

LIFE AND WORK OF
ROMESH CHUNDER DUTT



Rowen C. Sutt

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ROMESH CHUNDER DUTT
C.I.E.

BY

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WITH AN INTRODUCTION
BY HIS HIGHNESS THE
MAHARAJA OF BARODA



FOUR PHOTOGRAVURE PLATES AND TEN
OTHER ILLUSTRATIONS

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TO
HIS CHILDREN
WHOM MR. DUTT LOVED SO DEARLY
THIS WORK IS AFFECTIONATELY INSCRIBED
BY
THE AUTHOR

INTRODUCTION

IN introducing this life of an eminent intellectual leader of modern India, there is no need for me to dwell upon particular events in his life, or upon the literary achievements which have made the name of Romesh Dutt widely known in the West as well as in India. I wish rather to call attention to certain traits which seemed to me—and I had opportunities of knowing him intimately during his most mature period—to mark him out as a man at once of great capacity and great character.

And first of all I would mention his astonishing power of work. Romesh Dutt came from a province the climate and traditions of which are commonly supposed to discourage, in a peculiar degree, the exercise of physical and mental energy; but there were surely few men of his time, whether Western or Eastern, who laboured more continuously and to greater purpose than he.

The claims of the Service to which he gave the best years of his life were in themselves exacting, and it might well have seemed that such strength as was left over from the discharge of official duties would have been wholly absorbed in such researches as those rendered necessary for the writing of the "History of Civilisation in Ancient India."

Yet, as the world knows, his work as a Government officer and as the historian of Early India formed only a part of his manifold activity. He made himself an acknowledged master in the field of Indian economic

history and administration; he became the interpreter of the heroic Epics of his country to English readers; he carried through, mainly during his periods of leave from official duty, the gigantic task of rendering into his own mother tongue the sacred wisdom of the "Rig Veda." His labours in the cause of Social Reform are well known. He was after his retirement one of the acknowledged pillars of the Indian National Congress; and his political views were so well-considered and broad based that during the years of his residence in Europe, he was accepted as the most distinguished advocate, by speech and pen, of the Indian reform programme.

The mental grasp, the power of will, and the habit of industry which enabled Romesh Dutt to do all these things, during and after his long term of service under the Government of India, gave him the unmistakable character of a man fashioned in a large mould. There was nothing small about him. It was well and truthfully said that among any company of leading men in any part of the world he would have stood high. The impression he made wherever he went was of a great personal force, a mind habitually taking broad views and working for fine public ends. And this impression was strengthened by his big genial presence and overflowing humanity, and by the frank enjoyment of friendly intercourse which made him, in England as in India, the centre of a large and animated circle.

It is, of course, desirable that in this brief prefatory note to Mr. Gupta's biography, a word should be said of Mr. Dutt's relations with Baroda.

For many years past the policy has been to open the high offices of the State to men of proved ability without distinction of race or creed. That policy has been justified in many instances; but it will, I think, cause

no surprise when I say that Baroda has never had greater cause for satisfaction than in the results attained by the appointment of Mr. Romesh Dutt, first as Revenue Minister, and afterwards as Dewan.

His experience in the Imperial Civil Service had led him to the conviction that certain reforms in the government should be introduced for the benefit of the people, more especially the peasants; and it was his belief that the administration of a Native State furnished, by its comparative simplicity and elasticity, a more favourable ground for experiment than is offered by the more rigidly organised system of British India.

In Baroda he worked hard to give practical effect to his theories, and the story of his efforts is told in the series of Administration Reports for which he was responsible during his tenure of office in the State.

May I here express the great loss that the State has been put to on account of Mr. Dutt's untimely death so soon after his appointment as Prime Minister. Had Providence vouchsafed to him a longer span, I am inclined to believe that his administration would have been a still more glorious success. His great experience, his tenacity of purpose and strength of conviction, as also his firm belief in the ultimate triumph of Truth, are facts that might well serve as an example and inspiration to the younger generation of Indians.

SAYAJI RAO, GAEKWAR.

35th September 1911.

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The destinies of our Indian Empire are covered with thick darkness. It is difficult to form any conjectures as to the fate reserved for a State which resembles no other in history, and which forms by itself a separate class of political phenomena; the laws which regulate its growth and its decay are still unknown to us. It may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system till it has outgrown the system; that by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government; that having become instructed in European knowledge, they may in some future age demand European institutions. Whether such a day will ever come I know not. But never will I attempt to avert or retard it. Whenever it comes, it will be the proudest day in English History.—Macaulay's speech on the Bill renewing the East India Company's Charter, House of Commons, 10th July 1833.

What I seem to discern are not at all the symptoms of crisis. I do not see or hear demands for violent or startling new departures. What I do see is a stage reached in the gradual and inevitable working out of Indian policy, which makes it wise and in the natural order of things—and I do not at all despair of securing the agreement of the noble Lord opposite to this—that we should advance with a firm, courageous, and intrepid step some paces further on the path of continuous, rational improvement in the Indian system of government.—Lord Morley's Budget speech, 1906.

Gentlemen, I believe more in our fitness for self-government than in any gifts and concessions which we may receive from our rulers. If we are prepared by our devotion to work for self-government, no power on earth can withhold it from us. Nations shape their own destiny, and our future is in our own hands. Let us forget those petty jealousies and differences which sometimes divide us. Let us keep the great object before us. The path of progress is thorny, but in spite of many disappointments I still believe that the path is as clear before us as the noonday sun. This is Dharma; it is the duty of every nation to strive for progress, as it is the endeavour of the plant to seek for light. If we are true to ourselves in education and social reforms, in industrial and political endeavours, our future is assured. Every act of self-seeking and untruth holds us back; every act of self-sacrifice and devotion sees us farther on our onward march.—R. C. Dutt: speech at Lucknow, February 1908.

PRELIMINARY

I

To present a critical estimate of Romesh Chunder Dutt, while standing so near in time to his life and achievements, is a task beset with many difficulties. That, at any rate, is not the sole object of the present biography. But there are stages in the history of every nation, and modern India may at least be conceded to be a nation "in transition," when the life of the strong individual, the leader, forms but a chapter of the larger life of the nation itself. It is from this standpoint that the life of a representative Indian, a recognised leader of Indian thought and opinion, is of especial interest. Such a life faithfully narrated; the sources of its intellectual and moral strength, its aspirations and ambitions, the bed-rocks of its faith clearly exposed to view; its limitation of vision, the moments of its despair and gloom mirrored by a faithful hand; above all, its subtler hues, the play of sentiment, the leaven of occidental culture and energy, the heritage of oriental feeling, all painted with a truthful yet sympathetic brush, cannot fail to serve a useful purpose and find an answer to many heated controversies. Would you really know what advance India under British rule has made in the path of true nationality, would you peer into the future and catch a glimpse of the far-off haven to which this ancient argosy of the East is slowly winning her way? Then, the study of the life of a great Indian cannot fail to deepen your interest and clear your vision.

II

The closing years of the nineteenth century and the opening decade of the present, mark perhaps the most momentous chapter in the history of modern India. For the historian of the future will have to record in these years, if not the birth of a "New India," yet a determined and signal advance in that long and weary path over which it is the appointed task of the people of India to travel, before the goal will be reached and a true political personality will emerge from the heterogeneous mass who inhabit the vast continent. The most reliable and competent observers, both amongst Englishmen and Indians, have not been slow to read the signs of the times, and to detect in the storm and stress through which we are now passing the true portents of a great national upheaval in the country, the parturial pains heralding the birth of a nation. To confine ourselves to English opinion only, what a marked revulsion there has been. Professor Seeley, who was one of the first to make a critical study of the political aspects of the British occupation of India, observed in 1883: "There is no Indian nationality, though there are germs from which we can conceive an Indian nationality developing itself." Even so late as the closing years of the last century, Meredith Townsend declared the impossibility of an Oriental nation advancing in the path of Western civilisation, and held that "the chasm between the brown man and the white is unfathomable." But even in those days preachers of the rival school of thought were not altogether silent. Only two years after Seeley's book appeared, in 1885, Mr. (now Sir Henry) Cotton, one of the ablest and most sympathetic English officials serving in India at the time, saw "a New India rising before his eyes, and a nation in the real sense in actual formation."

The currents of political life in India have moved swiftly since the days of the first publication of "New India," and landmarks which were then dim and

unformed have now taken more definite shape and emerged clearly to view, till to-day, the greatest living political thinker of England has himself analysed for us the sources of the present political illumination in India. In the memorable speeches delivered while he was in charge of the India Office, Lord Morley has on more than one occasion made a searching analysis of the inevitableness of the present-day "intoxication of educated Indians with ideas of freedom, nationality, and self-government, and the irresistible and mighty influence which such great teachers and masters of England as Milton, Burke, Macaulay have exercised in India." And it is not only the political philosopher who has seen this. The far-sighted Viceroy, who with Lord Morley has shared the high honour and lasting glory of building the foundations of real autonomy in India, and who had the amplest opportunity of gauging the potency and true character of the new forces at work, recognised the birth of a new spirit almost as soon as he assumed his high office. From his throne in the Council Chamber, Lord Minto, in 1907, declared that "a change was rapidly passing over the land, and new and just aspirations were springing up amongst its people." Still more forcibly, in his remarkable speech in the Council of 1909, introducing his memorable reforms, he pointed out that he "had to deal with political forces unknown to his predecessors, which it was no longer possible for British administrators to ignore, while the trend of events in the far East had accentuated the ambitions of Eastern populations." His Excellency must have remembered the noble exhortation of the Hon. Mr. Gokhale, when, in the course of his speech on the Budget of 1906, he said: "Moreover, my Lord, the whole East is to-day throbbing with a new impulse, vibrating with a new passion, and it is not to be expected that India alone should continue unaffected by changes that are in the very air around us. We could not remain outside this influence even if we would. We would not so remain if we could."

It is hardly necessary to repeat that the central motive

power of this unifying process, this fusion of many races, is the solidifying principle which underlies the British domination of India. "There is no determination more fixed and immovable in the will of England," to quote the words of another great Viceroy, "than eventually to evolve from its present intricate and imperfectly adjusted mechanism a homogeneous community so well-balanced and co-ordinated, so united in its material interests and its moral convictions as to form a loyal, patriotic, and compacted whole."¹ And the heart and core of this movement, the real solvent which is working this miracle, is unquestionably the introduction of English education in India, which, according to Seeley, "remains the great landmark in the history of the Indian Empire, considered as an institution of civilisation."

And the representative Indians of to-day, the children of this Western civilisation, "trained in Western education," are striving to win for their country "Western institutions," and thus fulfil that mission which Macaulay pictured for them in 1833, and which, according to that wise and beneficent prophet, "would herald the proudest day in the annals of England." And a study of the career and achievements of the great Indians who, since the days of Raja Ram Mohan Ray, have devoted their lives to the service of India, abundantly proves that their labours have contributed in no small measure to the uplifting of their motherland. "The last half-century has seen the erection of a mighty edifice in India. Englishmen have placed the bricks, but Indians themselves have supplied the mortar."²

III

Nor are the leaders of Indian thought, the pioneers of the Indian national movement, unaware of the complexities of the present situation, or oblivious of the claims of England and of those noble-hearted Englishmen who have made the regeneration of India the primary duty of their lives.

¹ Speech of Lord Dufferin, Feb. 1887.

² "Glimpses of Hidden India," by "John Law," p. 231.

How to reconcile the claims of racial nationalism with the claims of that imperial and composite patriotism, which, according to Lord Curzon, "the Indian may share with the Englishman," is a problem which will have to be grappled with not only by all genuine Indian patriots, but also by all those noble Englishmen who set the good of India above the mere perpetuation of their own national predominance. And the key-note of the life and labours of Romesh Chunder Dutt, the driving energy which impelled him to such unremitting and ceaseless toil, is to be found in his unswerving devotion to the cause of his motherland—not in subordination to, nor at the sacrifice of, his loyalty to the British Crown, but in a harmonious and reasoned co-ordination of the two sentiments. On the one hand, to lead India in the path which will end one day in her taking her place among the nations of the modern world, and, on the other, to bring home to the rulers of the country the wisdom of associating educated Indians more and more in the task of the administration of their own country, and thus effectually deepening and broadening the foundations of the Empire, were the twin inspirations of his life.

Amongst the band of noble and strenuous workers who have laid the foundations of true nationalism in India, there is hardly a more commanding figure or a more unremitting worker than he; and from few Indians has the motherland received such high, unselfish, silent, and enduring service as was offered at her shrine by that gifted son. To the Government, whose servant he was, he rendered equally lasting service. Through him, more than through the medium of any other Indian, has India learnt the value of the rarer gifts of the English character—the love of independence, truth, patriotism, and an unflagging devotion to duty; and his whole life was a living demonstration of that true "intermingling of the East and West," the attainment of which is perhaps the highest mission of England in India.

IV

Of John Stuart Mill, Lord Morley has written : "From the beginning to the end of his career he was forced into the polemical attitude over the whole field ; into an incessant and manful wrestle for what he thought true and right against what he regarded as false or wrong." The same polemical attitude obtrudes itself in most of Mr. Dutt's political writings. In all the important questions of administrative reform for which he waged such ceaseless war, he was far too anxious to uphold the Indian position to aim at the speculative calmness of a political philosopher. He was far too deeply engrossed in the interests at stake to rise to the clear vision of an impersonal critic. His impatience to secure a hearing for his side of a case not seldom obliterated a true sense of proportion, and he returned to the charge time after time over the same field, but always with unexhausted and inexhaustible vigour. Style and literary brilliancy were sacrificed in the all-absorbing desire to drive home a point, or vindicate a just grievance of the Indian people. Yet he was never blind to the claims of an opposing view, and there was no publicist of his age engaged in the discussion of Indian problems, who took such infinite trouble to study and master details, and to gather first-hand information from the people themselves, whose cause he fought. At the time when Mr. Dutt died, there was hardly another man who excelled him in the knowledge of the real needs and aspirations of the people of India as a whole, and who was so thoroughly at home with the different aspects and vicissitudes of all the great Indian administrative questions which have agitated the public mind during the last half-century. Nor was his view of Indian subjects parochial or dwarfed by a regard for considerations of the hour only. He was a ripe scholar, and was as familiar with the social and political institutions of ancient and modern India as with the political literature and institutions of modern and mediæval Europe.

V

A man is but the product of his age. It is not in every country and during every age that truly great achievements are possible. What type of a great man is India during this transition stage capable of producing? Has the Indian citizen of to-day a better chance of shining in the sphere of action or of thought? Is true statesmanship, the worship of the goddess of political wisdom, within the reach of the sons of a subject nation? In the field of literature, too, are the doors of the shrine of true literature really open to him? In what language is he to clothe his thoughts, if his productions are not to share the fate of ephemeral exotics? What language is destined to be the national language of India of the future? A critic must weigh these and similar questions before he seeks to assign a place for Mr. Dutt.

What, after all, is the true essence of greatness in a man? Is he to be judged by his achievements alone? Or is it the power of his will, his character, the loftiness of his purpose, his resistance to the tyranny of self, and an unswerving devotion to duty against many odds and difficulties, that deserve our truest admiration?

The inspiring beacon-light of Romesh Chunder Dutt's life cannot be better described than in his own language, when, standing on the top of the North Cape in July 1886, "and gazing over the sublime and limitless ocean beyond the last frontier of human habitation," his imagination raised before his mental vision the picture of the India to come:—

"I will not conceal the pain and humiliation which I felt in my inmost soul," he wrote, "as I stood on that memorable night among representatives of the free and advancing nations of the earth rejoicing in their national greatness. Champagne was drunk on the top of the hill, and Germans and Frenchmen, Englishmen and Americans, pressed us to share their hospitality. I accepted their offer with thanks on my lips, but I felt within me that I had no place beside them. May we, in the course

of years, progress in civilisation and in self-government, in mercantile enterprise and in representative institutions, even as the young English Colonies in Australia are doing year by year. And may our sons' sons, when they come to Europe, feel that India can take her place among the great advancing countries of the earth. Let us trust to the future, but trust still more to our honest work and hard endeavour. There is not a race in Europe, or in the whole world, but has gained its place by hard, severe, unremitted struggle and toil. And if we too, each individual among us, learn to work honestly and truly for our country, we cannot fail."

And nobly did Romesh Dutt play his part. Along nearly every avenue of intellectual and material progress did he seek to show the way to his countrymen. And in order to awaken a true spirit of nationalism amongst them, and to stimulate their highest and noblest aspirations, there was no labour, however arduous and exacting, which he did not manfully and cheerfully undertake. Nor must we judge him only by the results as we see them to-day. In many spheres he and the noble band of workers, English and Indian, with whom he worked, have only sown the seeds. Who can foretell what the tree will be ?

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