

INDIAN  
CONSTITUTIONAL  
REFORM

*VIEWED IN THE LIGHT OF HISTORY*

BY

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## PREFACE

THE authors of the *Report on Indian Constitutional Reforms* (1918) insist that 'full and public discussion is necessary', and ask that their proposals may be allowed to 'benefit by reasoned criticism both in England and India, official and non-official alike'. That comprehensive invitation dispenses with the necessity of apology for intervention in the discussion by any person equipped to a reasonable degree with qualifications entitling him to form and express an opinion on the subject. My official experience during twenty-nine years in revenue, 'settlement', executive, judicial, and administrative duties gives me some title to deal with the question of reform from the point of view of an officer who has had in his time practical knowledge of the working of the government machine. The study of Indian history in all its branches for almost half a century entitles me to speak with some authority concerning the historical background which lies behind the stage on which the drama of present-day politics is played. It is simply impossible to understand modern India even tolerably well without a moderate acquaintance with the past in which the roots of the present are so deeply buried. The authors of the Report, in their haste to give India the benefit of up-to-date democratic formulae, have shown little regard to the lessons of history. The defects of the Report in that respect, which have been noticed by several critics, forced themselves upon my attention, and I could not help

feeling that my special knowledge might possibly be of service if placed at the disposal of readers interested in the reform problem, while unskilled in that unpopular subject, Indian History. My inclination would lead me to continue my life-long studies and to avoid the muddy waters of current politics. But India has done much for me, and now, before my working days come to an end, I should like to do something for India, by contributing my mite towards the solution of the dangerous problem which Parliament must solve one way or another without long delay. It is unnecessary to dilate upon the dangers of the experiments advocated by the Secretary of State, the Viceroy, and many reformers of less note. The rather lurid language of the Report about the 'disaster' and 'misery' which will follow on the failure of their plans is even stronger than any words I should care to use. It is evident that their confidence lacks robustness. Perhaps Mr. J. A. R. Marriott, M.P., may not be altogether wrong when he calls the scheme of the Report 'a Gargantuan gamble'. If there be any truth in that view, which is not inconsistent with the rhetoric of the authors, it is permissible to remark that the Indian Empire is a large stake to play with.

It is wrong to suppose that the Report 'holds the field', and that the issue is 'the Report or nothing'. That view is wholly erroneous, as will be apparent to anybody who has read, as I have done, the numerous books by H.H. the Aga Khan, Mr. Vyasa Rao, and other authors, not to speak of the multitude of speeches, articles, and pamphlets pouring continually from the press.<sup>1</sup> The Report omits much that needs consideration and includes much that could be spared.

<sup>1</sup> A very useful work for reference is *Indian Constitutional Documents (1600-1918)*, by Panchanandan Das Mukherji, 2nd ed., vol. i, 808 pages, vol. ii, 100 pages : Thacker, Spink & Co., Calcutta, 1918 ; price 18 rupees.

Recent events, and above all the Great War, fraught as it is with incalculable consequences, render a change in the method of governing India imperative. That cardinal fact is acknowledged by me quite as heartily and sincerely as it is by Mr. Montagu and Lord Chelmsford. But I do not feel bound to admire the whole of their work or to accept their principles without demur. These principles, on the contrary, demand the most searching scrutiny and, in my personal opinion, are largely erroneous. I agree that 'self-government' and the increased employment of Indians in the public service, as stated in the 'Pronouncement', are objects not only desirable, but attainable within certain limits. The emphasis laid upon those limits in this essay is imposed by the historical method of treatment and should not be misunderstood. It does not imply hostility to reasonable, practical reforms. I say frankly that I think it is a mistake to seek the distant 'goal of responsible government' at present. The premature chase after 'responsible government' is the cause of nearly all the illogical and contradictory recommendations of the Report, as its authors confess in paragraph 354. If they had postponed the consideration of 'responsible government' to a more convenient season they would have done much better. They have run to some extent ahead of the 'Pronouncement' which they profess to follow. 'Responsible government' in the English parliamentary sense may or may not be a suitable 'goal' for Indian politicians, but, however that may be, it is better left alone just now. Even without it the reformers have plenty to do.

Chapters 3 and 4 of this essay treat faithfully and candidly of certain disagreeable, inconvenient facts, which are shirked or slurred over by the authors of the Report. It is no use to pretend blindness to awkward realities which are not

affected by the pretending. Only the truth can make us free. The excessive optimism of the Secretary of State and the Viceroy, as illustrated by the quotations in Chapter 5, is not justified by the realities of the situation.

In the concluding chapter I have attempted to indicate methods by which genuine, useful reforms seem to be attainable.

My whole adult life for fifty years has been dedicated to India, and the sole purpose of this little book is to offer some help, however small, to the persons, especially the members of both Houses of Parliament, who are responsible for the final decision which concerns India so deeply, and England also. I do not very much care whether particular suggestions are accepted or not. The essential thing is that the whole of the facts, agreeable or disagreeable, convenient or inconvenient, should be faced squarely, and that the decision should be based upon truth, not upon illusion. The 'Māyā', which 'sends forth an imaged world, just as a magician produces illusive effects', permeates the Report.

V. A. S.

OXFORD, Dec. 18, 1918.

## I.

'That sound public opinion, which it is so essential to carry along with every branch of our free government, has been very partially exercised with regard to Indian affairs. The problem of the best mode of governing that country is so difficult to be solved, the interests affected by it so remote and complicated, that few have given it any deep attention' (Sir John Malcolm, *The Political History of India*, 1826, vol. ii, p. 114).

## II.

'Hitherto they [*scil.* "the voiceless millions of India"] have regarded the official as their representative in the councils of government; and now we have to tear up their faith by the roots, to teach them that in future they must bring their troubles to the notice of an elected representative—further, that they have the power to compel his attention. We have to bring about the most radical revolution in the people's traditional ideas of the relation between ruler and ruled, and it will be a difficult and even dangerous business, for it is neither safe nor easy to meddle with traditional ideas in India. Unless the political changes now in contemplation are accompanied by an educational campaign directed to awaking in all classes alike, but especially in this particular class, a sense of citizenship, disaster will certainly result' (from an official report quoted without dissent in the Montagu-Chelmsford Report, paragraph 137, p. 113).

## III.

'It would be a disaster for India to be forced into the narrow form of constitutionalism that developed, with its essential condition of two great rival parties, in England through historical and natural causes, but is now confessedly in need of reform. . . . Constitutional government has succeeded only where it has been cast in a form natural to the history and development of the people. . . . Why should India be

forced to imitate a system of government evolved through many centuries in a geographically small country with two historical parties? . . . We want self-government, we want responsible government in the widest sense of the term—that of ultimate responsibility to the people—but we do not want our nascent national institutions to be put into swaddling clothes, because one word [*scil.* “responsible”] instead of another [*scil.* “self-”] was chosen by the British War Cabinet for its public declaration’ (His Highness the Aga Khan, *India in Transition*: Philip Lee Warner, London, 1918, pp. 165, 166).

N.B.—The thick type is not in the originals.



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