardley, 109, 111, 114-5 Nulkar, Rai Bahadur, 49

O'Connor, T. P., 262 O'Dwyer, Sir Michael, 328 Official Secreta Act, 309 Olivier, Lord, 382 O'Malley, Mr., 344 Oratory, 140-3, 271 Orthodoxy, Hindu, 1-2, 5, 7-8, 25-6, 71, 75, 79, 82, 100, 121-2, 224, 265, 396-8 Outstill System, 93-4, 96 Oxford Mission, the, 37 Oxford Union, 62, 90, 114-5, 137

Paikpara Rajas, 28 Pal, Bepin Chunder, 227, 278 Pal, Rai Kristo Das, Bahadur, 14. 25, 32, 40, 59, 66, 68, 72, 102, 173, 198, 392 Pal, Satya, 328 Palit, Sir Taraknath, 14, 17-8, 118, 182, 213 Pail Mail Gazetle, 280 Panjdeh incident, the, 90 Parekh, Mr., 268 Parental Academic Institution, the, Parisad, the, 144 Partition of Bengal, 57, 59, 63, 79, 81, 95, 103, 124, 138, 164, 169, 171, Chap. xviii, 190-2, 195-7, 199, 209-11, Chap. xxii, 221-2, 224, 227, 229-35, 240, 245, 252, 254-5, 262, 266, 269, 276-81, Chap. xxviii, 292, 300, 309, 351, 361, 400 Passive Resistance, Chap. xxv, 286 Patel, Mr., 310, 321, 389 Patriotic Association, 49, 108 Payne, Mr., 342, 368-9 Peacock, Sir Barnes, 77 Pedler, Sir Alexander, 181 Peile. Sir Louis, 151 Pentland, Lord, 149 Petheram, Sir Comer, 120 Pioneer, 176 Plague, 147, 154-5 Polak, Mr., 329 Police, 23-4, 76, 95, 214, 218-9, 222-3, 225-7, 232-3, 235, 247, 249, 251, 286, 295, 298 Postord, Mr., 27-8 Press Act (1913), 294; (under Lord Minto) 60, 295; Vernacular, 58-65, 72, 107, 133 Press Conference, Imperial, 63, 151, 257-68 Press, the, 68, 70, 193-4, 199-200, 205, 249, 259-61, 275, 281, 299. See also Journalism Prinsep, H. T., 29 Proclamation (of 1858), 57, 66, 133, 309 Prosad, Raja Shiva, of Benares. 109 Public Services Commission, 49, 88, 133, 151 Public speaker, author as, 34, 37-8, 41-2, 48, 86-7, 94, 105, 107, 110, 112-3, 115-7, 124, 136-44, 152, 160, 166, 174, 201, 210, 230, 235-6, 260-1, 266-70, 271, 275-7, 311, 319, 336, 352-3, 360-1, 408-10 Public Works, 277, 280 Pugh, Mr., 205

418 INDEX

Puna Sarvajanik Sabha, the, 51 Punjab Government, 328 Punjab Land Alienation Act, 108

Quarterly Review, 91 Queen Victoria, 57, 64, 66, 133, 142, 258

Racial matters, European anđ Indian, 27, 58, 107, 128, 162, 191-2, 194, 303, 304, 308-9, 315, 335, 407-8; Hindus and Mohamedans, 49, 108, 124, 201, 218, 231, 236-7, 290, 302, 305 Raghunandan, 101 Rahim, Sir Abdur, 339 Railway expenditure, 280 Rais and Rayyet, 42 Raju, Dr. Dhanakatu, 50 Rakhi-bandhan, 212-4 Ram, Lala Jaishi, 166 Ram Krishna Mission, 46, 213 Ramnarain, Pundit, 47 Ranade, Mahadeo Govind, 50, 138-9, 145, 167 Rand, Mr., 154 Ranjit Singh, 339 Rao, Ram Chunder, 321 Rasool, A., 222, 231, 241-2, 255 Ratcliffe, Mr., 188 Recruiting, 206, 300-1 Reed, Sir J. Stanley, 259 Rees, Sir John, 177, 329 Reforms, see Morley-Minto and Montagu-Chelmsford Regulation III of 1818, 154, 249, 251, 253, 298-9; XXV of 1827 (Bombay), 154; of 1893, 126 Reid, Mr., 377, 378 Repression, 195, 203-4, 218-9, Chap. xxiii, 231-2, 240, 247, 249, 252, 269, 275, 277, 288-9 Review of Reviews, 280 Revolutionary tactics, etc., 179, 193, 197, 232-5, Chap. xxvi, 260, 287, 313, 381, 402 Reynolds, H. J., 29, 293 Ripon, Lord, 36, 63-6, 72, 88-9, 107-8, 128, 139, 157, 252, 284, 296, 366 Ripon College, 36, 106, 117-8, 120-1, 145, 171, 177-9, 182, 196, 257, 374 Ripon Collegiate School, 87, 177. 196 Risley, Sir Herbert, 132, 143, 150 Roberts, Mr. Herbert, see Lord

Clywd

Robertson, Principal, 36 Robinson, Major-General, 372 Ronaldshay, Lord, 242-6, 319, 327, 334, 337-8, 340-3, 346, 357, 384 Rosebery, Lord, 259 Rotary Club, 335-6 Row, Chensal, 50 Row, Madhava, 389 Rowlatt Act, 299-300, 352, 393 Roy, Ananda Chunder, 81, 255, 239 Roy, Barada Prosanna, 94-96 Roy, Behari Lal, 221, 223, 229 Roy, Lieut. Bejoy Prosad Sinha, Roy, Debendranath, 121-2 Roy, Hem Chunder, 160 Roy, Rai Jadunath, Bahadur, 121-2 Roy, K. C., 321 Roy, Kali Prosanna, 47, 166-7 Roy, Kalinath, 172 Roy, P. C., 321 Roy, Raja Ram Mohun, 6, 8, 11, 131, 141, 264, 392, 397-8 Roy, Raja Sashi Sekhareswar, 108 Roy, Sitanath, 300 Roy, Surendranath, 243 Ryan, Sir Edward, 14

Sadler Commission, 295 Saligram (brought into court), 74-5 Salimulia, Nawab, 285 Salisbury, Marquess of, 44, 56-7, Samarth, Mr., 321 Sanitation, 99, 277, 280, 326, 329, 345, 354, 386 Sanjibani, 80, 226 Sankirton, 94, 213 Sapru, Dr. Tej Bahadur, 299, 321, 324 Sarma, Sir Narasingha, 305 Sasmal, B. N., 358 Savarker, Mr., 275 Scott, C. P., 262 Sea-voyages (and Hindu orthodoxy), 11, 121-2, 135, 137-8, 398 Selborne, Lord, 323 Self-government, 103, 136-7, 179, 223, 236, 240, 266-7, 277, 281, 303, 307, 312-4, 390 Sen, Baikuntanath, 81, 135 Sen, King, Ballal, 1 Sen, Bhabanath, 160 Sen, Keshub Chunder, 6-8, 17, 25-6, 35, 44-5, 80, 141, 198, 392 Sen, Rai Narendranath, 132, 193-4, 232 Sen. Nobin Chunder, 162

Sen, Upedranath, 153, 170 Sernjul Islam, Nawab, 124 Shakespeare, 263-4 Sharfuddin, Mr., 111 Shastri, the Rt. Hon. Srinivasa, 299, 305, 314-6, 321, 388-9 Shaw, Mr., 66 Sime, John, 4 Simultolia, 159-60, 166, 173-4 Sindhubala Case, 298 Singh, Sirdar Guru Chand, 166 Sinha, Lord, 160, 295, 304, 323-4, Sircar, Hara Kissen, 83 Sircar, Dr. Mohendralal, 135 Sircar, Nalin Behari, 132, 169 Sircar, Sir Nilratan, 243, 377 Sircar, Peary Churn, 7-8, 34 Sircar, Pulin Behari, 160 Sircar, Dr. Suresh Chunder, 161, 163 Sirker, Akshay Kumar, 42 Sivaji, 339 Sly, Sir Frank, 315-6 Smith, Philip, 37 Smoking, 264-5, 394 Sorabji, Setji, 80 Soul-force, 286, 308 South Africa, 110 South Wales Liberal Federation, 113 Southborough Committee, 289. 315-6, 319, 322 Spoor, Ben. 324 Spencer, Herbert, 348 Star Chamber, 298 Statesman, 78, 188, 194-5, 205, 378 Statutes, Parliamentary, (1870), 54, 133; (1892), 57, 93, 113-4, 123-5, 128, 254; (1910), 30, 124 Stead, Mr., 278 Stevens, Mr., 83 Strathcona, Lord, 273, 393 Students' Association, 35, 38 Sukul, Kali Sunkar, 95 Sulava Samachar, 80 Surahwardy, Major Hussain, 373, 377 Surajball, Dr., 47 Surhawardy, Dr. Abdulla, 338 Sutherland, H. C., 27-8, 31 Swadeshi Movement, the, 37, 94-5, 103, 138, 146, 191, Chaps. xx and xxi, 213, 219, 221-2, 224, 227-33, 240, 248-9, 277, 287-90 Swaroj and the Swarajist Party, 74, 125-6, 307, 317-8, 359-60, 363-6, 370, 382, 385, 387 Swarnamoyee, Maharani, 52-3, 105 Sydenham, Lord, 306, 321-2, 324

Tacitus, 204 Tagore, Debendra Nath, 6, 397 Tagore, Dwarakanath, 11 Tagore, Maharaja Sir Jotindra Mohon, 13, 59, 72, 102, 188-9 Tagore, Dr. Rabindranath, 216, 229, 364 Tagore, Maharaja Romanath, 13,66 Tagore, Satyendra Nath, 26 Tabirpur, Raja of, 124
Taylor Case, the, 77, 79
Telang, Kashinath Trembuck, 49, Temperance Association, 96; movement, 7-8. 34 Temple, Sir Richard, 129 Tennyson, 320 Thakur, Sripad Babaji, 13-4, 16-8 The Times, 57, 64, 257, 275 Theosophical Society, the, 237 Thompson, Sir Rivers, 173 Tilak, Mr., 236, 240, 305, 321, 324, 388 Times of India, 251 Todd's Students' Guide, 393 Tribune, 47, 172 Turnbull, Mr., 265 Turner, Sir William, 90 Tyabji, Budruddin, 169

Universities Act, 176, 180-1, 309 Universities Commission, 175-6 University Institute, Calcutta, 115, 136

Vernacular Press Act, 58-9, 62-5, 72, 107, 133
Viceroy's Executive Council, 131, 252, 292, 295-6
Victoria, Queen, 57, 64, 66, 133, 142, 258
Vidyabhuson, Jogendranath, 43
Vidyasagar, Iswar Chunder, 8-9, 14, 26, 34, 36, 41, 100, 190, 198, 290, 339
Vincent, Sir William, 299
Viraraghava Chanar, 104
Vivekananda, Swami, 35
Vizianagram, Maharaja of, 104-7

Wacha, Sir Diushaw, 150, 173, 410 Warwick, Earl and Countess of, 262-3 Webb, Mr., 136 Wedderburn, Sir David, 54, 66 Wedderburn, Sir William, 54, 112, 114, 150, 254, 270-1, 340, 343

420

INDEX

Wedgwood, Col., 321
Weekly Notes, 198
Welby, Lord, 150, 258
Welby Commission, 126, 150-1, 258, 393, 410
Weldon, Bishop, 157
West, Sir Raymond, 293
Westmacott, Mr., 96
Weston, Mr., 172
Wheeler, Sir Henry, 376
Widows, Hindu, 8-9, 100-1, 395-8

Williams, D. B, 345-6 Wilson, Col., 377 Wilson, Mr., 115, 137 Wilson, Sir Guy Fleetwood, 292-4 Woodburn, Sir John, 127, 130, 14 162-3 Woodroffe, Mr., 146

York, Archbishop of, 115 Yule, George, 92, 109, 112 46. 48. 48 51 57. Convers were fation to 61
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