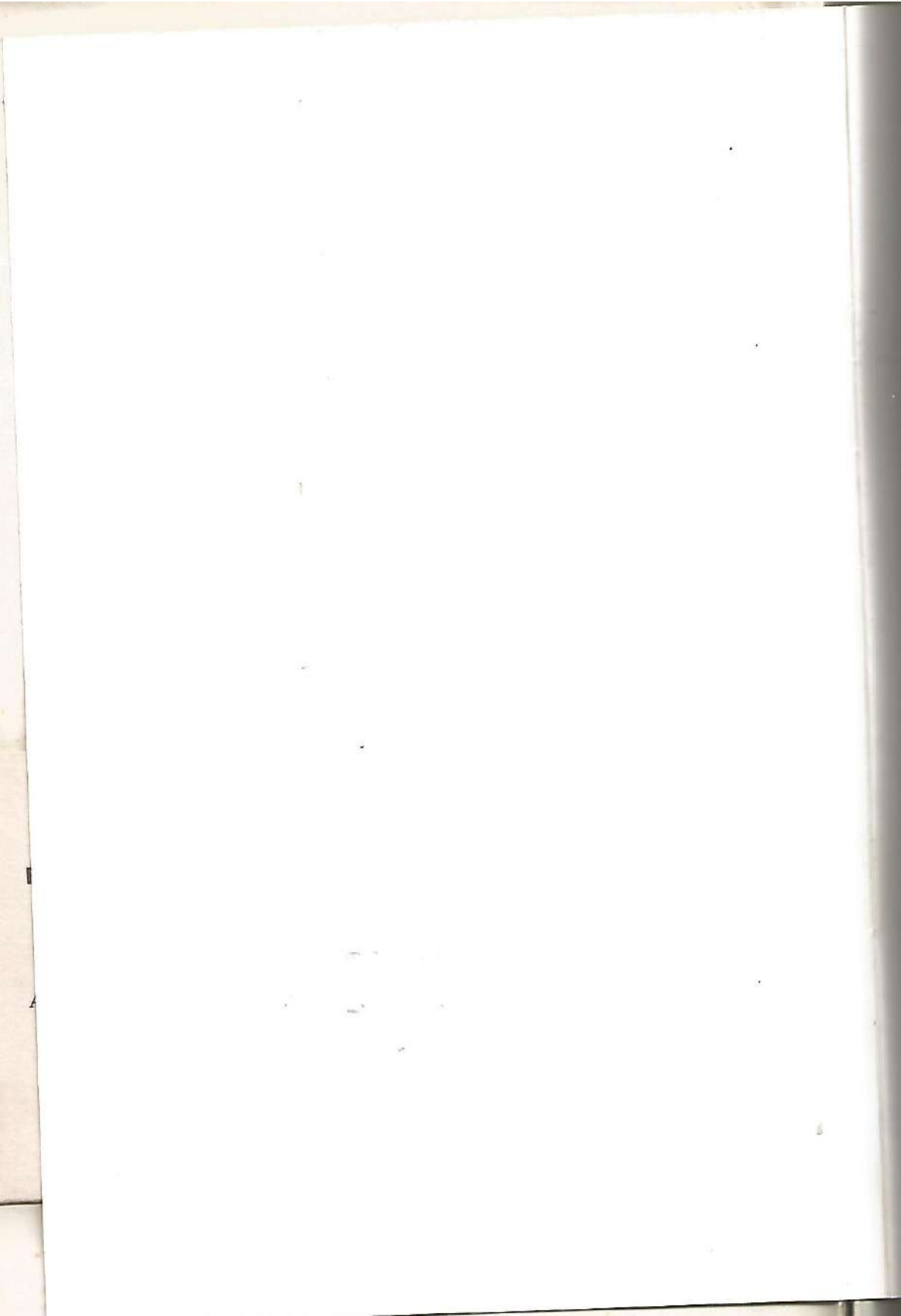


A HISTORY OF THE BENGAL CLUB

1970-2000

*(Addendum to the Bengal Club History 1827-1979
published in 1977)*





HISTORY OF THE BENGAL CLUB

1970-2000

The last three decades of the millennium rapidly saw a change in the composition of the membership of the Club and the nature of its activities. In 1959, rather belatedly, the Club had opened the door to Indian members and that too initially on a quota basis. By 2000 A.D. there were only three European Town Members of over ten years' standing. Whereas the first Indian President took office only in 1968, by 1977 the last European president finished his term and the last European to serve on the General Committee had left by 1986. From 1988 ladies could be members in their own right—a decision which must have made many members of previous generations turn in their graves. Earlier in 1983 widows of recently expired members were admitted into a category of Special Members enjoying all facilities but not entitled to vote.

In this period Town Membership strength grew from 230 to 698 despite fairly strict yardsticks being applied generally over the period to the qualification of the candidates. There is no doubt that had those in the management of the Club, even at the time of Indian Independence, had adequate vision, a debt-ridden Club would not have had to dispose of the magnificent Chowringhee frontage building. The earlier historian of the Club had regarded the original buyer—Grindlays Bank—as a white knight; regrettably the Bank soon after the purchase sold the property to a real estate developer and we have as our neighbour an ill-maintained tall and ugly structure. While the construction of that building was going on there were serious damages to the Club building. After acrimonious exchanges, the Club managed to get adequate compensation to effect the necessary repairs.

In 1970 the Club entered into a reciprocal arrangement with the Tollygunge Club whereby either Club offered against a subscription full facilities except for voting rights to those who opted for such reciprocity. For

a brief period of nearly a year in the early stages there was a hiatus when the Club withdrew from the arrangement. However, disputes were amicably settled. The terms of reciprocity have been reviewed from time to time. By 2000 A.D. the quota of either Club in the other was determined at 350. The arrangement is highly logical as it gives members of two like-minded Clubs in the city offering a different range of facilities the opportunity to use these at a rational cost.

The Club has struggled throughout this period to change the image of a lunchtime Club. Successive committees have endeavoured to find means of attracting a more spread out use of its excellent facilities but with limited success. A major breakthrough in 1977 was the creation of the Oriental Room, which allowed children to come into the premises directly from the car parking area. With developments in interior decoration and the menu over the years this has remained a popular restaurant.

Each General Committee has tried to organise special nights of gourmet fare, dance and music. The club springs to life on those occasions; otherwise the evenings remain somewhat forlorn. Successive attempts to get a card room going have failed; the billiard table had to be disposed of in 1977 as there were no enthusiasts and valuable space was being taken up.

A major event in this period was the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the Club on the 31st January 1977. A Member's Only banquet in formal attire was attended to capacity seating arrangement by one hundred and twenty five persons. Governor of West Bengal A.L. Dias was the Chief Guest; Sir John Thompson, the British High Commissioner, flew down from New Delhi for the occasion. Dessert over, a magnificent band of Gurkha Regiment bagpipers played their music in a parade round the hall. In an imaginative menu card the names of founders and presidents were wittily put in as given alongside.

On the next day, 1st February, the actual anniversary date, a ball was held. It was then decided to commemorate the day every year by holding an anniversary dinner. Furthermore as a permanent reminder of the occasion the



1827-1977

Commemorative Banquet

31st January, 1977

Toasts

The President of India

(Mr. M. R. Smith)

The Founders

(Mr. Arabinda Ray)

Our Guests

(Mr. A. W. B. Hayward)

Future Prosperity of the Club

(Mr. M. R. Smith)

Menu

Consomme Combermere

Beckti a la Outram

Mutton B' Irani

Chicken Choksey Curry

Tikka Kanga Kabab

Biscuit Monte Satow

Coffee Colville

Vegétarian

Crema de la Prinsep Asparagus Soup

Legumes Metcalfe

Orange Pilau Parekh

Keddie Matar Paneer Curry

Apoar Alu Dum

Woodroffe Vegetable Curry

Keswick Gobi Masala

Thai Baren Ray-tha

Biscuit Monte Satow

Coffee Colville

erstwhile Garden Room was converted to a very specially decorated dining room strictly for 16 sit down diners entitled Room 150. The room was provided with antique style furniture and special silver cutlery was obtained (by melting down battered old *aagdams*). Souvenirs of silver cufflinks, miniature *aagdams* and handpainted crockery depicting old Calcutta scenes were produced for members to purchase. The staff cooperated wonderfully in all activities and at their own expense presented a silver cobra to mark the occasion; this has its proud place in the Nagraj Bar.

Another occasion of note was the opening of Room 300 in 1989 to mark the tercentenary of the birth of Calcutta. The Chief Minister, Mr Jyoti Basu, graced a dinner attended by the members of the General Committee and Past Presidents with their spouses in the newly decorated room. The Millennium Banquet held on the last day of 1999 had a record attendance.

On many other occasions visitors of note used the Club facilities during the period. Mention may be made of the Prince of Wales, President Giri, the great footballer Pele and the members of visiting MCC teams.

The period was marked by cordial relationship with the staff where third generations of families have been serving. Three major festivities observed by the employees – Vishwakarma Puja, Janmashtami and Id-ul-Fitr-- are happily celebrated with members' participation. The annual drama of the staff is a major occasion in the Club's calendar. Over the years the Club's library has been consolidated since the trauma of the departure from the old building. Systems have been improved, storage modernised by airconditioning and a comfortable, elegant Reading Room provided. At the end of the period the Library had as many as 16000 books.

The residential quarters have been constantly updated and provide a major source of revenue. The public rooms other than Room 150 and Room 300, viz. Reynolds Room, the Main Dining Room, The Nagraj Bar and the Large Guest Room are regularly refurbished and renovated to suit altered needs. The latest addition, The Millennium Room, provides small but well-equipped reception/business meeting facilities.

The Club's finances have steadily improved and at the turn of the millennium the Reserves and Surplus stood at Rs. 22,641,777.

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Comparative figures of membership statistics through the period make interesting reading :

Category	1970	1985	2000
Town	230	743	698
Life	nil	25	121
Mofussil	63	235	279
Supernumerary	688	475	30
Special	nil	25	52
Reciprocal	nil	425	262

Moffusil members refer to members in India who do not reside in Calcutta. Supernumerary members are those who live abroad and can for a small fee maintain their membership. They are naturally difficult to trace since most have left the country for good; the Secretariat has a job in keeping track of them. In a major clearing up exercise between 1994 and 1995, for example, their numbers were reduced from 402 to 55.

Arabinda Ray

April 2001

LIST OF PRESIDENTS

(1971—2000)

1971—72	:	B.P. Ray	
1973	:	A.W.B. Hayward	
1974	:	C.R. Irani	
1975	:	P.K. Choksey	
1976	:	M.R. Smith	
1977	:	Arabinda Ray	
1978	:	Pran Prashad	
1979	:	Bhaskar Mitter	
1980	:	D.K. Basu	
1981	:	A.L. Mudaliar	
1982	:	K.K. Dutt	
1983	:	Dipak Roy	
1984	:	P.H. St. R. Surita	
1985	:	Dr. Tarun Banerjee	
1986	:	Dr. Dara P. Antia	
1987	:	Jahar Sengupta	
1988	:	Sukhendu Ray	
1989	:	Subimal Ghosh	
1990	:	P. Majumdar	
1991	:	N. M. Ghose	
1992	:	A. Majumdar	
1993	:	A. Majumdar	
1994	:	P. M. Narielvala	
1994	:	Arun K. Ghosh	
1995	:	B. N. Bhattacharjee	
1996	:	Aloke Mukherjea	cc/
1997	:	P. B. Ghosh	
1998	:	Sudipto Sarkar	
1999	:	P. K. Dutt	
2000	:	Dr. Tapan Kr. Banerjee	

