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**EVOLUTION OF LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
IN BOMBAY**



SIR PHEROZESHAH MERWANJI MEHTA

Bombay's leading citizen for more than a generation

EVOLUTION OF
LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT
IN BOMBAY

BY

R. P. MASANI

Formerly Municipal Secretary, Deputy Municipal Commissioner and
Municipal Commissioner for the City of Bombay

WITH A FOREWORD BY

S. T. SHEPPARD

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TO
THE MEMORY
OF
SIR PHEROZESHAH MERWANJI MEHTA
THAN WHOM
NO MORE SPLENDIDLY ENDOWED CITIZEN
EVER LABOURED AS A MEMBER
OF
THE MUNICIPAL CORPORATION OF BOMBAY
FOR THE WELFARE OF THE CITY
AND
WHO, AS A LEADING CITIZEN OF BOMBAY
FOR MORE THAN A GENERATION,
HAS LEFT BEHIND HIM
AN INSPIRING EXAMPLE
OF
SELF-SACRIFICING CIVIC SERVICE
UNIQUE IN THE ANNALS OF INDIA

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FOREWORD

A GOOD book needs no introduction, but the flattering request that I should write a foreword to this excellent book could scarcely be refused because it means that my friend, Mr. Masani, has recognized in me a fellow-student of the history of Bombay City. That history has for many years been to both of us a source of great and ever increasing interest, and I fully expect that the publication of this book will turn the thoughts of many who have as yet ignored the fascinating story of Bombay to its study and appreciation. Those who have already yielded to the charm of that study will not fail to find Mr. Masani's book of extraordinary interest and to those engaged in the municipal work of Bombay it must prove of lasting value, because it not only traces the evolution of local self-government in the city but shows how some of the most pressing problems of the day have defied all attempts to deal with them.

Bombay, for example, still has a fish-market conducted in the most primitive fashion. Governor Aungier, in many ways the greatest of our Governors, sought to solve this problem with the suggestion that the Court of Directors should send out fishmongers with their families for erecting a company of fishmongers so that better order might be observed. In this and in many other ways Aungier was ahead of his time, and these pages show how the efforts of reformers to deal with such questions as traffic regulations, licensing of liquor shops, gambling, paupers and so on were thwarted by incapacity to carry good intentions into effect. We inherit to-day the general principles of assessment of property laid down at the end of the eighteenth century and it is from

a 'Rule Ordinance and Regulation' passed more than a hundred years ago for the good order and civil government of the Island of Bombay that the municipal laws of to-day have really developed. The genius of Indian people for local self-government, which decayed owing to the centralization of Government, has yet to re-assert itself with all its pristine vigour. But the committee system of municipal administration, which some favour to-day, appears to be a throw-back to the tenth century ; and with a little more perseverance India may go back to the ninth century, to those happy days when there was a rule of debate forbidding the persistent obstruction of the proceedings of the assembly and providing that obstructionists should pay a fine for each offence.

I have mentioned but a few of the points on which Mr. Masani has much to say that is both fresh and interesting, merely to indicate the general interest of his subject and the more particular importance of its study to present-day administrators. It would be difficult to affirm that the municipality is wholly alive to the importance of its past history, but it has at least done something to encourage the study of the city's history by providing in the old Bombay rooms at the Victoria and Albert Museum the nucleus of a collection of historical material which may some day prove very valuable. But a good deal more remains to be done and, considering how incomplete is the collection of engravings alone in the old Bombay rooms, the municipality might well do more than it has done. Other objects, however, make stronger claims upon the strained financial resources of the municipality, and the encouragement of historical research is forgotten. I can, however, assert that much could be done with but comparatively little money, for the catalogues of London and other booksellers often point to bargains which should be

greedily seized by an enterprising municipality. And why do not the citizens of Bombay help to make that collection of pictures and maps worthy of their city? They could be of material assistance, but apparently lack the necessary stimulus to make them disgorge such objects of historical interest as they may possess.

Of course the most obvious way of extending interest in the history of Bombay would be for the University of Bombay to do something analogous to the step taken a few years ago by the University of London when, by the enterprise of the London County Council, it appointed its first Reader in the history and records of London. I have often heard it said that the University of Bombay, despite the widespread nature of its many interests, is not in close touch with the life of Bombay. That reproach—unless it means only that the University does not sufficiently touch the wealthy citizens of Bombay for donations—might to some extent be removed if it were to pay particular attention to, and encourage the study of, the city's history. That there is plentiful material to be explored and fresh lines of research to be opened up is clearly shown by Mr. Masani in this book. Anyone who has explored even one aspect or one chapter of Bombay history must have found for himself that attempts to write that history have as yet been little more than a scratching of the surface, and that there is an immense amount of valuable material to be brought to light by those who care to dig all at deeply. But the explorer is confronted with the initial difficulty that he has no guides such as, I suggest, the University might afford. He has an excellent series of finger-posts to history in the Gazetteer by the late Mr. S. M. Edwardes and in the notes for that work by Sir James Campbell. But there is not even a bibliography of Bombay, and no collection of books and pamphlets dealing with the history

of Bombay that can claim to be anything like complete. Recent years have seen the appearance of a number of monographs treating various aspects of that history, and Mr. Masani's book is the latest and most encouraging of those works to those who know how much historical spade-work has yet to be performed before anyone can attempt a history of Bombay City in the wider sense of the term. It is, after all, for Bombay men to elucidate the history of their own city, and Mr. Masani has in doing this followed in the footsteps of some notable pioneers such as da Cunha, Dinsha Wacha and Malabari. I hope I have not appeared to minimize the importance of those or any other writers' books when I have referred to the scantiness of the published history of Bombay: they have splendidly pointed the way to others.

Though another Pherozeshah Mehta may arise to show us what civic pride at its best may be and may achieve, perhaps the time has not yet come when it can be said that Bombay men have as a general rule that affection for and interest in their own city which, for example, Manchester men have in regard to Manchester. But surely that time will come and the University has it in its power, I firmly believe, to bring that time nearer to us. The would-be historian will then find his way made materially easier than it is at present, for he will know where to look for the manuscript records, the books, and the maps and pictures of Bombay which are relevant to his own particular line of research.

S. T. SHEPPARD

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INTRODUCTION

THE constitution of the Municipal Corporation of Bombay was until recently regarded as a model for self-governing institutions in India. The extension of the franchise to hundreds of voters marks the latest phase in its evolution. Act VI of 1922 abolishes the various franchises that existed under the Act of 1888 and substitutes a uniform franchise whereby the occupancy of a building or a portion of a building the rental value of which is not less than Rs. 10 per month qualifies the occupant for registration as a voter. It is said that the Corporation is thus reconstructed on a democratic basis. So long, however, as the system of nominations clings to the constitution, so long as suffrage is not universal, it cannot strictly be called democratic. Nevertheless, this latest enactment is a distinct step forward towards democratizing the Corporation. It has unquestionably led to a growth of interest in the municipal government of the city and given a great impetus to the training of the inert mass of the population in the work of self-government.

It is not enough, however, that the mass of the population should pulsate with new ideals. Without proper guidance, or under the influence of enthusiasts bent on volcanic changes, such an awakening may prove positively harmful. If popular franchise is to be used to the best purpose, the electorates must have a training in citizenship. As long as suffrage is uninformed, a democracy is nothing but an oligarchy controlled by a few who know how to advance the interests of themselves and their satellites. If we want real government by the people for the people, let us see to it that public opinion is well-informed. Let us assist the people in discerning the essence of constitutional law and custom, ancient as well as modern. Let them realize that in an ideal

system of local government every man and woman must take an active interest in the administration of their city, just as they did in the halcyon days of Hindu civilization. Let them not forget the simple lesson of history that a nation can evolve a healthy and vigorous form of government only on the lines prescribed by its own individuality and history, and that therefore the most sensible and reliable means of developing a country is to develop its inhabitants.

Evolution is merely the linking of the past to the present. Between the present and the past lies a vast region of history. One cannot vividly portray the progress made during the interval without an historical background. Without the knowledge of what has preceded the recent reforms it will not be possible for us to grapple intelligently and successfully with the problems of the present, nor can we hope, without a sense of historical development, to find a key to the solution of the problems of the future. The *Bombay City Gazetteer* and Mr. Michael's compilation¹ give us an outline of the history of the Municipal Corporation of Bombay, while Sir Dinsha Wacha gives us a rather discursive but none the less fascinating legislative history of the constitution from the year 1865 down to the reform of 1887.² All authorities on the subject begin the story of the constitution with the Charter Act of 1793 (33 Geo. III) when the Governor-General obtained powers to appoint Justices of the Peace for the municipal administration of the presidency towns, also to appoint scavengers in those areas and to levy what would now be called a sanitary rate. The story of local government during the hundred and thirty years of British rule that preceded that enactment and of the system of management of local

¹ *History of the Bombay Municipal Corporation.*

² *Bombay Municipal Government.*



THE HON'BLE SIR DINSHA EDULJI WACHA

Bombay's veteran publicist and historian and a stern critic of Municipal Finance.

affairs in pre-British days, still remains to be told. Moreover, the fragmentary account we have of the interesting experiments tried between the years 1793 and 1865 has many lacunae to be filled. I have, therefore, endeavoured in this work to supplement the previous accounts with such additional information as I could glean from published and unpublished records concerning the dawn of municipal government in this city, and to give as complete a narrative as possible of the growth of the constitution from the earliest times, tracing the different phases of its development down to the latest reform embodied in Act VI of 1922. I have at the same time taken the opportunity to incorporate in this work the result of recent researches in the culture-history of India which reveal a remarkable development, in bygone days, of local institutions through which the communal life of the country expressed itself in different spheres, politics and civics included. I trust the information gathered on this point will throw some fresh light on a very old question and dispel the notion that the existing system of local government is altogether foreign to the genius of Indians. I hope it will also enable us to realize that, although during the last sixty years of our city's history, freedom in local government has broadened down from precedent to precedent, although substantial progress has been made during the interval, the ground lost since the disintegration of the ancient bodies has not yet been regained. Alike in respect of the frame-work of the constitution and in respect of our conception of the functions and prerogatives of local government, we are in these days of democratic ideals considerably behind the "great men" of the village communities of hoary antiquity. It may be hoped that a comparative study of local government on the lines indicated will deepen the spirit of civic

brotherhood for which the citizens of Bombay are deservedly noted and quicken their desire to attain the full measure of local autonomy enjoyed by the denizens of towns and villages during the early days. May we also hope that it will induce in them a sense of orderly development which is as essential for the vigour and efficiency of corporate life as for the vitality and utility of individual life?

It now remains for me to acknowledge my indebtedness to those who have helped me in connexion with this work. It was impossible for me single-handed to explore all the old records scattered in different places. My son Minocheher undertook to dive in the ocean of the Secretariat records and I am grateful to him for the care and discernment with which he has culled for me many a pearl of useful information. My thanks are also due to Mr. G. B. Laghate for similarly lightening my task by ransacking the works of reference in the High Court Library and old newspaper files, and to Mr. L. W. Michael for searching the records and books in the India Office and the British Museum for a solution of some conundrums which I referred to him. I am also indebted to Mr. S. M. Edwardes,¹ author of *The Rise of Bombay*, for going through the manuscripts and making several suggestions. To Mr. S. T. Sheppard, Editor of the *Times of India* and author of *Bombay Place Names and Street Names*, than whom I know no more enthusiastic and erudite student of the history of Bombay, I tender my heartfelt thanks for his valued foreword to this book and for many useful suggestions.

21st March, 1925

R. P. MASANI

¹ In the death of this gifted historian, since these lines were written, Bombay has lost a student of local lore whose place it will not be easy to fill.

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