

DADABHAI NAOROJI:

The Grand Old Man

of India



DADABHAI NAOROJI
(1913)

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*The Grand Old Man
of India*

by

R. P. MASANI



With a Foreword by

MAHATMA
GANDHI

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WOKING

FOREWORD

IT was on September 4, 1888, that I sailed from Bombay for London with three letters of introduction, the most precious being for the G.O.M. of India, Dadabhai Naoroji. The writer was a Maharashtrian doctor, a friend of the family. The worthy doctor told me the G.O.M. did not know him personally, in fact he had never even had the *darshan* of the G.O.M. "But," said the doctor, "what does it matter? Everyone knows him and adores him as India's great son and champion. He has exiled himself for us. I claim to know him by his service of India. You will see that my letter will serve you just as well as if I had known him personally. The fact is, you need no introduction to him. Your being an Indian is sufficient introduction. But you are a youngster, untravelled and timid. This letter will give you courage enough to go to the G.O.M. and all will be smooth sailing for you." And so it was. When I reached London, I soon found that Indian students had free access to the G.O.M. at all hours of the day. Indeed, he was in the place of father to every one of them, no matter to which province or religion they belonged. He was there to advise and guide them in their difficulties. I have always been a hero-worshipper. And so Dadabhai became real Dada to me. The relationship took the deepest root in South Africa, for he was my constant adviser and inspiration. Hardly a week passed without a letter from me to him describing the condition of Indians in South Africa. And I well remember that whenever there was a reply to be expected, it came without fail in his own handwriting, in his inimitably simple style. I never received a typed letter from him. And during my visits to England from South Africa I found that he had for office a garret perhaps eight feet by six feet. There was hardly room in it for another chair. His desk, his chair, and the file of papers filled the room. I saw that he wrote his letters in copying ink and press-copied them himself.

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The story of a life so noble and yet so simple needs no introduction from me or anybody else. May it be an inspiration to the reader even as Dadabhai living was to me!

M. K. GANDHI

October 19, 1938

PREFACE

IT is given to but few to live so full and complete a life as that of Dadabhai Naoroji. In India longevity is rarely associated with strenuous intellectual labour and political activity. Dadabhai¹ was a remarkable exception to the general rule.

When this herald of self-government for India was born in Bombay in 1825, the independence of certain South American States had just been recognized, and the New World had been called into existence "to redress the balance of the Old." In England it was the reign of King George IV; in India, the East India Company, though still a trading corporation, held sway. When the new-born babe was cutting his teeth, the Governor of Bombay, Mountstuart Elphinstone, was speculating on the consequences of his educational policy and the time when the fitness of the people to govern themselves should lead to voluntary or enforced transfer of power into their hands. When Dadabhai was a lad of nine, learning the English alphabet, Macaulay was writing his historic minutes in favour of English education, minutes which were to determine the subsequent course of Indian education and progress.

When, after the "Mutiny," India was placed under the direct government of the Crown, Dadabhai was a young partner in the first Indian commercial firm established in England, a philosopher-trader who startled his partners by his idealism in business, a patriot who was concerned more with the prestige and welfare of his country than with profits. When Gladstone opened his Irish campaign in the House of Commons, Dadabhai started his Indian campaign in England, educating the British on their responsibilities in India and demonstrating to them by relentless statistics and remorseless logic how India was being bled under the prevailing system of administration. When Lord Ripon

¹ Following Indian usage, the hero of this story will be called by his first name, Dadabhai. Naoroji, the name by which he was called in England, was his father's name.

inaugurated the era of local self-government in India, Dadabhai had already made a name for himself as an authority on Indian economics and politics, engaged in a strenuous struggle to secure for the sons of India an increasing share in the administration of their own country. When Lord Curzon attempted to put back the clock and when New India was in open revolt against the autocratic Viceroy, the hero of our story was past four score years, still carrying on a country-wide platform campaign in the United Kingdom, demanding redress of India's wrongs and proclaiming self-government as the only remedy.

During the closing years of Queen Victoria's reign Dadabhai entered the House of Commons as a Gladstonian and an ardent advocate of Home Rule. In the House and on the public platform he demanded that British rule in India should be dominated by British principles. In the year 1911 he had the happiness to welcome Queen Victoria's grandson—King George V—to the shores of India. Three years later, when the Great War broke out, he made a stirring appeal to the people to stand by the side of the British Empire. At the same time he impressed upon British statesmen the wisdom of granting to India the same rights of self-government within the Empire as had been conceded to the Dominions. He learnt from friends in England that epoch-making reforms, heralding the dawn of self-government, were well on the way. He was not, however, destined to see the fruition of his life-long dream; the end came sooner than expected, seven weeks before the historic declaration of August 20, 1917.

The story of a life which thus spanned several memorable epochs in the history of India and left its impress on the progress of the people is, surely, worth telling. I could have wished that the work had been undertaken by one who had breathed the same political air as he breathed and been associated with him, for at least some years, in his manifold activities. In 1911 I offered to sit at the feet of Dadabhai and to take notes for the future biographer. A friend to whom I unburdened my mind said: "Gokhale intends to write the biography and he has arranged to send his assistant

to Dadabhai for notes and reminiscences." "Nothing better," I replied. Gokhale, however, predeceased Dadabhai by two years without having begun the work.

In these pages I have tried to give as faithful an account as possible of a simple but heroic life devoutly dedicated to the service of humanity. It is based mainly on Dadabhai's private papers. Unfortunately, a large collection of documents relating to his early activities was found to be worm-eaten and was destroyed when his house was acquired, during his absence in England, by the Bombay Improvement Trust. The story of that period had, therefore, to be founded on such data as I could get from personal inquiries and various publications. The material for the remainder of his life, from 1876 onwards, was there, but it had suffered from the ravages of time and transport. The task of examining, single-handed, during my leisure hours, all such faded and crumbling papers seemed beyond me. It was, however, possible for me to pay undivided attention to the work during the last twelve months.

It seems to me that the delay in writing this biography is not an unmixed evil. I often heard people speak derisively, during recent years, of constitutional methods of agitation, the key-note of the policy of Congressmen of the past generation. I also noticed that faith in British justice—the rock on which that policy was based—had been fading. The times were out of joint. The Congress, during the last two decades, was driven to pursue the policy of non-co-operation and civil disobedience. Who, in such times, would have heeded Dadabhai's advice to hold fast to constitutional methods or shared his faith and his hopes in British character and British justice?

During the days of the civil disobedience campaign people asked: "What would Dadabhai do, were he alive today?" The remnants of the Old Congress gave one answer; New India gave another. When I met Mahatma Gandhi on board the *S.S. Pilsna* in December 1931, during his voyage to Bombay, after the Round Table Conference, I referred the matter to him specifically.

"Don't you think," I asked, "Dadabhai's policy, which the present generation ridicules as a mendicant policy, was the right one, considering the circumstances then prevailing?"

"Yes," he replied.

Then, promptly anticipating my second question, he added:

"And I believe that if he were alive to-day he would follow the same policy that I have been pursuing for the last few years."

How far this belief was justified, how far Dadabhai's own latter-day utterances, which have been unreservedly cited in this book, lend support to it, may be left for the reader to judge.

Happily, there is now a truce between Government and the Congress. After years of boycott of Councils, Congress ministries are now in office in most provinces. Heretofore the history of India has been the history of an alien bureaucracy out of tune with the political pulsations of the people. Now commences the era of national government. Several fundamental issues, however, still remain to be settled. Moreover, many fear that the ship of co-operation may founder on the rock of "Complete Independence." After all, it is a question of definition and adjustment, and Mahatma Gandhi may be trusted, if called upon, to cut the Gordian knot. Such being the vista of possibilities opened out by the current policy of co-operation and constitutional progress, the present appears to be an opportune moment to make Dadabhai live again and to recall and revivify his stirring words of reproof as well as of hope. The story of his untiring effort for peaceful and orderly progress, hampered at every stage by the bureaucracy, has for the British Government and nation, as well as for the people of India, a lesson writ in tears and sorrows and suffering.

Several small sketches of Dadabhai's career were written during his lifetime. To these, and also to Messrs. Natesan & Co.'s compilation of his speeches and writings, my acknowledgments are due. I am also indebted to Mr. C. F. Andrews, Deewan Bahadur, K. M. Jhaveri, and Mr. S. T. Sheppard, who have evinced keen interest in the progress of this biography and favoured me with valued suggestions. I had to approach numerous persons in India, England, and America for information or advice.

To all of them, particularly to Sir Frank Brown, Honorary Secretary, East India Association, I am grateful for willing assistance. Finally, I tender my thanks to Mahatma Gandhi for his Foreword. He is, so to say, the apostolic heir and successor to the place occupied by Dadabhai in the heart of the people of India. The Grand Old Man of India could not have wished for a more lion-hearted or a more noble-minded successor. No one has contributed more than this idol of the people towards the fulfilment of Dadabhai's dream of Home Rule, and there is none in India to-day so well qualified as he is to form an accurate estimate of the life and character of the great patriot.

R. P. M.

December 5, 1938

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