

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

(1868-1943)

Sir Ganesh Dutta Singh—who was, for the unprecedentedly long period of fourteen years, a Minister in Bihar and Orissa—created a record in munificence by giving away, for public purposes, by far the greater part of his emoluments. His total benefaction to the Patna University, for educational scholarships, amounted to about fourlakhs of rupees. The way he spent the money earned by him, as a Minister, justly redounded to his public spirit and self-sacrifice, and formed a unique record, which no other Minister in India had hitherto tried to emulate. Living in a severely simple style—what for many others would be a life of privations—in order to save money solely for charitable and educational purposes, he set a new standard of public duty, in India, to all who draw on public revenues, for rendering services to the State. There can be no doubt that posterity will justly regard him as a great philanthropist, and give him a place of honour amongst those who willingly suffered hardships, so that the poor might benefit by their savings.

To be able to make a correct and fair appraisal of the work and worth of Ganesh Dutta, one should

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

keep in mind the important fact that there is often a great difference between a person as an official and as a man—though there are, of course, exceptions to that rule. Sir Ganesh Dutta, as a Minister, came in for a good deal of criticism for his ministerial acts and policy. But the admiration for Ganesh Dutta, the man, should be as profound, as the criticisms of his official activities had been bitter on many occasions. If his ministerial policy and administrative acts provoked controversy, and even acerbity, at times, he justly earned renown by cheerfully giving away by far the major portion of his salary, earned as a Minister, for the benefit of higher education in his native province, and for other beneficent purposes. He retired from Ministership, on the introduction of Provincial Autonomy in 1937, after having held office continuously for a period of fourteen years, from 1923, when he was first appointed in that capacity.

As Minister, Ganesh Dutta was responsible for some contentious legislations, and more than that for an administrative policy which evoked, not unoften, bitter acrimony. Himself a strict teetotaler, he introduced the outstill system as a part of his Excise policy, which led to ebullition of feeling, in the course of discussions, on the subject, in the provincial Legislature—as it was believed to be calculated to raise a much larger revenue from amongst

SOME EMINENT BEHAR CONTEMPORARIES

the poorer classes, at the cost of their health and economic condition. This is but one of the several instances when feelings ran high against some of the measures sponsored by him during his term of office. But his bitterest critics did not, and could not, but admit that he had no axe of his own to grind, and that whatever he did was solely in the interest of, and with the motive of, doing good to the province, according to the best of his convictions and lights. That this should have been the view of even his political opponents naturally redounded to his credit as a Minister. But while it would not be impossible to cite the examples of other Ministers, in the country, who would favourably compare with him as such, there is none that I know of to be compared to him as an unrivalled philanthropist.

II.

Ganesh Dutta was born in February, 1868, in the Patna district, of respectable middle-class parents. He began to study English at the rather advanced age of eighteen. He passed the Entrance (or Matriculation) examination in the first division, in 1891, at the age of twenty-three, and secured a monthly scholarship of Rs. 10, and a silver medal for proficiency in Mathematics. In 1893 he passed the Intermediate Examination, and in 1895 he graduated himself. The Bachelor of Law degree he obtained in 1897, when he was nearly thirty. After

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

practising for seven years in the District Courts, at Patna, he was enrolled as a Vakil in the Calcutta High Court, in 1904. He practised in that Court, for nearly twelve years, till the establishment, in 1916, of a High Court, at Patna, when he got himself enrolled as a Vakil in the highest judicial tribunal of his native province. He was elected a member of the Bihar and Orissa Legislative Council in 1921, and selected as a Minister in March, 1923, by the then Governor of Bihar and Orissa. Till then Ganesh Dutta had led a more or less uneventful life. Though he had practised for twelve years in the Calcutta High Court, he had not attained in the profession a particularly prominent position. Even during the years that he practised in the Patna High Court, from 1916 till 1923, he was not regarded amongst the front rank lawyers. It was only when he was appointed a Minister that the qualities, which made him so influential a member of the Provincial Government, were brought into relief.

Ganesh Dutta had thus a chequered career as a lawyer in the High Courts in Calcutta and at Patna. But as a member of the Legislative Council of Bihar and Orissa, to which he was elected in the general election of 1920, he came into prominence by inveighing against Government, and making things lively in the Legislative Council, until he became a Minister, when he appeared before the public in, so

SOME EMINENT BEHAR CONTEMPORARIES

to say, a conspicuously new role. On his election to the legislature he had retired from practice, to be able to apply all his time and energy to the new duties that devolved upon him. For two years as a member of the Council, he worked incessantly, and in budget discussions, and on other occasions, he displayed considerable talents in carrying on debates. This marked him out as a tenacious and well-informed debater, and he came to command respect for his ability and character as a public man. The two Ministers at that time, in Bihar and Orissa, were Mr. (afterwards Sir) Muhammad Fakhruddin (in charge of the portfolios of Education and Industry), and Mr. Madhu Sudan Das (in charge of Local Self-Government and Medical Relief). When Mr. Madhu Sudan Das, the Oriya Minister, suddenly resigned office in March, 1923 (as he could not work, he said, as freely as he desired to do), Ganesh Dutta naturally stepped into office, and for fourteen long years remained a Minister. He then became prominent by reason of his experience as a man of affairs, his strength of character, imperturbability of temper, and great tenacity of purpose in pursuing his policy.

III.

Of Ganesh Dutta Singh's work as Minister, in the field of legislation, I may recall even at this distance of time, that he was justly entitled to the credit of having placed on the statute-book a

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

liberally-conceived Local Self-Government Act, which was one of the best enacted under the dyarchic regime, as it enfranchised the District and Municipal Boards by vesting in them the right to elect their own Chairman, and also larger powers of administration and control. Of his administrative activities, those who have no inside knowledge or experience of the working of the machinery of Government, during the dyarchic regime, (that is, as Members of Government, whether as Executive Councillors or Ministers), are naturally prone to give credit to a Minister for establishing public institutions which were opened during his term of office, and that may be said to be technically correct, so far as it goes. But in making a fair appraisal of the work of a Minister under dyarchy (1921-1937), it is important to remember that though a Minister might have been able to evolve schemes, he could not carry them out, if the Finance Member of the Government could not see his way to agree to provide funds for them, in the budget.

This very important aspect of the constitutional position of a Minister under dyarchy may not be appreciated by those who had not either worked as Ministers, or studied the question in all its bearings as discussed, for instance, in the Report of the Muddiman Committee (issued in 1925); but it is a truism to those who are familiar with the realities

SOME EMINENT BEHAR CONTEMPORARIES

of the situation under dyarchy. Viewed in this light the credit for having established institutions of utility should belong perhaps, in an equal, if not even in a larger measure, to the Finance Members, who had control of the public purse of the province, and thus exercised complete financial control over the Ministers' policy. But even keeping this constitutional limitation of the Minister under dyarchy in mind, credit should be awarded to Ganesh Dutta for his having successfully carried through some important projects of great utilitarian value—such as the establishment, in 1925, of the Prince of Wales' Medical College, at Patna; the Medical School, at Darbhanga; and the Indian Mental Hospital, at Ranchi; the Ayurvedic and Tibbi Schools at Patna, in 1926; the Sanatorium (for the treatment of patients suffering from tuberculosis) at Itki, in the Ranchi district; and the Pasteur Institute at Patna, in 1929. These cannot be classed amongst the more or less ephemeral projects of Ganesh Dutta's ministerial policy, and for founding them his name will be justly cherished by posterity in esteem and regard.

IV.

Ganesh Dutta's tenure of office for fourteen years as Minister was not only the longest held by anyone in India (or even in Britain), but was even more remarkable for his setting apart by far the greater

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

part of his salary for charitable and educational purposes, which had made his name famous throughout Bihar as a distinguished philanthropist. There is absolutely no instance in the history of modern India of any public man having lived so sternly simple a life, marked even by hardships, with the sole object of devoting the greater part of his earnings to advancing the cause of education, by means of awarding stipends and scholarships, to poor but deserving students. As the result of such an unparalleled self-sacrifice on his part, he had been able to place at the disposal of the public, through the medium of the Patna University, about four lakhs of rupees, with a view to advance the interests of higher education in his native province of Bihar. This is truly a unique record of which any servant of the State may justly be proud. But more than that his native province of Bihar may well claim the credit of having produced such a rare type of a philanthropist. Thus Ganesh Dutta had won greater laurels by his munificence in the cause of education than in the sphere of administration as a Minister. His philanthropy was unique in that he had the largeness of heart to make a gift of all his life's savings for the good of future generations of the people of Bihar, by depriving even his own descendants. There have been many, in this country, who had made charitable endowments of

SOME EMINENT BEHAR CONTEMPORARIES

much larger amounts than four lakhs. But there are few who had accumulated wealth just for the sake of establishing funds for the good and advancement of fellow-beings, by denying to themselves a life of ease and comfort, and submitting cheerfully to one of austere simplicity, and of even privations. In that way Ganesh Dutta was undoubtedly a greater benefactor than many others, and his munificence of greater value and importance than of those who have enough and to spare.

The conferment on Ganesh Dutta of the degree of Doctorate *honoris causa* by the Patna University, in 1933, was a fitting tribute to his splendid services to the cause of the educational advancement of the Biharees. His simplicity of life, high character, exemplary sacrifices for objects of public utility, and enthusiasm and driving power for causes that he had made his own, are beyond praise, and readily enlist unbounded appreciation and admiration, even by those who did not approve of some of his ministerial policies, and administrative acts and measures. At a farewell banquet given by Lord Curzon to Mr. Justice Ameer Ali—on the eve of his retirement from the Bench of the Calcutta High Court, in 1904—the Viceroy paid him a just compliment by saying that long after his judgments would have been forgotten, his literary works would continue to be read and admired; and this estimate had

SIR GANESH DUTTA SINGH

been proved to be absolutely correct. And it can similarly be predicted that long after Ganesh Dutta the Minister would cease to be remembered, Ganesh Dutta the philanthropist will continue to evoke the admiration of generations of Biharees yet unborn, so long as the Patna University will continue to exist, and scatter benefits to students and scholars from the great endowment established by him. Thus it may appositely be said of Ganesh Dutta, in the words of the poet, Gray, of the *Elegy* fame:

Large was his bounty, and his soul sincere.
Heaven did a recompense as largely send;
He gained from Heaven ('twas all he wished) a friend.