

# The Bengal Club in History



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#### INTRODUCTION

This book was originally planned as a single author history of the Bengal Club. The proposal for the writing of the book came from S.B. Ganguly, President, Bengal Club, 2004. H.R. Panckridge's A Short History of the Bengal Club 1827-1927 (1927) supplemented by R.I. Macalpine's The Bengal Club 1927-1970 (1970) was reprinted by the Club in 1997, but it was felt that there was a need to re-examine the history of the Club from a post-colonial perspective. It soon became apparent, however, that writing a new history of the Bengal Club was an impossible task as no archival records of the Club have been preserved. In the circumstances, the only viable alternative seemed to be to put together a book of essays by different contributors on The Bengal Club in History. It was felt that a range of perspectives on the Club, its history and its past and present role in society, would be a valuable collection combining personal reminiscence with a sense of history.

Of late, there has been a growing sense of debate within the Club between those who treasure the inherited sense of values, the status and grace that characterize the Bengal Club, and those who feel that, to be relevant in these changing times, the Club should not only change its membership profile but also the very ambience of the Club, its infrastructure, food and facilities. Debate is always welcome and is a sign of the vitality of any institution. The Bengal Club, while adapting to the needs of changing times, has been able to retain its unique position amongst the social clubs of Kolkata. Through various moments of crisis – the induction of Indian members, allowing women into the public rooms of the Club, financial crisis leading to a shrinkage of space, admitting women as full members – the role of the Club as civil society has endured. It seemed appropriate that those who are familiar with different aspects of the Club should reflect and contribute to a collection of essays on the Bengal Club at what is perhaps another moment of crisis in its history.

I am grateful to the distinguished contributors who have taken time out of their busy schedules to write essays especially for this volume. The essays range from reconstructions of the Club's history to personal reflections on the Club as meaningful space. Taken together, they record and analyze the history of the Club that emerges from available resources, the material culture of the Club and an inherited store of anecdotes. Through reminiscences and personal points of view, they also project different assessments of the Bengal Club's past and present role in society. It is hoped that this volume will make a significant contribution to the recorded history of the Bengal Club.

Two questions have often been raised about the Bengal Club. The first, which may relate to some other social clubs of Kolkata also, but is particularly applicable to the Bengal Club, is, what is the relevance of a social club constructed on a familiar British model in independent India, especially in the twenty-first century? Secondly, does the Bengal Club have a special character that needs to be sustained, or should it be levelled out, made to conform with that of other clubs, for reasons of profitability? The second question is of crucial importance today as the Club considers, not profitability alone, since that is fortunately not a problem at this point of time, but the matter of perception. Is the Club to be perceived as falling short of expectations if its public rooms are not full, or is it much more important to preserve the spirit and sense of values which makes the quality of the experience the Bengal Club offers one of the highest standards? These are questions that are fundamental to any assessment of the Bengal Club in history. Whether directly addressed or not, each of the contributions in this volume reflects upon these questions and offers its own interpretation.

This volume was to have been jointly edited by Rimi Chatterjee and myself. Unfortunately, for personal reasons, she was not able to act as coeditor. I am grateful to her not only for her contribution to this volume, but also for her continued support, at least in conversation, and for the refreshing, uninvolved and intelligent perspective she brought to bear on the affairs and future of the Club as a non-member.

I am grateful also to two young researchers, Anindita Chatterjee and Trinanjan Dutt, who spent many hours at the offices of The Statesman and the Victoria Memorial in the hope that some archival material about the Bengal Club may be recovered. I am grateful to them also for spending time at the Club and making a meticulous inventory of the paintings, prints and clocks the Club possesses.

To many members of Bengal Club, and distinguished past presidents, I am grateful for information and valuable insights that they have provided. I would also like to thank the staff and executives of Bengal Club, in particular Indrani Banerjee, for unstinted help at all times during the preparation of the book.

I wish to thank S.B. Ganguly, Chairman of Exide Industries, and President, Bengal Club, 2004, for his personal support, encouragement and total commitment to this project. Also Aditya Kashyap, President, Bengal Club, 2005, and Shyamal Mitra, Vice President, for their support and encouragement.

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Finally, I wish to thank my husband, Sudipto Sarkar, President, Bengal Club, 1998, for many valuable suggestions.

For all editorial policies and for the views expressed in this Introduction, I take sole responsibility.

Malabika Sarkar

#### The Bengal Club in History Birth and Survival

#### Bharati Ray

If I were a historian writing in 1827, how would I view the meeting held in the Town Hall, Calcutta, for the establishment of an association of Europeans of the town? If I were a British historian residing in the metropolis itself, I would take scant notice of a few expatriates forming an association in an unfamiliar town. If I were a Bengali historian based in Calcutta, I would note the meeting of European sahibs, as indeed I would take note of every movement of the Europeans, perhaps without comprehending its full importance.

For me, the Europeans would be intruders in the land, unwelcome but important. They had defeated us in the mango groves of Plassey; their historians and intellectuals, known as the Orientalists, had sung praises of our ancient civilization - but now by 1827 they had started to sing a different tune and targeted our culture. Fortunately, this proposed club was not meant to be an invasion into our lives. It was for them, the foreigners, and was named Bengal Club only by virtue of its geographical location. The appropriate name should perhaps have been ECEB - Exclusive Club for Europeans in Bengal! It was established on the same principle that was later crisply articulated by Rudyard Kipling (born 1865) —"never the twain shall meet". I would not know in 1827, as Kipling would not know even in the late mineteenth/early twentieth century, that this non-inclusive Club would one day be the meeting point of the East and the West, the place of interaction of a section of the elite among the erstwhile

ruling class and the once-colonized, but recently independent, citizens of the Republic of India.

1827 was an interesting year because of the times it belonged to, not only because of what was going on in the country that the members came from, but also because of what was going on in the country they chose to stay in. George IV ruled in the home country; the Tories dominated Parliament under Liverpool in 1827, and the following year under no less a person than the Duke himself (in Britain, the Duke can mean only one - the revered Duke of Wellington). In Bengal, the Company's top man was still called the Governor General of Fort William. In 1827, Lord Amherst held this job. Bentinck took over in 1828 (to become Governor General of India in 1833) and initiated the first momentous step in the Europeanization of the Indians – and, consequently, the fusion of two cultures. In his capacity as the Law Member of his Council, Macaulay drafted the Minute (1835) that made English education a crucial part of modern Indian culture.

From the Indian side, Raja Rammohan Roy, a staunch supporter of English education, founded the Brahmo Samaj, another culmination of the East-West exchange of thoughts, one year after the Club was born. The Hindu School, the most important vehicle for this interaction, already existed. In 1827, I would not be able to see the far-reaching significance of all this. No historian can really visualize the impact of contemporary history - they can merely record the events. So I would at best send an insertion to the Samachar Darpan (started in 1820), the mouthpiece of the Bengali bhadrolok, regarding the creation of the Club. My description would be different from the prosaic way it was actually reported in the Government Gazette of 5 and 8 February, 1827. The Gazette merely reported that a "Meeting held at Town Hall on the 1st of February" resolved "That the Club be considered to be formed from this day". I, as a historian of the soil, would note that another European cultural tool had appeared in Bengal. Thank God the Europeans and Indians would not dine side by side here. No risk of proselytization!

Interestingly, while in the larger context, in England as well as in India, attempts were being made by 1827 to pave the way for interaction between the culture of the colonial rulers and that of the colonized, and the imposition of the former on the latter – "cultural imperialism" as we term it - this Club aimed at exclusion, not inclusion. To that extent, it was an aberration on the soil of Bengal.

But was it really an aberration? All over the world emigrants hold on passionately to the culture of their homeland. South Hall in London and Jackson Heights in New York are not aberrations. There the Bengalis celebrate Durga Puja, the North Indians their Diwali and the South Indians their Navaratri with more zealous faithfulness than those who stay back in the homeland do. People carry their culture with them, and symbolically retain them. Otherwise, how would they survive in a foreign land, in an unaccustomed climate, among unfamiliar customs and unknown people? Bengal Club was a part of Britain in Calcutta. That is the true essence of the beginning of its history.

The members were British men, most of them drawn from the service of the John Company. The Club was not inclusive of all British men. It was an exclusive Club in two senses - exclusively European and exclusively selective. It selected in terms of "a command of character and friends", and strove to create for those who "constitute the society of Calcutta", a place to spend "an idle half hour agreeably" and meet old friends and acquaintances. That is why the number of members was limited to five hundred, one hundred of whom were to be from "Gentlemen not in the service of His Majesty or the Company", which meant, according to the Club Resolution accepted at the first meeting, members of "the Bench, Bar and the clergy".

Who were the earliest members? Lt. Col. J. Finch the first President, Charles Metcalfe who had been a Resident (later to become a Governor, and President of the Club for ten years), Henry Prinsep (father of the Prinsep of the Prinsep's Ghat), Commodore John Hayes, were all among its earliest members. Lord Combermere, the Military chief of the Governor, later the Duke's second in command at Salamanca, whose portrait still occupies a place of honour on the walls of the Club, was the Patron. What was the character of the members? Whether men at the periphery made the empire or whether from the very beginning London and Calcutta were intimately connected in the imperial project - a question over which historians have fought futile polemical battles - is not important to us. Yet we can see that from its inception the Club was a stronghold of military elite, men who fought battles for an emerging empire. Among the earliest members were also two Judges of the Supreme Court and a few financial magnates. One of them was John Palmer, head of the firm of Palmer & Co., which had unlawfully forced a loan on the Nizam of Hyderabad at an exorbitant rate of interest, thus precipitating his financial ruin and subsequent subordination to the British. Later on, came other men like Sir James Outram (President in 1860), who captured Lucknow for the British and whose equestrian statue was placed at the Chowringhee corner to remind the 'natives' of the might of the British. Major General Willoughby Cotton, Bartle Frere (the latter day Governor of Bombay) and even the Earl of Ellenborough, Governor General of India, adorned the Presidential chair. These were unscrupulous empire-makers from our standpoint but glorious men, when viewed from the British. Let it be said, however, that two of the first members, Captain Taylor and Colonel Richards, both of the army, married Indian women, indicating some endeavour at a fusion of cultures!

At home, ministries fell, monarchs changed, the great Queen Victoria ruled for over half a century. In India, the Great Revolt was crushed, Governor-General became Viceroy, the empire-maker John Company withered away, the nationalist movement emerged, and what was unthinkable in 1827 happened - India became independent. The Bengal Club continued. Gradually its members came to be drawn from the British ICS officers.

high court judges, leaders in the legal and medical professions, and *burra* sahib representatives of commercial houses. It retained its exclusive character and remained "the hub of arrogant imperialism during the high noon of the empire", as Geoffrey Moorhouse aptly commented in his book *Calcutta*.

What a social historian would be interested to know is how these people lived and how they used their club. Alas, there is hardly any record. But imagination is an important tool of a historian. One must try to reconstruct history with a little bit of imagination based on available facts. Obviously, the empire was not ruled from the precincts of the Club, yet possibly one or two policies or stratagems must have been fine-tuned during the course of dining and wining. Macaulay, who frequented the Club (with his closest friend Ryan), and his associates, discussed affairs of state at breakfast meetings which continued till late afternoons. Who knows if the core of the Minute was not formulated here! Important negotiations were conducted while dinners were hosted, and decisions taken unofficially on its floor.

What was the food like? Did those foreigners try any "native" cooking, or did they stick to their food habits, the ingredients for which would be hardly available in the tropical soil. Beef was good, if the present standard of beef in Kolkata is any measure to go by, so roast beef was popular, sea fish was available, but avocados and strawberries had to be replaced by mangoes and apples. By and large, however, they preferred their own style of food. Understandably. Food is so much a marker of identity that expatriates typically carry the smell and style of the food they are used to. British gastronomy was represented in all its simplistic splendours by some of the well-known dishes, such as Toad in the Hole, Lancashire Hot Pot, and roast lamb served with boiled potatoes and boiled cabbage. While the British enjoyed their plain roast lamb, they were, of course, oblivious of what the French, with their sophisticated cuisine, said— the British slaughtered the lamb twice, once when they killed it and again when they cooked it! Although the Club catered mainly to Britishers, it also served

continental dishes of a high order. And so Bengal Club became - and has remained until this day - famous for western cuisine. Glorious food and outstanding gourmet experiences with exotic names of dishes became almost proverbial.

Nor was Indian cuisine totally neglected at the Club. Michael Edwards, the Raj historian, described a dinner party hosted by Nasir-ud-Daula, King of Oudh, in 1834. "The meal is European. Soup, fish, joints, curry and rice, pastry and dessert - a solidly Englishy Calcutta dinner. But the food is excellent, the cook a Frenchman trained in the niceties and culinary secrets of the Bengal Club in Calcutta." What Edwards did not mention is that the Frenchman condescended to serve curry and rice to foreign guests of the Nawab only because Indian curry had made its inroad into the British palate as early as the 1830's! No wonder, Prince Charles and Camilla Parker Bowles are often seen at Indian restaurants in London. Perhaps foreign chefs trained in the Bengal Club contributed to popularizing the Indian curry!

That tribe disappeared from the Club with time (though Bhaskar Mitter remembers the Italian Mr Ressia dominating the catering scene as late as the 1960's); but the Bengal Club culinary reputation did not. The cooks and chefs were artists, concerned about the taste, the dressing, the aroma and the sophisticated, proud and distant manner of serving of food and the way wine was to be handled like a pretty woman gently held by the waist. William H. Russell, a London Times correspondent, mentioned in his Indian Diary of 1858-9, "many good dinners were held at the Club frequented by the high and mighty among the European community". If the same William was disappointed with the food twenty years later in 1876 (as he said he was), I am afraid I would infer that years had taken their toll on him and that by now the knighted gentleman had lost his youthful appreciation of unfamiliar but delicious food. Anyway, he gives us interesting information: "By 1857, hookah smoking in the club was

replaced by pipe and cheroot smoking". Obviously, then, hookah was smoked in the precincts of the Club before 1857! The aroma and the elegance of the Indian hookah had actually tempted the military sahibs away from the cheroots for some time! After 1857, if not the identity crisis, a need to indicate the distinctiveness of empire builders brought back the cheroots. Symbols speak more forcefully than words.

Over the years, the food that the Club serves has evolved to cater to new tastes and new preferences. There was a time when curry lunch was a Sunday treat. The manner of eating the curry would seem today to be funny. Rice was heaped on a plate in a mound with a shallow depression on the top like the crater of a volcano. Into this crater was poured 'Dhawl curry', superimposed on which came the main mutton curry, accompanied by sweet mango chutney and chopped raw onions. The final topping was of 'Papadams' crushed in the hand and sprinkled. This somewhat weird mixture was consumed with great relish. Today that variety has, thankfully, vanished. Wednesday buffer lunch is of fish curry along with five types of vegetables and three types of sweets, all done in the Bengali style, Friday buffet lunch presents a continental spread and Saturdays are for Mughlai kabab and tandoori dishes. For dinners, Indian gourmet has found a favoured place by the side of the western, while the gorgeousness of the dishes remains and indeed dictates the menu. Take a look at the menu served at the commemorative banquet in January 1977 that marked the Club's 150th birthday. Consomme Combermere, Becti a la Outram, Mutton B'Irani, Chicken Choksey Curry, Tikka Kanga Kabab, Biscuit Monte Satow, Coffee Colville pleased the carnivorous members. To please the vegetarian palate, the chef offered Crème de la Prinsep Asparagus Soup, Legumes Metcalfe, Orange Pilau Parekh, Keddie Matar Paneer Curry, Apcar Alu Dum, Woodroffe Vegetable Curry, Keswick Gobi Masala, Thai Baren Raytha, Biscuit Monte Satow and Coffee Colville. If some of the words of this menu seem unfamiliar to the gourmet specialists, let me quickly add that the dishes were so named after some of the founders and Presidents

of the Club. The soup would remind one of General Combermere, the fish of General Outram, the Tikka of D.P. Kanga and so on. This interesting innovation was followed in 1983 at the newly-introduced Anniversary dinner. The menu on that occasion was named after the then President Dipak Roy and the members of the Committee (e.g. Chicken Roy-al, Sukhendu Fondue, etc.). The point that must not be lost sight of in this maze of names is that each of the dishes was as tasty as they used to be when served by the chef in the pre-such-nomenclature days.

How did those early members dress? None of the fashionable sartorial fancies of the Regency period, described so vividly by Georgette Heyer. A tie and jacket was normally worn throughout the year. In summer the suits were usually made of linen or China silk. In winter one saw smartly tailored suits. For those who could not rise to the exalted heights of Savile Row, the noted tailoring establishments of Ranken & Co. and Phelps & Co. in Calcutta did a fine job. They also made very good shirts for those who could not afford Sulka in Jermyn Street. During the day, less formal blazers and sports jackets were widely worn. 'Old Etonian' and a spread of regimental ties were available at Army and Navy Stores on Chowringhee. A typical Club member with a clipped accent and in a tweed jacket with old leather elbow patches could easily have passed off successfully as a Club character in a Noel Coward play.

In the evening the dress code was more formal. At dinners the standard attire was "Black tie", that is, a short dinner jacket with a dress tie, as opposed to the "White tie" required on special occasions when a tailcoat was in order. In the height of summer some concession was made out of consideration for the poor Europeans suffering the unbearable Calcutta heat. They were graciously permitted to wear a black dinner tie without a jacket! Black trousers and a black cummerbund round the waist compensated for the missing garment. This particular attire was known as "Red Sea kit", so named since it was worn in the hot, sticky climate of

the Red Sea through which the P & O steamers sailed on their way to and from England. On these boats, the preference for portside cabin on the way out and starboard side cabin on the way back is thought to have gifted to our dictionary the word POSH. An apt description of Bengal Club dress code!!

Ladies were not allowed at the inception of the Club. Much later when the Club was Indianised and, even later, when women were allowed to cross the *lakshmanrekha*, they came in expensive and gorgeously coloured beautiful saris (only a few in salwars or dresses). The dress code for men was relaxed to some extent. During mornings, members became free to choose their attire, though some formality remained. For instance, in winter, jackets & ties are still the rule for the dining hall where shoes remain a must. And so, like Amit Chowdhury (whom the Bombay Gymkhana bearer had once refused to serve because of his sandals), whenever I visit the Club I am painfully conscious of my footwear, since I wear sneakers (an oddity of mine!). Once I actually overheard a bearer commenting, "Jutawalli memsaab a gayı"! As if other ladies did not wear shoes!!

The early members of the Club collected artifacts, some of which are still there at the Club. Paintings were commissioned to decorate the walls - people look a bit self-important, but the landscapes are charming. A large clock reminded them if not of Big Ben, of their grandfathers at home. And so it went on - as I said, a fragment of England survived in a makebelieve world. A rich collection of silver was added - on these treasures Malabika Sarkar writes in this volume. No less valuable a heritage was the grand edifice that the Club was housed in since 1845. This was the building where Macaulay had once resided and which had been leased from Kaliprasanna Sinha (our *Hutom Pencha*). Alas! In 1969 the attractive front and the major part of the historical building were sold to the Grindlays Bank "to square a huge debt", the Club retaining only a comparatively

small space facing Russell Street. The members were sad but adjusted with the loss. Grumblings continue about the 'ugly ill-maintained' Chatterjee International Centre that came up on the land sold and cast its unwelcome shadow on the Club grounds. Yet one relic of the earliest of the Club's building - perhaps that of the house on the Tank or Esplanade Square - is with us.

It is believed that a cobra was found while digging for the foundation of the building. The labourers, under the superstition that a cobra is the king of the place it lives in, refused to work. A priest was, therefore, brought in to worship the cobra, and apparently on being satisfied with the offering of milk, the king of the snakes left without any protest or fuss!! Since then the representation of the cobra as the Club's crest! This may be a story, but then, what is history but a story based on some major or minor evidence? The crest stands as reasonably acceptable evidence. In this post-modernist world representations make a fascinating study. What would interest a historian of culture about this particular story is that the Europeans could not get rid of an Indian superstition, thereby accepting the primacy of local beliefs over the imported belief system which they arrogantly called rationality!

The Club opened its door to Indians only in 1959. At an extraordinary General Meeting the proposal was passed by a small majority, the minority advocating winding up rather than admitting Indians, said RH Wright, who was present on the occasion. The East and the West met in Bengal, as indeed they did in other parts of India (perhaps not so closely, though), and the Club became an important juncture of the meet. It could not claim the historical importance of Hume's association established in Bengal in 1885, or that of the Chamber of Commerce of today. And yet it served as a tool for interaction between leaders of Bengal society and British men important in the Calcutta context. It functioned as a means of communication of thoughts and ideas between the two. For a time the

British customs dominated, at least outwardly. One did not use fingers except when eating asparagus and bread rolls; one had to respect conventions regarding the times when smoking - not hookah but cheroots and pipes, and occasionally the low brow cigarette - was permitted only in the coffee room. The smell of tobacco would ruin the aroma of food.

This was so because the Indian entrants came from the highest echelons of the corporate world, and each, to say the least, was distinguished and, in a sense, special, in their respective areas. D.P. Kanga, who headed the crucial CESC, was the first Indian President of the Club, the ever-green Pearson Surita gained tremendous popularity as the first Indian commentator of sports, the extroverted and highly talented Russi Mody was a legend in TISCO, the sedate Robin Sen was the first Indian partner of Price Waterhouse. While the affable Baren Ray was the first Indian partner of Orr Dignam, A. L. Mudaliar, nephew of Ramaswamy Mudaliar, ran the ICI, and PK Choksey was an awesome name in the world of accountancy, to mention only a few. They had one common trait - either educated in the United Kingdom or trained in British corporate ethics. These men brought elegance and élan as decreed by the British culture. And yet, what is of greater import is that gradually, if imperceptibly, they lent support to bringing in Indian-ness in the Club and were to a great extent instrumental in Indianising the Club. They derived considerable support from members who came from the Bench and the Bar and the group of enterprising Indian entrepreneurs who steadily made the Club their own.

One reason that the Club survived for 179 years is that it adjusted with time - a great compliment for its members. Between 1969 and 1979 the Club became almost totally Indianised. Women came in (from 1988 they could become members in their own right), and the Club became a proper social club. If the character of the Club has changed, so has its role in history. It serves today as a social club, increasingly more Indianised, with Pramita Mallick singing Rabindra Sangeet, Bratati Bandopadhyay reciting

poems in Bengali and Siddhartha Basu conducting Open Quiz competitions among Indian competitors in English. The employees, too, observe some of the popular Indian festivals, such as the Vishwakarma Puja, Janmashtami and Id-ul- Fitr. If it started as an exclusive European club, it has today become an Indian club where Europeans take part, but as participants of an Indian club in Bengal, and where employees maintain the old heritage with inputs from modern India. It still remains a prestigious Club, members wear the unwritten badge of "having arrived". Applications for membership are many, and membership is still selective. The earliest rules for admission prevail. A candidate for admission is to be proposed by one member and seconded by another and chosen by ballot. At the interview, one would be asked about the nature and size of his company (if he belonged to the corporate world), about how often and in what way he wished to use the Club, and about his friends, his family and his social background.

If history is not merely the history of kings and wars, but the history of the people, then Bengal Club initially represented the history of a small section of British people in a land encircled by the sea (which was a part of their lives at home), on the banks of a colossal river (compared to the Thames), in an area wrongly named Calcutta for Kolkata (difficult to pronounce on their British tongue). The birth of the Club was, therefore, the story of a few Europeans who, needing employment and money, had travelled to this distant land and while helping to construct a mighty empire struggled to preserve their identity. Future history will possibly look at today's Indianised form as a club of the elite Indians, of corporate people and entrepreneurs, of established physicians and advocates, of single women first venturing to establish their identity. I argue that the elite and the middle class - British or Indian - although a miniscule minority, constitute important segments of the country's population, and their story forms an integral part of the social and cultural history of the people. The story of Bengal Club is merged in the history of Bengal.

\*I have drawn liberally from The Bengal Club, 1827-1970 written by Sir H. R. Panckridge in 1927 and revised by Mr. R. I. Macalpin in 1970, and from The Life and Times of the Bengal Club, 2002. I am grateful to all the contributors and to S. B. Ganguli and Malabika Sarkar for inviting me to write this article and to Aditya Kashyap, Bhaskar Mitter and Sukhendu Ray for their comments. The mistakes are all mine.

#### The Bengal Club Born 1827 - Still Going Strong

#### Bhaskar Mitter

The social club is essentially a British institution which evolved out of the Coffee Houses of 17th and 18th Century London as a place to meet, to talk, and to spend some happy moments of leisure. Samuel Pepys ventured into a Coffee House in 1663 because, as he wrote, "Dryden the poet and all the wits of London were gathered there". The nearest equivalent on the Continent of Europe was the café in France and the beergarden in Germany. So when the British established themselves in India, they also established one of their cherished institutions, the Club. The Bengal Club was founded in 1827 in Calcutta, the capital of their nascent Indian Empire, and this was soon followed by two other clubs in their other major settlements, the Madras Club in 1831 and the Byculla Club in Bombay in 1833. Not only was the Bengal Club the oldest in India, it could be ranked with some of the oldest and best known clubs in London. I may mention, in this connection, the Oriental Club founded about the same time in 1824, since the two clubs have always had close links and many members of the Bengal Club today are also members of the Oriental Club. When I joined the Oriental Club some forty years ago, I found that several members of the committee were men who had lived and worked in Calcutta, and some of them had been active members of the Bengal Club.

The Bengal Club was born 178 years ago after it had narrowly escaped miscarriage! The original intention was to call the Club "The United Services Club". It was officially established on 1st February, 1827, and the Government Gazette reported:

On Thursday last a meeting took place at the Town Hall to consider the institution of the United Services Club when it was determined to form the association proposed...

A meeting of the first committee of the United Services Club was held on 22nd February, 1827, when the first Rules of the Club were "read, approved and confirmed", but the first Rules of the Club which were read, approved and confirmed were headed "Rules of the Bengal Club"! Apparently there had been a quick change of mind.

The origins of the Bengal Club lie in the dim, distant past and it takes some time and some thought to visualize what Calcutta was like then, and to get a mental picture of both those who founded the Club and those who ran it in the formative years. By 1827, the East India Company was well installed in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras and in their hinterlands. They were then occupied in waging a series of military campaigns in various parts of India to consol date their hold and to expand over other areas. Calcutta, their headquarters, was an up and coming commercial, military and political centre, since the Company was transforming itself from being merely a trading venture into a powerful political entity striving to fill the vacuum left by the crumbling Moghul power. But despite its vibrancy, Calcutta was still a growing town without any of the amenities we take for granted today. The streets were not paved and became quagmires during the monsoon. Both the streets and the houses, including the Club, were lit with oil lamps. Gas did not reach Calcutta until 1860, and electricity came commercially much later in 1899. There was neither municipal water supply nor drainage. To keep out the heat, the 'Swinging Punkha' had recently been invented replacing the hand held fans made from palm leaves. Palkies, horse drawn carriages and the ubiquitous horse were the principal means of locomotion.

The battle of Waterloo had been fought only twelve years before and Napoleon had been exiled to St. Helena. Ships which sailed from Britain

to Calcutta touched at St. Helena, an important halt for replenishing their provisions. It was the proud boast of many passengers landing in Calcutta that they had had a view of Napoleon on the island. Some even claimed to have had the privilege of exchanging a few words with him by prior arrangement with the East India Company. It was rather like British visitors to India some years later flocking to have a glimpse of Bahadur Shah, the last Moghul Emperor, when he was confined in the Red Fort of Delhi, after the violent uprising of 1857, languishing in a state of gilded irrelevance. St. Helena had a curious link with the Bengal Club. The first Rules of the Club had a provision that the name of a newly elected member would be erased if he did not pay his entrance fee within three months if he was stationed in India, and within twelve months "if he was at the Cape of Good Hope, or St. Helena, or any place eastward of the Cape."

When the Club was founded, Akbar II was the enfeebled Moghul emperor in Delhi and Sir Charles Metcalfe, who later was to serve as President of the Club for eleven years, was the British Resident at his Court. Lord Amherst was then the Governor General in Calcutta. Raja Ram Mohan Roy was already a celebrity and he founded the Brahmo Samaj a year later. Dwarkanath Tagore was thirty-three years old then, already busy deploying his entrepreneurial skills over many fields. Portraits of both of them adorn the walls of the Club today. Vidyasagar was yet to start teaching at the Fort William College. The Calcutta Medical College was established eight years later and Calcutta University was still thirty years away. This was the environment in which the Club was born.

Some idea of the hoary age of our Club can be had from the charges it levied in its early years. For the first few years of its existence, the Club occupied a building in Esplanade Row, near Tank Square, later called Dalhousie Square and now B.B.D. Bagh. It occupied, beside the public rooms on the first two floors of the building, eight "spacious very airy and comfortable sleeping apartments, completely furnished for mofussil

members visiting Calcutta". The charge for each apartment was Rs4/weekly. Breakfast cost Re. 1/-, tiffin Rs. 1/8 and dinner Rs. 3/-. These charges did not include dr.nks, but by spending between Rs. 1/2 and Rs. 3/- extra, one could get copious supplies of Beer, Sherry, Claret and Port. It is interesting to note that whisky did not feature in the list. It is commonly believed that the Bengal Club has always been essentially a Club for businessmen of Calcutta. However, this was not the idea when the Club was founded, nor does its history bear this out. In its early days, when the armies of the East India Company were marching up and down the country annexing new territories and putting in place Government institutions to administer those territories, it was natural that the army and the civil service would dom:nate the membership of the Club. In fact, glancing through the list of Founder Members, it becomes clear that the vast majority of them were either from the army or the civil service. There were of course some members from other professions such as Law, Medicine and Business. One founder member was Chief Justice of Bengal and there were also some judges of the Supreme Court. Some of these founder members were colourful and highly idiosyncratic personalities. For example, there was a Dr Simon Nicholson. Untrammeled by any qualms about modesty, he is said to have enjoyed from 1820 to 1835 "the undisputed pre-eminence as the most celebrated doctor in India". There was also a Mr. Lambretta, a Director of the newly formed Bank of Bengal. He was of Spanish extraction, which accounts for his somewhat unusual name. In the sprawling grounds of his house, there was an old Roman Catholic chapel. Not deeming it necessary to indulge in any excessive display of piety, he converted the chapel into a residence for the mahouts of his elephants and for his f ghting cocks!

Though the number of four der members from the business community was small, some of them were very influential as they were the owners of the new Agency Houses which had mushroomed in Calcutta and played an important role for a time in the economic scene of Bengal. These

Agency Houses should not be confused with Managing Agency Houses which came much later. As they were to have a powerful impact not only on members of the Club, but on the Club as well, it would not be irrelevant to dwell a little on what these Agency Houses did. Although those working in the East India Company were technically whole time employees, they were allowed to conduct private trade on the side. This was rather like a Government doctor being allowed private practice. In the process, many civilians in the service of the Company had amassed large fortunes. In parallel, those serving in the army were often engaged in military campaigns during the course of which they annexed the territories of a large number of Rajas and Nawabs. Whenever they captured an important enemy centre the custom of the time allowed the army to seize the treasuries of the conquered potentates. Some of this "Prize Money" was sent to the Company, the balance being retained by the army and shared according to an accepted procedure. The top Commander took the lion's share and the remainder went down the line according to rank.

Thus many merchants of the East India Company as well as the red coats of the army had considerable wealth with very few outlets for investments. Some retired to Britain and became the famed "Nabobs" in their homeland, but others who stayed in India and kept their wealth did not quite know what to do with it. The banking industry had hardly been born, there were no joint stock companies issuing secured debentures, there were no official Government loans and they did not have full confidence in the local Indian bankers. The Agency Houses filled this vacuum. They took deposits and deployed their funds in a variety of fields. They lent money not only to Indian Princes, but also to the Government by way of temporary accommodation. They invested in indigo and traded with a number of countries including America, the Cape Colonies, Singapore, Java and China. They tried to become mini Rothschilds.

Among the founder members of the Club were the Heads of the leading Agency Houses, such as Alexander & Co., Mackintosh & Co., and the

largest of them all, Palmer &: Co. The founder of Palmer & Co., John Palmer, was known in Calcutta as "the Prince of Merchants". He lived in lavish style in a palatial mansion in Lal Bazaar at the site now occupied by the headquarters of the Calcutta Police. He was a close personal friend of Dwarkanath Tagore whom he called "Dwarky". Amongst his multifarious ventures, he lent large sums of money to the Nizam of Hyderabad whose court was riddled with corruption and whose revenues were said to be "a feeble trickle at the end of a long and leaky tube".

These Agency Houses, however, did not survive long. For some time their position had been shaky. They had been indulging in doubtful trading, locking up money in shady ventures without adequate security, lending vast sums to indigo planters forgetting that their ability to repay was dependent on the vagaries of the weather, and counting as assets loans which had become unrealizable. The inevitable crash came and the great house of Palmer closed its doo's in 1830. This triggered a chain reaction and Alexander & Co. was the next to go in 1832, closely followed by the others. Lord Combermere, the Commander-in-Chief and the first Patron of the Club, had received £60,000 as prize money after he had captured the Jat stronghold of Bharatpore. He had entrusted the whole of this sum to Alexander & Co. with whom he banked in Calcutta. Not long after his retirement, Alexander & Co. failed and Lord Combermere lost nearly all his fortune. Among the other Agency Houses which went bankrupt were Mackintosh & Co. They were Treasurers of the Bengal Club and the Club lost over Rs. 40,000 which, in those days, was a considerable sum of money. This crash had very serious repercussions on members of the Club. Writing in 1836, Macaulay said "the tremendous crash of the Commercial Houses which took place a few years ago, had ruined one half of the British society of Bengal and seriously injured the other half". This calamity naturally had a direct bearing on the activities of the Club and there were no Club banquets or other festivities. It took the Club a long time to recover from this shock.

The first thirty years after the Club's birth saw frenetic activity on the part of the East India Company and a series of military expeditions resulted in more and more territories coming under their control. At the same time, in these newly acquired territories, they started laying down new systems of both civil and judicial administration. The men who were in the forefront of this thrust were also prominent figures in Calcutta society, and in that capacity some of them took up the leadership of the Club. A run through the names of the early Presidents shows the close connection between those who led the Club and those who were spearheading the Company's growing power in the country.

Viscount Combermere, the first Patron of the Club, has already been mentioned, but this was in the context of the financial crash which enmeshed him in the twilight of his career. He was a distinguished soldier and had fought under Wellington in the Peninsular War. Some time after the battle of Waterloo he came to India, rapidly established his reputation as a military Commander and rose to be Commander-in-Chief. There is a striking full-length portrait of him in the Club, resplendent in his Field Marshall's uniform bedecked with medals. After Lord Combermere left India, Lord William Bentinck was appointed Governor General in 1820 and he became the Club's second Patron. His name is still remembered as a person who helped in the process of abolishing "suttee", and among the people he was close to were Ram Mohan Roy, Dwarkanath Tagore and Alexander Duff.

In the list of early Presidents of the Club, perhaps the most illustrious is the towering figure of Sir Charles Metcalfe who was President for eleven consecutive years from 1827 to 1837. His portrait hangs in the Club. He was one of the most able Civil Servants in the East India Company. At the age of twenty-three he went as an envoy to Maharaja Ranjit Singh in Lahore, and at twenty-seven he was appointed the British Resident at the effete Moghul court at Delhi. At that time the Resident was the de facto

ruler of Delhi and its surrounding areas. There, Metcalfe laid the foundation of a new land tenure system and a new administrative structure which became a model for many other parts of India. He was appointed Governor General to fill the gap between the departure of Lord William Bentinck and the arrival of Lord Auckland. When Lord Auckland came out to Calcutta he brought out with him his sister Emily Eden after whom Eden Gardens was named.

After eleven years of a civilian President at the Club, the army claimed the next seven years - four years under Maj. Gen. Willoughby Cotton and three years under Lord Elenborough, who was actually the Governor General when he became President of the Club. This provides a unique example of the Head of State also heading a club and is a testimony to the special position occupied by the Bengal Club in the life of the city. It was during Lord Ellenborough's tenure that Sind was annexed by Napier and he sent his famous message in code to his headquarters announcing his victory. He wrote in Latin the single word "Peccavi" which, when translated, read "I have sinned". Whilst the Civil Service and the army had between them hitherto monopolized the Presidentship of the Club, the judiciary now came prominently into the picture and judges sat in the Presidential chair for the next fourteen years. After this long spell, there was a short interlude during which General Sir James Outram became the President. He was the last Club President from the profession of arms. Outram is remembered chiefly because he led the force which relieved Lucknow after the long siege of 1857. A magnificent bronze equestrian statue of Outram stood at the corner of Park Street and Chowringhee where Jawaharlal Nehru's statue now stands. Outram's statue, relocated in the grounds of the Victoria Memorial, is reckoned by some to be the finest specimen of British statuary in India.

A few years before Outram's Presidentship, the Club moved in 1845 from the vicinity of Tank Square to a house, No. 33, Chowringhee, which

was owned by a wealthy Indian aristocrat, Kali Prasanna Sinha. Macaulay had occupied this house from 1834 to 1838 when he was Law Member of the Supreme Council. But this house on its own was not adequate for the Club which took over, in addition, another large house in the same compound, Nos. 1 and 1/1 Russell Street as well as No. 1 Park Street. Spread over five old buildings until it moved much later to its palatial new building on Chowringhee, the Club had its public rooms and its residential accommodation, or chambers, for its mofussil members. With his chambers a member got two stalls for horses and a "standing" or space for a carriage or a buggy. The charges for the chambers was Rs. 175/- per month during the "season" from mid-October to mid-April, and Rs. 92/- during the "off season" from mid-April to mid-October. Each stall occupied by a horse cost Rs. 5/- per month and for a buggy Rs. 4/- per month. The horse was a vital adjunct of life and as late as 1889 the Club Rules provided that no dogs or other animals were to be brought into the premises except horses. With the chambers also went the services of a 'Bhistee' or water carrier, a sweeper, and the luxury of a lamp in the bathroom at night.

In the meantime, momentous changes were taking place in India in the second half of the 19th century. After the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857, the administration of India was taken away from the East India Company and vested directly in the British Crown. Henceforth, Governor Generals were known as Viceroys. By this time, British power was well consolidated over large parts of India. The army was now under the control of the Civil Government, and the days of the larger than life, swashbuckling Generals was a thing of the past. Similarly, in the vast territories controlled by the British, a settled system of administration had been introduced, and the great pioneering figures like Metcalfe were gone. Thus the leading personalities in the Club, however distinguished they might be individually, became for the most part incorporated into the system. Consequently, if one goes down the list of Presidents, individual mention becomes largely

redundant as there were no colcurful personalities as in the formative years.

As I have already mentioned, after General Outram, the army did not provide any more Club Presidents and the field was left to the services and the judiciary. The new Calcutta High Court was established in 1864 and the legal profession now had a powerful presence in the city. From 1864 to 1870, all the Presidents of the Club had some connection with the High Court. They were all respected men with the exception of Sir Mordaunt Wells, President in 1864, who became a highly unpopular figure among the Indians. He presided over the famous trial of Rev. James Long. In 1860, Rev. Long had published the Bengali drama Nil Darpan written by Dinabandhu Mitra and translated into English by Michael Madhusudhan Dutt. The play had as its theme the ruthless exploitation of ryots by the indigo planters. When the English translation appeared, Rev. Long was subjected to a withering fusillade of criticism and was sued for libel by an Association of indigo interests. The case created a great stir in the city and eventually Mordaunt Wells held Rev. Long guilty. After an unsuccessful appeal, he was fined Rs. 1000/- and sentenced to a month in jail. The fine was immediately paid by Kali Prasanna Sinha, the same person into whose property the Club had shifted in 1845.

Just as the first half of the 19th century had seen great changes in the political sphere in India, the second half witnessed profound changes in the economic sphere. It was at this time that India came into contact with the technological breakthrough of the steam age which had been ushered in by the Industrial Revolution in Britain. The railway, the telegraph and an organized postal service, all made their appearance in the 1850s. The steam age economy was based on coal and large deposits of coal were located in Bengal and Bihar around that time. The Geological Survey of India was established in 1857, but before that, in 1855, the East Indian Railway had already made a small beginning, taking the best part of a day

to chug its way from Howrah to Ranigunge. In the same year, the first power driven jute mill was set up near Calcutta. The jute industry, which was to play a pivotal role in the economy of Bengal until after the first World War, had made a start. So had the tea industry and the first tea auction was held in Calcutta in 1861. These early industrial beginnings got a great boost with the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, significantly reducing the time taken for ships to come to Calcutta.

All this had a direct effect on the city. The business community expanded rapidly and began to attain a powerful niche in society. There was still a long way to go, however, before they occupied the front row seats in the rigidly hierarchical Victorian social scene. The leadership in the Club continued to be provided by the services and the judiciary with business making sporadic forays into the hallowed ranks. There was a mini breakthrough when Charles Marten became President for three successive years, but he was not a mainstream businessman, being a broker, though a very popular one. For business proper, a beachhead was gained a few years later by J.J. Keswick and A.A. Apcar. The latter lived in great style in Russell Street, a few houses down the road from the Club, where the Royal Calcutta Turf Club is now located. There is a sketch of this house by Desmond Doig in his charming book of sketches of old Calcutta.

Most of us have a common perception that the late Victorians were rather sombre people with lugubrious expressions in stiff collars who led Spartan lives, went to bed early, and religiously attended church early on Sunday mornings. This perception is not accurate, however, in the case of Bengal Club members. The Club rules adopted in 1896 provided that lights in all public rooms would be extinguished at 2 a.m. Members using the Club after 2 a.m. would be charged Rs. 2 per head and after 4 a.m., Rs. 5 per head. The precept of "early to bed and early to rise" does not appear to have been always followed, and perhaps at times all the pews in church were not filled on Sunday mornings.

After Independence in 1947, the British members of the Indian Civil Service and its allied Services left India, followed not long after by Britishers in other professions like law and medicine. The top leadership of the Club was now left wide open for business. Barring a few exceptions, the business community has provided the main thrust of the Club from 1948 onwards to the present day. From the late 1960s, however, British businessmen also started leaving India and, again barring a few exceptions, since then the leadership of the Club has been in Indian hands.

I have said earlier that the horse was vitally important in one's life at the end of the 19th century. In fact, it was the advent of the automobile in the 20th century which gradually diminished its role, until by the 1920s the horse and the horse carriage became rare sights in the streets of Calcutta. I remember, however, seeing the horse drawn "phaetons" plying for hire regularly in certain parts of the city till after the Second World War. Just as the horse has now vanished, so have many other things which, until not too long ago, were very familiar. For example, several articles of men's wear, which were at one time seen regularly at the Club and all over the city, are now no longer seen. Although the transition from the rather formal Victorian and Edwardian to less formal and more comfortable attire is well known, the demise of several accessories which went along with the dress is hardly remembered. Among these, I might mention a few items which disappeared gradually in the 1940s and 1950s.

I would place at the top of the list the "Sola Topee", from the smart white topees, which Governors and "Burra Sahibs" wore, to the humbler khaki topee in more plebian use. This ubiquitous adjunct to one's dress had a somewhat sad end after the Second World War when British and American troops fighting in tropical countries found that the topee was not really necessary as a protection against the sun, and millions of the local population of these countries never wore any head-dress at all. The starched collars and cuffs of the Victorian and Edwardian eras fought a

rearguard action when shirts with soft detachable collars and cuffs came into vogue. This of course still necessitated the regular use of collar studs and cuff links. With dinner jackets, it was not uncommon to see not only jeweled cuff links but also jeweled studs for dress shirt fronts. These are now rarely seen. Ties were in daily use because they were worn both to office as well as in the evenings. Whilst ties are of course still in use, the bow tie has become rare, and what has become an extinct species is the broad Ascot tie worn with a fancy tie pin, usually a solitary pearl. Ascot ties were mainly seen on special occasions in winter when members lunched at the Club before going on to the Races.

Mention of the Club lunches brings to mind the fact that some old items have disappeared from Club menus. The food at lunches and dinners were generally of a very high order under the supervision of the legendary Italian steward Ressia. Sometimes, however, Club menus reverted to plain, simple British food in deference to the members who were almost exclusively British. The British over the centuries have been noted for many qualities, but their cuisine has never been one of them. The French for example say that the British always slaughter a lamb twice - once when they kill it and again when they cook it. Many of Ressia's superb creations such as winglets of guinea fowl in a sherry sauce are missed now, but one item which has vanished and will perhaps not find many mourners is oxtail soup.

Although jackets are still widely worn, what one does not see is the wearing of flowers in button holes. "Wearing a button hole" was considered very fashionable and one often saw exotic orchids being thus worn. I know of only one person in Calcutta who still wears flowers in his button hole regularly. Men's wear generally having become much less formal than in the past, so have the words denoting dress on invitation cards. Words like 'Casual', 'Comfortable' or 'Easy' were unknown not too long ago. I even got a glorious invitation once which stipulated "Dress Optional"!

Ideas have changed over the years and so have habits and customs but the Club has adapted itself to these changes and has marched on. The story of the Club has been a very long one. Like Calcutta, the city which gave it birth, the roots of the Club are firmly embedded in the Indo-British period of our shared history. Those who founded the Club came to Calcutta after a long and arciuous voyage of several months past St. Helena, the island of Napoleon's exile, and then round the Cape of Good Hope. Job Charnock and the Britishers who first settled in Calcutta had also come along the same route about a century and half earlier.

Both Calcutta and the Club have a rich common heritage. In the case of the city, after decades of apathy, the authorities have now become alive to the importance of preserving this heritage including Dalhousie Square or B.B.D. Bagh, a superb architectural specimen of the Indo-British era and of great historical value. The Bengal Club however, has never been unmindful of its past history. This does not imply that it has been cocooned in the past. It has moved ahead, and continues to do so, catering to new tastes, new preferences and new aspirations, but it is not oblivious of its past. This is vividly brought out in the Club Rules which even now classify its members into two broad categories—"Town" and "Mofussil". The word "Town" bears testimony to the fact that the origin of the Club goes back to the days when Calcutta was a vigorous young town but had not yet graduated to being called a "City". The word "Mofussil" has an impeccable Indo-British flavour denoting country settlements in the hinterland of the main town or "Sudder". The word "Mofussil" is a word unknown in Britain. The Club's strong Indo-British legacy is also implicit in its crest, an Indian motif in what was essentially a British club until about fifty years ago-the Nagraj. As the Club evolves and moves forward, it does so not in conflict with this legacy, but in harmony with it.

#### Clubbing It

#### S. Nihal Singh

If the Indian genius over the ages has been the ability to absorb conquerors and produce a unique blend that embellishes Indianness with a mélange of the foreign, come to the Bengal Club, that outpost of the British Empire at high noon, the oldest surviving club in the Indian subcontinent and the third oldest in the world.

A club is a quintessentially English institution and clubs in the former colonies were homes away from homes for bachelors and grass-widowers, an exclusive setting which did not permit Indians and, as an old member recalled on the Club's 175th anniversary in February 2002, his father had to use a rear entrance to meet a visiting British barrister staying at the Club. Alas, the grand entrance to the Club on Chowringhee is no more, sold to a bank to make ends meet and sold again and transformed into an ugly multi-storied building. The Bengal Club today lives and breathes in what was the annexe, with its main entrance from Russell Street.

It speaks volumes for the hoary Club that, at an extraordinary general meeting in 1959, a very small majority voted to keep the Club going, rather than folding it up to divide its assets among members. It was at that meeting, twelve years after Indian independence, that a list of Indians was drawn up to be invited to join as members, an invitation many of them refused, smarting as they were from the indignities the Club had heaped on them. Initially, the only Indian members were the Maharajas of Burdwan and Coochbihar.

Somerset Maugham recalls a lunch he had with the Prince of Berar in Hyderabad in 1938 in his *Writer's Notebook*. He told the writer: "In the Bengal Club they don't allow dogs or Indians, but in the Yatch Club in Bombay they don't mind dogs; its only Indians they don't allow."

In the old days, the Bengal Club was, indeed, the preserve of the more exalted personages of the Raj. Lord Ellenborough, the Governor General, was the Club President in the 1842-44 period. Black tie and white tie on occasion were *de rigueur*. It was a strictly European male preserve. The first time women were admitted to the Club premises was during an At Home to mark the centenary celebrations on February 1st 1927, a lapse from the Club code repeated in 1935 to celebrate the Jubilee of King George V and Queen Mary.

After the traditional members – British ICS officers, high court judges and military officers – left for home, the Bengal Club became, in the late Fifties and early Sixties, the preserve of the *burra sahibs* of agency houses on Clive Street. By the Sixties, club membership had dwindled, thanks to the devaluation of the rupee and Naxal violence. Even after selling off the grand building, the Club was in desperate straits and the large staff had to be given the option of voluntary retirement.

It was only after the almost total Indianisation of the Club between 1969 and 1979 that things gradually got better. The membership has widened to include eminent doctors, lawyers and other professionals, in addition to heads of commercial establishments. Initially, women were restricted to certain entrances and rooms and only in 1967 were they permitted the use of all rooms. Married quarters were first allotted to one Mr. and Mrs. G.R. Harris in 1954. Women are now admitted to the Club in their own right.

But dress codes continue to this day although one rarely sees black ties. The accent is on appropriate dress whose definition has understandably undergone a change. National dress is allowed but not the use of open

slippers with Western dress. Which brings us to the heart of the matter: what does a venerable club so redolent of the Raj mean in today's Bengal and India? Are we merely imitating a British institution in an age of independence and emancipation? Indeed, what is the point of maintaining the Bengal Club?

I became a member of the Club in 1974 during my early days as editor of *The Statesman*. Those were stirring and interesting times, with Indira Gandhi's Emergency in force, and my job on the newspaper often took the form of devising stratagems to outwit the official censor. We succeeded more often than not, our staff's knowledge and use of English being vastly superior to that of the bureaucratic censor.

The Club was a haven during those days and I would often sink into a leather sofa in the coffee lounge whose walls were crowded with brooding paintings of the Raj, thumbing through old copies of *Punch*, a sterling publication, which was to pass through difficult days before its demise. What a relief it was to the daily task of fighting the Emergency and I would rise from the sofa rejuvenated.

The Bengal Club has always been renowned for its cuisine – in the old days boasting a French chef - and I still remember with fondness its traditional lunch menu starting with mulligatawny soup served with crisp toasts brought in a serrated frame. Hilsa in season was a delight and I had never imagined before tasting it in the Club that the humble custard pudding could be so tasty. "No smoking please in the dining hall before 2.30 p.m." was an order scrupulously observed.

Having been demoted to the status of a mofussil member after leaving Calcutta at the end of 1979, I now use the Club's residential facilities on occasion and quite enjoy the feudal perk of having a gentleman's gentleman attend to my modest needs, although the servitors have wizened with age and their uniforms are off white. Surely, giving me the appellation of being a mofussil member (defined by Hobson-Jobson as the provinces as

distinguished from the Presidency) for living in the nation's capital must be Bengal's revenge on the British for having moved the capital of British India out of Calcutta.

On a more serious note, the Bengal Club does not often pretend to be what it was. But Bengal has taken to club culture far more avidly than the rest of India. After all, the club's primary function is to provide a congenial meeting place for the like-minded to converse, partake of a meal and entertain friends. In the process of Indianisation, the dress codes are more relaxed, the gatherings noisier and the dance floor on special occasions more crowded and swinging to desi numbers. Why not? We are not British, even making allowances for their aversion to sex in the idiom of the famous comedy. In one respect, the Bengal Club retains the flavour of the old days, its snobbish appeal.

Sir H.R. Panckridge wrote in 1927, "it is the practice of European peoples to reproduce as far as possible in their settlements and colonies the characteristic social features of their national lives". True enough, but the sun has set on the Empire and Britons in their role of colonial rulers have gone home. Indian social values are admittedly different and they are at home, not running an overseas empire. Here again we must revert to the Indian genius for absorption. It would be foolish to expect a replica of the old British club culture. But a new Indian, particularly Bengali, club culture has been born and is flourishing.

Perhaps the time has come to open the Bengal Club to younger members (admittedly with discretion) to replace those of four score and ten or older to provide new vigour and bring an avant-garde quality to the room décor of the residential wing. And now that the old British taboo has been broken, let us have more women members. In the Indian milieu, they are an essential humanizing influence.

# The House In Which Macaulay Lived

#### Rudrangshu Mukherjee

A snake as an emblem and a stone tablet are all that remain. The stone tablet, which informs members and visitors that this was the house in which Thomas Babington Macaulay lived, is placed in what may have been the tradesmen's entrance of the original house that faced Chowringhee. Macaulay's residential address in Calcutta was 33 Chowringhee. It is apt perhaps that the Bengal Club, a principal centre of modes of socializing derived from Anglo-Saxon social life, should occupy the house in which Macaulay lived during his stay in Calcutta. Without Macaulay there may have been no Anglicization.

Macaulay was not destined to come out to India. His father, Zachary, was a son of the manse. Zachary's father and grandfather had both been Scottish Presbyterian ministers. Zachary, as part of the Clapham Sect, had been a lifelong campaigner for the abolition of slavery. Zachary sent his son to a private boarding school, and from there Macaulay moved to Trinity College, Cambridge.

At Trinity, Macaulay began with great promise. In the College Examination of Freshmen (May 1819), he was placed fourth in the first class and in 1821 he won the coveted Craven Scholarship. In the Cambridge Union he cut a figure as a popular orator. But the early promise received a jolt when Macaulay was compelled to take an ordinary degree. In the early 19th century, the only way to get an honours degree in Cambridge was by way of the mathematical tripos examination. Macaulay, much to his father's

disappointment and anger, "gulfed" in mathematics. In other words, he failed. He also failed in 1823 to win a Trinity fellowship but did win it the next year.

Zachary, a domineering father, had wanted a career in the Church for his son. When his son refused this, Zachary persuaded his son to join the legal profession. Macaulay joined Lincoln's Inn from where he was called to the Bar in 1826. The call of silk did not capture Macaulay's imagination. His biographer records that Macaulay "much preferred sitting in the Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons, listening to the debates, to cadging briefs." Politics beckoned him and his driving ambition was to become a member of the august house. In the early 19th century this was not an easy ambition to fulfil for a young man with no aristocratic connections and no independent resources. But Macaulay's talents brought to him the patronage of Lord Landsdowne from whose country seat in Bowood he was unanimously elected in 1830. Macaulay was launched but India was not even a twinkle in his eyes.

Macaulay won his spurs in the House of Commons through the speeches he made there in the debate on the Reform Bill of 1832. Walter Bagehot was to remark that Macaulay "delivered marvelous rhetorical exercises on the Reform Bill". Such was the power and passion of his oratory that it became a fashion to talk of him as "the Burke of our age". Macaulay, even before he entered Parliament, had earned a reputation for himself as an essayist in *The Edinburgh Review*. His essay on Milton had won for him many admirers. But his success in the House of Commons made him the lion of London society. He was invited out to dinner every night. His hosts were all powerful aristocratic politicians. Gladstone was to comment that "For a century and more perhaps no man in this country, with the exceptions of Mr Pitt and Lord Byron, had obtained at thirty-two the fame of Macaulay". The subject of this adulation, however, was very critical of the circles in which he was forced to move. He had become "sick", he wrote, "of Lords with no brains in their heads, and Ladies with

paints on their cheeks and politics and politicians, and that reeking furnace of a House." To his sister Hannah he wrote in 1833, "I am the only parvenu I ever heard of who, after being courted into splendid circles, and after having succeeded beyond expectation in political life, acquired in a few months a profound contempt for rank, fashion, power, popularity and money - for all pleasures but those which derive from the exercise of the intellect and the affections."

Despite all his reservations, it was Macaulay's stoking of what he called "the reeking furnace of a House" that earned for him his first official post and his first link with India. He was appointed one of the commissioners of the Board of Control for India in June 1832. This body, since 1784, represented Parliament in the running of India while the Court of Directors represented the proprietors of the East India Company.

Upon assuming his new office, Macaulay immersed himself in Indian politics. He wrote that he was deep in *zamindars, raiyats, polygars, faujdari* courts and the courts of Nizamat Adalat. The energy he brought to his new work amazed Charles Grant, the president of the Board of Control. Macaulay wrote that Grant was so impressed by his speed of reading that he thought Macaulay was a conjuror. He drew up two reports in twenty-four hours. At the end of 1833 by dint of sheer hard work, Macaulay earned for himself the post of Secretary to the Board of Control with a salary of f, 1,500 a year.

India was opening up to Macaulay as a future. It had been laid down as policy that one of the members of the Supreme Council to govern India would be a person who was not a servant of the East India Company. By mid-August 1833, Macaulay was certain that this position would be offered to him. He was keen to accept the offer. The reasons were monetary. The post brought with it a salary of f 10, 000 a year. On this salary, Macaulay could return from India with a fortune even after living "in splendour" in Calcutta. This was important to Macaulay because he feared that without

a solid income his sisters would have to go out as governesses and milliners. As he wrote to his old patron, Lord Landsdowne, "Without a competence it is not easy for a public man to be honest; it is almost impossible for him to be thought so." In early December when the Court of Directors offered Macaulay the appointment, he accepted it with alacrity. Thus it was that in February 1834, Macaulay, accompanied by his sister Hannah, sailed for India on the Asia. To sustain him during the journey, Macaulay took with him the complete works of Gibbon, Voltaire, Richardson, Horace and Homer.

Before landing in Calcutta, Macaulay had to take a short detour to meet the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, who in June 1834 was convalescing in Ooty. Having paid his respects, Macaulay finally arrived in Calcutta at the end of September. We do not know if he immediately moved into the house on Chowringhee, but by the year end he was writing home about his magnificent establishment. What we do know, however, is the vision of India and for India that Macaulay had brought with him.

On his appointment, the Court of Directors had given a dinner for Macaulay. An eyewitness remembered that Macaulay "rather gave himself the airs of Lycurgus and spoke as if he were about to bestow on the swarming millions of India the blessings of rudimentary legislation". To the House of Commons, a few months before, he presented an even grander vision. In one of his great speeches to Parliament, Macaulay said,

The destinies of our Indian Empire are covered with thick darkness...The laws that regulate its growth and its decay are still unknown to us. It may be that the public mind of India may expand under our system till it has outgrown that system; that by good government we may educate our subjects into a capacity for better government; that having been instructed in European knowledge, they may in some future age, demand European institutions. Whether such a day will ever come I know

not...Whenever it comes it will be the proudest day in English history. To have found a great people sunk in the lowest depths of slavery and superstition, to have ruled them as to have made them desirous and capable of all the privileges of citizens, would indeed be a title to glory all our own. The scepter may pass away from us. Unforeseen accidents may derange our most profound schemes of policy. Victory may be inconstant to our arms. But there are triumphs which are followed by no reverse. There is an empire exempt from all natural causes of decay. Those triumphs are the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism; that empire is the imperishable empire of our arts and our morals, our literature and our laws.

Policies to put in place "the pacific triumphs of reason over barbarism" would be worked out from the house in Chowringhee. What was the house like? We have glimpses of it in the letters that Macaulay sent home. He boasted of it as being "the best in Calcutta". In another letter, he wrote,

I have a very pretty garden not unlike our little grass-plot at Clapham but larger. It consists of a fine sheet of turf with a gravel walk round it, and with flower-beds scattered over it. It looks beautiful just now after the rains, and I hear it keeps its verdure during a great part of the year. A flight of steps leads down from my library into the garden and it is so well shaded, that you may walk in it till ten o'clock in the morning.

When Macaulay arrived in Calcutta, the elites of the city were somewhat cash strapped. In the first years of the 1830s, the Agency Houses had crashed and ruined many individuals and families. Even the Bengal Club, then located near Tank Square (later to be named Dalhousie Square), did not remain unaffected by the crash. The Club's treasurers, Mackintosh & Co., one of the bigger houses, collapsed, taking with it the Rs. 40,000 the Club had deposited with it. Macaulay was aware of these strained circumstances of his peers. He noted, "That tremendous crash of the

great commercial houses which took place a few years ago...ruined one half of English society in Bengal and seriously injured the other half. A large proportion of the important functionaries are in debt, and accordingly, the mode of living is now exceedingly quiet and modest." Being a new arrival, Macaulay was, of course, untouched by this temporary reversal in fortunes and on his admission he kept house "more handsomely than any other member of Council". He had, to use his own phrase, an "army" of servants. This was common in India among Britons of Macaulay's position. Emily Eden had noted the ubiquitous presence of native servants all around her and commented that "it sometimes strikes me that we Europeans are mad people, sent out here because we are dangerous at home, and that our black keepers are told never to lose sight of us, and the ingenious creatures never do". Macaulay's cook was special since Lord Dalhousie, the future Governor-General's father, had recommended him as "decidedly the first artist in Bengal". Macaulay had two carriages, and when he rode in one of them some of his servants ran after it.

Inside the house took place certain important developments. Within six months of Macaulay's arrival in Calcutta, his sister Hannah, who had come out with him, became engaged to Charles Trevelyan, a young officer of the East India Company. The Trevelyans, like the Stracheys, were a cadet branch of an old West country family with baronetcies created in the 17th and 18th centuries. Charles met Hannah socially and for him it was love at first sight. She was a bit cold initially because she thought the young man's conversation was confined to political and economic matters. But Charles's perseverance won her over and very soon Macaulay was to discover her in the house pouring over some Minutes of the education committee written by Charles, which she had purloined from her brother's possession. Given the fact that Macaulay remained a committed bachelor, this was probably the only romance to have entered the house.

Macaulay approved of Charles Trevelyan. He wrote to his other sister

Margaret: "I can truly say that if I had to search India for a husband for her, I could have found no man to whom I could with equal confidence have entrusted her happiness." This approval was based on Charles's family background and, as Macaulay added, on the fact that Hannah's fiancé had capital worth £ 5,000 and an Indian salary of £ 2,000 per annum. But what broke Macaulay's heart was the prospect of separation from his sister. The dread of parting had so depressed him that even the Governor-General, Bentinck, was "frightened" about him. But a crisis was averted by the decision that Charles and Hannah after their marriage would continue to live with Macaulay in the house on Chowringhee. Macaulay, as he confessed to Margaret, was not too sure if this decision was correct but he preferred it to separation. Thus, the Trevelyans moved in with him immediately after their marriage in December 1834. Hannah, in fact, remained the centre of the Macaulay household that was soon to be enlivened by the arrival of Charles and Hannah's daughter. She was called Baba obviously after the way her ayah referred to her. This was probably the only concession Macaulay ever made to Indian customs.

We have a few vignettes, alas no more than that, of life in the interior of the household. Macaulay wrote to a friend, "The hours before breakfast I have all to myself; and I give them to literature." Breakfast, every Friday, was a long drawn out affair. We learn from George Otto Trevelyan, a nephew of Macaulay and the author of Life and Letters of Thomas Babington Macaulay, that every Friday at breakfast a select few would gather round the breakfast table and discuss matters of common interest. This would go on till noon till the accumulation of despatch-boxes beckoned them to their offices.

After lunch, he sometimes read to Hannah, in French or translating Greek at sight. This is how George Trevelyan painted the scene, "Scribe's comedies and Saint Simon's Memoirs beguiled the long languid leisure of the Calcutta afternoon, while the punkah swung overhead, and the air

came heavy and scented through the moistened grass-matting which shrouded the windows." After work, as the sun set, Macaulay, like most of his social class in Calcutta, took the evening air in a drive by the river. The evening, most often, was spent quietly in the house with the Trevelyans. Hannah wrote in a letter that the three of them led "most un-Indian lives, for we have a great deal to do, and we mix in none of the parties. I do not care for them, and Tom and Charles have no time. By the evening they are both generally pretty well worn out, and are glad to get early to bed, to be up by four the next day to resume the unceasing round."

This was, by all accounts, a cerebral and sombre household. It was not a joyous house. Given this context, one cannot imagine those impromptu sessions on Friday mornings to have been merry occasions. Important and grave issues must have been raised for discussion and it was here probably that Macaulay first tried out his ideas on education and legal reform, which made him famous.

It is important to bear in mind while describing Macaulay's life in the house on Chowringhee that he considered his stay in Calcutta as a period of exile. He was home-sick all the time and wanted to go home. He waited for the time when he would have enough money to return to London and lead a comfortable life. By 1838, he was ready to return home.

The house on Chowringhee had lost its most illustrious dweller. His stay in the house had very little impact on Macaulay. In his essays on Robert Clive and Warren Hastings there are passing glimpses of his Calcutta sojourn - the languid and sedentary habits of Bengalis; the season "when the fierce heat of Bengal can scarcely be rendered tolerable to natives of England by lofty halls and by the constant waving of fans; the cloud of crows pecking a sick vulture to death; the English barrister working 15,000 miles from all his friends with the thermometer at 96 in the shade". But outside his charmed circle he had little exposure to and experience of India. He was not, as the evidence suggests, even a member of the Bengal Club.

In his mind, Macaulay had deliberately put up a barrier saying "India and Indians not permitted". The Club that moved to his former residence in 1845 carried a similar notice till 1959 when the winds of change swept aside such prejudices. Yet all Indians, whether they like it or not, who opt to be members of the Bengal Club are Macaulay's children.

As one of history's parting ironies it must be noted as a postscript, albeit an important one, that the house in which Macaulay lived and to which the Club moved was the property of one of Bengal's most eminent reformers and men of letters – Kali Prasanna Sinha.

# The Bengal Club: A Personal Tribute

#### Uma Das Gupta

In our generation of academics, my husband's and mine, we did not usually think of becoming members of social clubs. There was never any conscious thinking about it, nor any spirit of rejection—that was simply how it was. Yet, like so many things in life which happen by chance, I became a member of the Bengal Club ten years ago almost without a pretext. The possibility arose when Sudipto Sarkar asked me to consider it. He and I were then working on a committee for the U.S. Educational Foundation in India to select scholars from India to study Intellectual Property Rights in the United States of America. I took Sudipto's kind suggestion about joining the Bengal Club seriously because I respected him. Even then I found the idea a bit daunting and took some time to think it over.

Once I decided to apply, all of the formalities were accomplished soon. The day came when my friend from our school days and the first woman member of the Club, Aditi Syam, very kindly presented me to the Committee in Salon 175. During that drill each of the committee members independently had the same question for me. Why did I not become a member earlier? What was I doing all this time? My answer to them was also one and the same, what I have just said in my opening sentences above. Some looked amused about what I said, others found it incredible that somebody could resist their Club all this while. I also found it all a little strange and wondered whether that inaugural experience was going

to be followed by any of the other rigours of an induction into this old and very formal institution.

Having used the word induction, I must hasten to say in all fairness that my nicest experience of the Club has been that there was actually no such thing. By now I know that the Bengal Club is definitely not one small world of conformism, although outwardly it may well seem to be so. It would be factually correct to say that the Club has more members from the business or corporate class than perhaps from any other group of professionals. But there has not been any imposition whatsoever from any group on sundry individual members like myself. In these times of all kinds of narrow formations, the Club shows its difference by being an open-minded and very gentle environment. It is no wonder that this old institution has stood the test of time and renewed itself over the years.

The Bengal Club has more than one persona and coexists harmoniously with all of them. For sure it embodies a rich history of our colonial times when a Club such as this was an instrument of some significance for the survival of the British colonizers. Their elite used this institution as an escape from their daily toil but also as an assertion of their art of living. The Club is thus left today with the heritage of a different culture and acts like a memento of a different way of life.

Luckily for those of us who use it today the heritage is an artistic one. Looking at the material side, the Club is in possession of old furniture items which were beautifully made, magnificent old clocks, oil paintings and portraits from that period, and traditional silverware. This silverware is laid out on special occasions and gives a glorious look to the Club. Anywhere else the silverware would have seemed ostentatious, but not at the Bengal Club where it is part of a genuine tradition, part of an old aesthetic and hospitable way of life. In these ways the Club also has educational value. The successive Indian Presidents must be applauded for their sensitive handling of the Club's history in preserving the portraits of the distinguished British personnel that line the Club's Dining Hall

along with adding a portrait gallery of the modern greats of Bengal in Room 300 for historical continuity. When in a contemplative mood, one can leave the Club with food for thought about our complex legacy.

The Club's cuisine is another feature of that legacy. The Bengal Club is home to authentic Anglo-Indian food – an altogether hybrid cuisine producing chops, cutlets and roasts that are only very remotely related to their sources in Britain. Another attractive remnant of the past way of life is there in the Club's Library with its exquisite little reading room containing several international newspapers and magazines. The Club clearly nurtures its library by setting aside a reasonable budget for buying fiction and non-fiction books as well as by actively trying to encourage more readership from its body of members. I would unhesitatingly say that the Club Library is what a library should be, pretty and calm. In comparison, so many libraries in our country today look neglected and gloomy.

I must end on a very personal note. If I say that the Club has been like a home away from home it will easily sound like a cliché. But sometimes even clichés can prove their worth in the path of life. Two years after I joined the Club my life changed drastically. My husband died and my home collapsed. My son most lovingly protected me by helping me with all the re-arrangements that is routine in those changed circumstances. But then he had to return to his Ph.C. studies at Yale. Needless to add, I would not have it any other way. What I needed most at the time was to stay at home quietly, but to find a place where I could occasionally go and sit among other people but not with them. That is what I often did. I would come to the Club and sit on my cwn for an hour or so with a cup of tea and a magazine and go back home feeling less anxious. The Bengal Club has that quality. It can give con idence to an individual. I felt at the time that the Reynolds Room provided an unspoken assurance that the world was generally in place.

# Jeeves to Tradition's Rescue Until Clubs Find Indigenous Level of Stability

#### Sunanda K. Datta-Ray

Recoiling from the serpent inlaid in the entrance lobby floor, Dr Karan Singh, our luncheon guest at the Bengal Club, gave my wife and me a lecture, replete with Sanskrit slokas as is his wont, on Naga, the divine snake-spirit. Now, there's a quandary that goes to the heart of India's adoption of alien totems. Should the marble slab be prised out and all trace of the sacred symbol removed to avoid offending the major religion of this country? Do we skirt round it, shutting our eyes and pretending that the creature isn't there? Or do we boldly plant muddied boot on the serpent's rearing head because to do otherwise might signify that we are not quite of the same ilk as the club's founding fathers?

Any mention of the social values and codes of conduct whose imperilled plight is the burden of this song at once prompts other questions. Whose social values? Whose codes of conduct? Both are products of particular cultures at a certain juncture in history. Neither can be frozen in time or transported lock, stock and barrel to another clime. Yet, the alternative to Anglicism need not be barbarism. If China and Singapore can match colonial grace with contemporary sophistication, so should India's 5,000-year-old civilization be able to do so. If Singapore's elegantly appointed Tanglin Club can emerge invigorated from its ordeal by fire, so surely can the Bengal.

The history of London clubs is the social history of the English upper classes over the last three centuries. Not that they were always quite so classy. "We now use the word *clubbe*," wrote John Aubrey, a 17th century biographer, "for a sodality in a tavern." Walter Raleigh and Shakespeare, John Donne and Ben Jonson patronised establishments that were not part of the Establishment. Even the easygoing Charles II tried to suppress sodalities that were suspected of subversive politics. That was then; today, clubs in England imply a lifestyle that prefers a silver salt cellar which doesn't pour to a plastic one that does.

"The gentleman's club, like the gentleman inside the club, is a peculiarly English institution," according to Anthony Lejeune, author of *The Gentlemen's Clubs of London*. But, alas, even the English are no longer as English as they were. A shadow of its former self, the National Liberal Club in Whitehall, where Sir Biren Mcokerjee proposed me for membership nearly 40 years ago, has been the subject of financial and sex scandal and satirised in *Private Eye*; it rents space to other clubs and leases its rooms to a hotel. There is, too, the Reform Club which, as readers of Jules Verne's *Around the World in Eighty Days* will recall, was plunged into consternation when Phileas Fogg introduced Aouda, his rescued princess. That stately preserve of male chauvinism now proudly admits women members "without any restriction."

Time moves on, as much in clubland's original bastion as here. It did not surprise me, therefore, to find the washbasin in the smart new (at the time of writing) men's lavatory opposite the Reynolds Room spattered with Pan Paraag. That sign of the times confirmed that like Lejeune, Bengal Club members also hold that "a member should treat his club as though it were his own house." Today's club may be "merely a haunted and much reduced miniature of what it once was" according to Geoffrey Moorhouse's Calcutta, but, priding itself on the august lineage of Pall Mall (Travellers, Reform, Athenaeum) and St. James's (Boodles, East India, Brooks's), it is still home. Where else at home would a Calcutta worthy squirt out unwanted juice but the bathroom basin? What are jemadars for if not to clear up the master's mess?

But not to worry, club servants, those last relics of the Raj, remain the ultimate custodian of values and codes imbibed from departed masters. They are the apostolic guardians of tradition until age, retirement or death snaps each flickering bond. Reliving his experience as a young waiter at Peletti's restaurant at the Calcutta race course, a doddering old khansama in the Dacca Club once solemnly instructed me on the precise protocol of addressing Bengal's notables. Burdwan was "Maharajadhiraja" and a "Sir" but Cooch Behar was "His Highness" – how lovingly he savoured the prefix! – "the Maharajah Bhup Bahadur."

Instinct and information go hand in hand. Servants know that hallowed clubs like the Reform frown on "overt display of business papers or documents, or the holding of conferences, seminars or similar gatherings". Hence the superb deftness of the Reynolds Room khansama one afternoon when a bunch of important looking men clustered in the corner over a spread of balance sheets and profit and loss accounts that they not only discussed in loud detail but also dictated on their mobiles to someone in another town. Each time they summoned the khansama for something, he picked up the brass cone on the coffee table and planted it down with a small thud. Inscribed on it below the coiled serpent is the instruction, "Please switch off your cellular phones as a courtesy to your fellow guests. Thank you." Twice he did so gratuitously, without being called. It was not the khansama's fault that his refined gesture of disapproval had no effect on the men.

On another occasion I found the library bearer wringing his hands in dismay because a member had seized almost all the most important magazines – the *Economist*, *Time*, *India Today* - stacked them beside him in the small reading room and thrown a newspaper over the pile. Feet pulled out of sandals, he sat twiddling his toes, mobile clamped to one ear, bellowing instructions in Hindi to his stockbroker.

It's Jeeves to the rescue the world over. No servant could have protected

propriety more diligently than the porter at the Travellers who strolled up to a young man helping himself to coffee in the morning room with a cheeky "Making ourselves at home, are we?" The flustered man explained in a slight American twang that he was staying in the club. "Room number?" the porter demanded peremptorily, and then announced that Mr Blankety-blank, a reciprocal member from Canada, had been assigned that room. "T'm staying with him" the young man replied, a little red in the face by then. "Never seen a member so casually dressed!" the porter exclaimed, moving away disdainfully. The Canadian was turned out in dark slacks, brown suede shoes and a suede 'erkin over a polo neck. Smart casual, but not gentleman's club attire.

That porter now runs a B&B in Bologna. But I shall forever be in his debt. My son and I were stranded in London at the height of the tourist season, the Travellers, East India and Royal Overseas were full, and none of the three club secretaries was able to help. The porter picked up his telephone, made a couple of calls, and in a jiffy we had a room at the Athenaeum next door. He was entitled to expect dress and deportment to match his service. Another porter intervened one day as I was signing the register. "But you're a member now, Mr Datta-Ray!" he exclaimed. I had to disabuse him. It's my son, not I, who has been elected. I still use the Travellers on the strength of the Bengal Club, and I still sign myself in.

The Tanglin reception porter is equally obliging. Since reciprocal membership allows me only thirty days' use in the year, he does not take note of the entire period of each visit to Singapore. If he did, my entitlement would be exhausted in no time. Instead, the kindly man ticks off each day that I actually go to the club.

Pall Mall and St. James's are not the Bengal Club's only progenitors; there is also the humbler heritage of what might be called Dustypore. "In any town in India," wrote George Orwell, "the European club is the spiritual citadel, the real seat of British power, the nirvana for which native officials

and millionaires pine in pain." Orwell also wrote in *The Road to Wigan Pier* that British soldiers and officials did not go to India to make money. "They went there because in India, with cheap horses, free shooting, and hordes of black servants, it was so easy to play at being a gentleman."

Clubs, whether metropolitan or mofussil, sustained the playacting. The Ranchi or Secunderabad Club was just as important to the district engineer or army captain as the Bengal Club was to the burra sahib. Like riding and shooting, they gave middle class "Great Britons" an illusion of belonging to an exalted set to which many could not aspire at home. Something of the divine right of kings was said to trickle down from Buckingham Palace through Viceregal Lodge and provincial government houses to the district where the collector's lady, otherwise a mundane housewife of modest birth, education and intellect, presided regally over fetes and garden parties. So, too, did the menfolk at Dustypore Club share the swank of White's and the Carlton. Packing the women off to powder their noses after dinner, they cracked manly jokes over the port about the day's pig sticking, cheaper tropical substitute for galloping after fox across the home counties.

Myth-making is a relatively harmless indulgence. I once heard a Bengal Club member in flowing dhoti informing his American guest that only rejects joined the Calcutta Club. Perhaps I should have quoted to him Moorhouse's account of how "once subservient Indians who never, in all Calcutta's history, would have been allowed past those wrought-iron gates" bid and bargained for the "decrepit residue of the old Bengal Club" in the auction after the departing sahibs disposed of the grand edifice that commanded 33 Chowringhee Road. Or Mahatma Gandhi writing in An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth how Ellerthorpe of The Daily Telegraph could not take him into the Bengal Club drawing room.

No, we can take no pride in a past when the definition of "all gentlemen received in general society in Calcutta" automatically excluded Indians. Nor in its codes and values. Dustypore Club was set up, as Orwell noted,

to keep the natives out. The story goes that the Allahabad Club rejected even Motilal Nehru who did not send his shirts to be laundered in Paris but did employ a British chauffeur. The course of Indian politics might have been different had it not.

A Pondicherrian lawyer, a Gallic version of Macaulay's composite colonial superman, claims that an important difference between French and British India was that the former had no "officers' clubs." The Cercle de Pondichery (NOTE: ONE R ONLY), occupying a prime site, was, in his view, an entirely social centre devoted to cards and drink, devoid of political purpose or distinctions of race and rank. And, indeed, there I ran into Papa Goubert, the exuberant rubicund chief minister of mixed descent who had been an administrator in Chandernagore and spoke Bengali as fluently as French.

Strictly speaking, officers' clubs are another variant, derived from England's country clubs that the entire family can use. You find them in tea gardens (Dibrugarh), railway colonies (Kanchrapara) and company towns (Jamshedpur). Arvind Nehra, the fictitious correspondent in that curious anonymous work, *Letters of an Indian Judge to an English Gentlewoman*, published in 1934, was posted to Myosein, a small town in Burma (then an Indian province) where each community had its own club.

Each Club is armed and fortified against the other Clubs. For a stranger it is a little hard to understand. By the recent amendment of a bye-law I am now admitted to the Government Club, but I have only been there once. In the Scotch Club, which is for Engineers and so on, only Scotch is spoken, and the Club, I gather, has to be rebuilt each day following St. Andrew's night, for the Scotsman is very warlike in joy. Then there is the Town Club, to which the Eurasians belong if they cannot pretend not to be Eurasian successfully enough to get into any other Club. For it seems to me to be the desire of everybody to get into another Club from the one to which their state of life has called

them; the aim of the other Club being to keep them out. England it seems, also has her caste system, as difficult, unovercomeable, as any of ours.

Nehra found the raison d'être of clubmen and club life far removed from Indian reality. He appreciated the piquant situation that arose when "the dark daughter of Mr Palmerston, a contractor" was about to wed an assistant (white obviously) in a rice firm. "Then she, automatically, will become a member of that Club to which her Father, Mother, and Sisters cannot belong." Unless, of course, the assistant "gets the sack because he is marrying her, as some think more than likely."

Nehra himself came up against what used to be called the colour bar when he ventured to the club on his own after his English superior and mentor died. The whites studiedly ignored him.

Then I tried the Engineers' Club and saw only a young man with reddish hair who called to me: "What do you want here, Black Face?"

Rough and ready Engineers' Club members, being several social rungs lower than the civil servants and judges who frequented the Government Club, saw no reason to cloak prejudice in politeness.

Humanity was just as crudely branded in the railway townships where much of my childhood was spent. In the early fifties we lived in a moated Officers' Colony, whose two bridges kept out intruders, with a club that sprawled amidst bowling greens, tennis courts and troops of brilliant canna. On either side of the stone fireplace in the drawing room gleamed the upright brass cases of shells fired during World War II from a nearby American camp. The library stored everything my adolescent reading taste yearned for.

Some distance down the line, beyond moat and bridges, was the Foremen's Colony with its bustling Anglo-Indian institute, the scene of lively Saturday night jitterbugging and brisk housie-housie sessions straight out of *Bhowani* 

Junction. Even further away was Baboo Colony (as it was called) for clerks, where another institute, an uninspiring redbrick building with no grounds at all, catered to social life. The seniormost member of the Officers' Colony led us there once a year to sit through the Bengali play they staged - Krishna Kanter Will on the last occasion I attended - after Durga Puja. It was duty, not pleasure or culture.

The two institutes were clubs in all but name. But, as my Pondicherrian friend would have mocked, British India allowed only officers, never mind whether or not they were also gentlemen, the entrée to a club. Hoi-polloi - "subordinates" was the term for employees whose names were not printed in the government gazette - had to be content with institutes. Each of the three constituents of that self-contained railway world was being transformed, succumbing to India if you like, in ways that eventually made nonsense of separation. The most palpable change was naturally in the Officers' Colony where not all new members (and certainly not their wives) were easy with knife and fork. Canasta began to languish. More women sat out dances than took the floor that the bearers polished with French chalk. The abdar complained of falling takings. His very existence seemed in jeopardy when a new entrant laughed at an elderly visiting officer calling "Abdar!" to order a drink. "Just because the waiter in your club is called 'Abdar' you think our servant has the same name?" the novice exclaimed, unaware of his gaffe. But, then, the distinctions between bearer, masalchi, bawarchi, abdar, khansama and khidmadgar are often lost even in much grander circles.

The first casualty was the Officers' Club tradition of a pot luck lunch every few weeks. People were suddenly told to bring whatever they had cooked at home for a pooled Sunday meal in the club dining room. Increasingly, it created problems. Some members were embarrassed by what they could offer; several had dietary restrictions; others noted the differences in cuisine and cuality. I remember, too, the seniormost officer announcing that a bathroom with a squatting lavatory would be fitted in

each bungalow. "For our mothers!" he explained kindly. His own mother, a grey-permed memsahib in chiffon, would have had a fit if confronted with a hole in the floor. He cannot have known then of Nirad C. Chaudhuri's tale of the British Broadcasting Corporation executive - white naturally scribbling on a European-style toilet in New Delhi that the corporation staff shared with All India Radio's Indian employees during World War II: "Indians cannot use such lavatories. They roost like hens, and they should go to the peons' lavatory." But the boss was a wise man, sensitive to winds of change.

Those winds were blowing the original inmates of the Foremen's Colony to Britain and Australia. The institute was crippled. Housie-housie remained but jiving petered out, as did Saturday nights at the bar. Regular church services were discontinued. Eventually, I seem to think, as Bengalis replaced Anglo-Indians, the Foremen's Colony and Baboo Colony institutes were merged. The ethnic and cultural divide had vanished. If the Officers' Club has not also merged by now with the combined institute, it should have done. For the reasons of race, class and culture that kept the three apart and, indeed, vested each with its distinctive codes and values, disappeared long ago.

Lines had already begun to blur when the case of the Younger Brother underlined a societal condition that demolishes England's "unovercomeable" (Nehra's coinage) caste system without which there can be no exclusivity. He was a bright young man who had done well in the competitive examination and joined the officer cadre. His elder brother was a head clerk and Baboo Colony stalwart. Younger Brother could have been an embarrassing male version of "the dark daughter of Mr Palmerston, a contractor" who could use the club but could not invite his kin; but no such occasion ever arose. The head clerk was a self-respecting man who knew his place and kept his distance. Younger Brother was also circumspect. But neither tried to hide a connection that hung in the air like an unmentionable albatross. No family could have straddled the different

worlds in the age in which the club and institutes were built, but any club's most haughty member today might be closely related to a clerk in the accounts department. M.G. Ranade, the distinguished Bombay High Court judge, always took his seat on the bench early to spare his father, who was his peshkar, having to stand up for him.

Other differences are equally marked. "The good news from clubland is that there's not much news," says Lejeune. No news, in India, would signify death, explaining why club presidents measure their achievements by the number of "functions" they can pack into a term and the number of VIPs who can be hauled in as guests, speakers and honorary members. Elections are excitement and argument, unlike the National Liberal where, in my time, the secretary's behind-the-scenes parleys produced exactly as many candidates as there were committee vacancies. Nothing so vulgar as a contest. Nor lurid newspaper stories such as Calcutta was regaled with in March 2002. According to the Reform, "confidential discussions and untoward episodes within the Clubhouse are treated as strictly domestic matters." The brochure goes on to say, "Mischievous reports of alleged occurrences appearing in the Press are greatly to be deprecated."

Any member of the Travellers can take out a priceless volume from the library, which is one of London's showpieces, without telling anyone or putting anything down on paper. "It's the old honours system" a veteran explained. Here, there would be no library left if bags and briefcases were allowed. The Athenaeum is packed with treasures that members look on as their own. So do Bengal Club members, but in the manner of Shakespeare's Henry V who loved France so well that he would not part with a village of it, and would have it all his. No wonder the reception desk with a brass plaque saying Macaulay had used it disappeared, as did an antique framed map of Calcutta from the library. What astonished me most was that when I asked around, not a single member, not even the president and his colleagues, admitted to any recollection of the missing

heirlooms. Only two humble servitors remembered them. Which bore out my point that servants are the best guardians of tradition. Woe betide values and codes when the last of them has gone.

Attempts to emulate the London club in places as far apart as Melbourne and Washington have met with limited success. Trappings can be copied and bettered – Shanghai's American Club is far more sumptuous than the Cavalry in Piccadilly - but members cannot be cloned. I think of Monsignor Gilbey of the port and gin family, a small bent figure in black, who lived and died in the Travellers. Or the Cavalry's cheery nonagenarian military man whose anecdotes ranged from disreputable Karaya Road establishments to Indira Maharani of Cooch Behar. In contrast, there were no members at all in Shanghai's American Club when my wife and I dined in its glittering splendour, French cuisine and wines served by a regiment of attentive Chinese servants who had no other guest to bother with.

Old codes and values are under siege everywhere. The Tanglin is gracious all right but as a local writer commented some years ago, "it seems now, though, that the classiness is a thin veneer, like the formica on a kitchen table top, which peels off over the years." A flurry of anonymous circulars in 1998 provoked that outburst. First, some (ostensibly Europeans who constituted 49 per cent of the membership) called for rules to "ensure that the Western culture and character of the club (codes and values?) is not at risk of being diluted by the further influx of Singaporeans ..." whose number was capped at 51 per cent. Then, others, presumably locals, promised to fight the "very racial and discriminatory attitude" of European members. A packed and stormy AGM was split on ethnic lines. The vicepresident was censured for writing to the press. "Boos and jeers could be heard from across the road, like noises from a coffeeshop brawl." Members attacked reporters waiting outside. "It was behaviour more becoming of pub drunks than members of a genteel club" commented a radical columnist in The Straits Times

The Tanglin has settled down again to elegant equanimity. The silver gleams. The upholstery is deep and the panelling dark. The Churchill Room serves choice wines with recherché dishes. Conversation is murmured. Members swim, play tennis or slumber in the tranquillity of a reading room that has all the leading papers of the Western world. The storm has blown over, leaving a harmonious synthesis of local and foreign. But the upsurge warned against taking smooth translation for granted. At some stage a firm stand has to be taken against the downward slide represented by the theft of objet d'art, the splash of Pan Paraag, the barefoot investor in the library and the businessmen in the Reynolds Room, the vitriolic newspaper articles and other aberrations. Good taste is not a matter of race; it is the essential prerequisite of a bhadralok.

All institutions left behind by the receding tide of colonialism find their indigenous level of stability. That is so with Parliament, the military, law courts, the press, the civil service and, of course, clubs. The stability may seem less refined but it is of the soil. It is what we are. Problems arise when we try to be something else by tethering inherited institutions too tightly to alien codes and values.

### The Way We Are

#### Aditi Syam Dua

"Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet..." wrote the experienced India hand, Rudyard Kipling. He had not, however, savoured the delights of Bengal Club where East and West blended in perfect unison. Through the triumphs and trials of its 178 years, Bengal Club has been on a pedestal as the foremost club not just of Calcutta (sorry, Kolkata) but of India. With its vast network of reciprocities, its most distinguished alumni, as it were, of the East and West, its exclusive facilities, and its devotion to excellence in every sphere, it stands as an impressive landmark of Kolkata, and indeed a place of near pilgrimage to lovers of the Raj. The civility, predictability, neatness and cosmopolitanism of Bengal Club make it familiar meeting ground for East and West.

There are countless stories around our Club, which have now become legendary. Let me recount an important one – that of the circumstances which led to the adoption of the King Cobra as the Club's unique crest. Many members and guests have wondered as they head towards today's Salon 175, why there is the black cobra so prominently displayed on that one marble slab. And then, there it is, present on the crockery and cutlery of the Club. The story goes that when the foundations of the Club's buildings were being dug, a very large King Cobra emerged out of the rubble and stood guard over the site. The local labourers refused to carry on with their work as they considered the King Cobra to be the lawful guardian of the place, not to be disturbed or killed, so as to avoid disaster

and misfortune. On the advice of the Overseer, a Brahmin, who was a priest of Monosha (the snake Goddess), was brought from Bagh Bazar. He conducted a *puja*, worshipping the King Cobra, and asking his permission for laying the foundation of the building. The King Cobra was appeared with the offering of milk and bananas. As a token of his consent and benediction, he satisfied himself with the *prasad* that was offered.

The whole incident took a few hours, but the Cobra was present during the entire duration of the *puja*, and only went away when it was over. Thereafter, the King Cobra was used as the Club's crest to show respect to the guardian of the place! How many institutions in the world can boast of such a guardian? As with most lores, this incident could be fiction or "coloured" fact. But as a celebrated barrister, who was a member of the Club, told me, "mere embellishment is no lie". Let us not delve too much into the whys and wherefores, but accept this legend of the King Cobra, forever the guardian of our Club!

As one enters the Club, one sees embedded on the right wall a marble tablet with the words, "In the house which formerly stood on this site and was dismantled in 1908, resided Thomas Babington Macaulay, Law Member of the Supreme Council in 1834-1838". Close by was the garden house of Mr. Henry Vansittart, Governor of Bengal, 1760-1764, and later occupied by Sir Elijah Impey and also by Bishop Heber. Nearby, there is today yet another landmark of old Kolkata, Loreto House, the school for girls on Middleton Row. This area, including today's Park Street, used to be a wide expanse known as the Deer Park.

A bit of history of our Club, culled from the well-documented volume, *The Bengal Club*, 1827-70, reprinted in May 1997, may not be out of place here. It was established on February 1, 1827, with membership then restricted to five hundred, "one hundred of whom be eligible from Gentlemen not in the service of His Majesty or the Hon'ble Company" (East India Company, i.e.!). The Club's first home was a large four-storeyed

block in Esplanade East, known as 'Gordon's Buildings'. In our Club today, there is a print of Esplanade East, the main feature of which is the Club's first home, the print being produced circa 1830 by the famous William Wood Junior.

In 1845, the long awaited plan of removing the Club from Tank Square was accomplished, the building chosen being, as the tablet says, the one occupied by Lord Macaulay during his stay in India as Law Member of the Supreme Council. The owner of the property was Babu Kali Prasanna Sinha, a wealthy resident of Jorasanko. In 1927 No. 34 Chowringhee, the property adjoining the Club to the South and extending from Chowringhee to Russell Street was bought. For over four decades, the impressive façade of Bengal Club dominated the Chowringhee (now J. L. Nehru Road) landscape. But in 1970, due to financial problems, the Chowringhee premises had to be given up, the keys being handed over to the General Manager of the then National and Grindlays Bank. Through demands, disputes, travails and other adversities, our Club has survived and its financial position is now secure. Old members have got used to its entrance from Russell Street. Many times though, when the small gate at the back leading to Chowringhee is open, we have used and still use it as a shortcut to get to Chowringhee!

Members of Bengal Club have had a sense of belonging and loyalty which is perhaps unparalleled. It has a strange draw, almost like one's alma mater. And so, over these many decades, it has not just acquired, but been gifted with numerous artefacts which adorn its walls and rooms – paintings, clocks, silver etc., each item having a history behind it which old timers will recount with the inevitable twinkle in their eyes. Reynolds Room is known for the painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Was it by him? That is the stuff of another story, but it dominates the room and draws attention always. The magnificent Grandfather Clock, today in the Reynolds Room, was gifted by Mr. A. R. Cope, and its delightful chimes were restored by

Mr. Satow, President in 1970. One of the most striking portraits the Club has, is that of William Bracken, Collector of Customs, 1845 to 1858. It is not known whether he was a member, but it forms a link with the earlier days of the Club's history - and East and West have met here - his portrait being honourably placed. Another historic link is "Kitchener's Table" from the Calcutta Light Horse Club when it wound up in 1966 - vet another happy meeting of East and West. The Russell Street Cup was presented by Messrs. L. M. Blomenstock and F. C. Williams. It is a trophy for the winner of the annual golf match against the RCTC. There are a host of other gifts, ranging from portraits to prints, to silver cocktail shakers, condiment sets and other forms of tableware, to settees, a complete bedroom suite, a bridge table and chairs, Dresden china and silver, and other items. They have all been gratefully acknowledged and speak of the happy meeting between East and West, it being the tradition for members leaving India to present to the Club a parting gift as a mark of affection and remembrance of times of bonhomie.

Our Club, as we all know, was once upon a time the sacred cow of the British, the "natives" not being allowed into its hallowed portals, till long after independence. We also know about the reverence this venerable Club had for tradition, which fortunately extends to its cuisine – both Continental, especially Continental, and Indian. Special mention should be made of the casseroles and pies, the soufflés and ice-creams, which are unparalleled, and perhaps would vie with an Escoffier and certainly give cordon bleu chefs a run for their skills, even in this culinary-conscious city. Members today, Ms. Afroze Randerian for one, and members' wives, Mrs. Threety Irani and others, have added to the Club's repertoire with their own mouthwatering recipes. We all miss Mr. Datta, the long-time Chief Steward of the Club, who was not only an institution, but devoted his life to the Club. Many are the recipes he has shared and whenever I make his Christmas Special Rum Punch, my popularity chart soars!

The Club's dress code is also a part of its heritage. Yet, as Bengal Club moves with the times, dress rules are relaxed to suit the demands of modernity. Sometimes, rigid adherences to such rules lead to untoward incidents. I recall an occasion when the late Mr. Ananda Shankar walked into the dining room upstairs in chappals and was asked to come back wearing shoes. As is the tradition of our Club, he was asked to keep to form most politely, and he took no offence. I am reminded of an incident in a Company just next to Bengal Club. The famous artist, M. F. Hussain, in his trademark bare feet had walked into the precincts of that Company which was in those days as koi hai as our Club. The durwans stopped him from entering the building. There was so much furore that the Chairman of the Company had to be called to adjudicate in the matter! Dress restrictions invariably lead to many comic situations, but rules are rules and exceptions are unwarranted.

Change is inevitable if survival is a must, and therefore change is necessary. As Alvin Toffler said about a decade ago, "change is avalanching on us", and indeed, the avalanche is still on. Although proud of its tradition, Bengal Club has kept pace with change, and at times, even been a forerunner. This "white sahibs" only Club gave way gracefully to "brown sahibs", the first "brown sahib" President in 1968 being Mr. D. P. M. Kanga of CESC. Mr. Kanga was in spirit and manner more "white" than "brown", but an extremely good-hearted and courteous gentleman, who, with Mr. V. V. Parekh, a President after him, ably conducted the affairs of the Club to see it being reborn in its present Russell Street premises. At the Centenary Commemorative Banquet of the Club on January 31, 1977, there were many Toasts drunk, the earlier toasts to "King and Country" being replaced by those to the President of India, the founders and the Club and I am told the Tikka Kanga Kebab and Orange Pilau Parekh were much appreciated! But the first Indian President, in form and in spirit, was Mr. B. P. Ray, the Senior Partner of Orr Dignam, who succeeded Mr. M. G. Satow in 1971. A great raconteur and wit, Mr. Ray was a storehouse of anecdotes about the Club and did a lot to put our hallowed Club in tune with the times. There was no looking back. With each successive President and Committee after that, Bengal Club moved ahead, catering ably to the needs of the times, as also to the priorities of the Club.

There were many changes – too many to recount – the Commemorative volume ably records them all. And as with any living organisation, changes continue, to the betterment of the Club. But a change that was momentous came about in 1988 when it was decided to admit Lady Members in their own professional right, as full members. Thus, this once very "Gentleman's Club", primarily formed as their retreat and for their leisurely lunches over a century ago, and that too for "whites" only, started admitting the fairer sex, recognising that women were marching alongside men in the Kolkata of today. I was privileged to be the first Lady member of the Club, when membership was opened for us, in my capacity as Vice President, Public Relations, ITC Ltd. I remember Mr. P. R. Ray (now sadly no more), of Indian Oxygen, proposed my name and Mr. A. Basu, Deputy Chairman of ITC Ltd., seconded the proposal. The admission of ladies in their own right is a far cry from the times when, till 1953, ladies were only permitted in the Large Guest Room (rena ned Salon 175), then known as the Ladies' Room! Mr. Sukhendu Ray, Chairman of Guest Keen Williams, was the President in 1988, and as I was introduced to the members of the Committee, who were all very affable, only one member politely enquiring whether I would use the Club effectively, I suspected the founding fathers, God bless them, to be turning in their graves!! It was almost as if the last male bastion in Kolkata had fallen!

After my admission, many professionals (ladies) have followed. I remember that the eminent jurist, the late Justice Padma Khastagir, became a member immediately after me. I proposed Dr. Uma Das Gupta, then the head of USEFI to become a member later, and now I am happy to see that our tribe has increased and continues to do so. This speaks not only of the equality of women in the professional sphere, but demonstrates also the

resolve of our Club to move with the changing times despite it being known to be most conservative, and despite it being a well recognized fact that its membership is like entering the holy of holies!

I cannot help but remark here that whereas we have moved with today for as long as almost two decades, another club, not too far away, is anachronistic in its attitude towards admitting ladies as members in their own right. When it is known that this club was formed after Bengal Club as a protest against its then rules of "whites only" as members, this attitude is indeed ironic. This remark is being made just by the way, there being no reason to mean any offence whatsoever.

Our Club's Library, which houses books dating back to the Mutiny of 1857, deserves special mention. Over the years, the Library has been consolidated, and reassembled in our new premises. Mrs. A. P. Trevor and Mrs. P. Prashad, spent many humid hours checking and reassembling books. Today the Library has as many as 16,000 books and an elegant Reading Room next to it provides an oasis for book lovers who want to spend a meaningful hour or so in the midst of newspapers, periodicals, journals and books.

The programmes – and there are many today – which our Club has, speak of its inexorable march with the times and needs. I remember an occasion well over a decade ago when our Club decided to celebrate *Poila Baisakh* and we asked Abhirup Guhathakurta to sing, the Large Guest Room being decorated for the first time in its history, with *alpana*, followed by a wonderful Bengali dinner. This was certainly not *de rigeur* in days of yore, but now, most appropriately, is. Since then, such occasions are many and an intrinsic part of club activities. We have had so many *Poila Baisakhs*, *Holis, Id* celebrations, rubbing shoulders with children's Christmas parties and Christmas lunches and New Year Eves. Debates, discussions, songs, dramas and recitations are today as much a part of the Club's activities as are the Continental, Bengali and North Indian lunches and corporate

parties. Room 150, Room 300 and the Millennium Room have been added to cater to increasing demand. The other public rooms, such as the Reynolds Room, the Nagaraj Bar, the Large Guest Room and the Oriental Room are constantly being refurbished as are the very comfortable and commodious residential rooms. Once, a Rev. Father Carlo Tomas from Barcelona was my guest and he was greatly impressed by our residential rooms. He even celebrated mass in his room and I received his special benediction!

As we move ahead, there is talk of having a gym and even perhaps a small swimming pool, if space permits. Old timers never think of changing their loyalty from the Barber's Shop that has been there since it seems forever, despite the many saloons that Kolkata offers.

Like many of our members, I too have my share of fond memories of our Club – dignified in its modernity, proud of its heritage, yet moving in step with today. And as one sees the navy blue flag of our Club with its emblem of the King Cobra fluttering over the portico, one feels privileged to belong to this "best" Club of all.

### The Clubbable Society

#### Rimi B. Chatterjee

In 1827, a group of expatriate Englishmen decided to found a gentlemen's club in the garrison city they inhabited far from the shores of the mother country. Their reasons for doing so combined the fashionable with the practical: gentlemen's clubs were all the rage in London, with the Athenaeum Club established in 1824, the Oriental Club in the same year, the Oxford and Cambridge in 1830, the Garrick in 1831, and the Reform in 1837. The first President, Lieutenant Colonel the Honourable J. Finch, cited the success of such institutions as the reason why he wanted to bring together some of Calcutta's residents to set up a similar institution. But the men who gathered to lay down its charter did not call their new venture the English Club, or the London Club, they called it after the province they had come to rule: the Bengal Club.

In retrospect this is astonishing, for there was to be nothing more English on Bengali soil than the Bengal Club. For generations of young men far from home, the Bengal Club stood ostensibly for solid masculine English values while it quietly and graciously provided a cocooning, almost maternal care for the homeless and stress-burdened agents of the imperium. Paradoxically womanless, the club was nevertheless a refuge from the hurly burly of colonialism where the movers and shakers of the new Eastern territories could put their feet up, enjoy a good brandy and soda, assassinate a few characters and swap the odd bit of news. Since the average age of going out in the first half of the nineteenth century was sixteen (it increased

a bit after the introduction of competitive exams) the Club was a surrogate family to the newly-arrived. It was universally acknowledged that survival in India was a function of experience and good advice, and if the 'griff', as the newcomer was known, had to acquire the first on his own time, the club was the venue where he could get a judicious dose of the second. Since most found Indian food unpalatable on arrival, the Club would feed them 'Anglo Indian' cuisine until they could find their own cook and khansama, in which the Club seniors would help.

Apart from all these clearly practical and immediate advantages, the expatriate community also fulfilled a somewhat subtler agenda in having a club of their own. Like the wider society they were trying to govern and the one that had sent them there to govern it, the Anglo-Indians (as they called themselves) were a hierarchical social body with elaborate caste rules. These did not necessarily come preset from the mother country: to the homebound English the society of Calcutta was scandalously lax about social conventions, but in fact the rules were not looser, only different. Here enterprise and success (more so in the early years) could win a lowborn Englishman a high position, until communications with the mother country improved to the point where Calcutta's social autonomy was severely reduced. Be that as it may, social distinctions only have meaning when they are enacted in public, and the Club was one of the many theatres in which this could rake place. The most obvious distinction, of course, was whether you were in or out: in time the Saturday Club became known as the 'Chota Lat' club, while Bengal Club gloried in its stately reputation as the lair of the Burra Lats. Within the Club's august portals, there was room for all the delicious factions and counterfactions that added spice to expatriate life, though there was also a camaraderie that underpinned the groupism. The Club's members were all Bengal men (in the petit sense) but they also needed a pecking order, and a system of laying it down, in order to feel that the universe was working smoothly. In the time-honoured English tradition, the Club provided a place where

they could exercise the subtle timing, freezing silences and modulations of accents that are the essence of English social putdowns, and any bumptious characters on the receiving end could drown their sorrows in the Dirty Dining Room.

This was not merely a social enterprise: it mirrored in microcosm the comparative power and favour of various ideologies of the Raj. The most fundamental distinction was that between commerce and empire. Many of the men who founded the Club were not administrators but traders, but the records, such as they are, are rather coyly silent about them. In later years the Club tried to present itself as a who's who of the 'Civilian' muscle in Bengal, but trade persisted in entering its portals and indeed helped bail it out of several financial crises. Today, of course, it is the administrators who are a minority, if not absent: a fact that represents the radical changes in society itself that have taken place between 1827 and the 1960s when CEOs began decisively to replace maharajas as the men to watch.

But when the Club was the haven of rulers, it was also a battleground for the comparative importance of the factions within the Raj. Whig and Tory rivalries did come to India in a somewhat changed form, with Macaulay the most famous Whig to be associated rather tenuously with the Club (he stayed in the house which is now the Club's premises). Macaulay's Minute on Education was one of the first experiments in what we might call social engineering to be carried out on a large scale, and significantly it was to pre-date England's own enterprise in mass state-sponsored education. Macaulay's outlook was shared by some in the administration, and bitterly opposed by others: these divisions became generational when India switched to direct administration under the crown in 1858 and the 'competition-wallahs' came to fill her posts. These men arose from somewhat different social strata (aspirational middle class, mostly) than the East India Company men who had trained at Haileybury

Imperial School and College (largely upper class youths unsuitable for the Church who needed to make their fortunes) who were their bosses in the post-1857 period. Their religious, educat onal and social differences meant that Club society must have been placed under many strains after Victoria was crowned Empress of India, and some of the new men seceded from Club culture altogether. The more idealistic, irked by the overt racism of the established clubs, even tried to set up mixed European-Indian ones (none of which seem to have survived post-Independence), thus beginning the fragmenting of hierarchical elites that has so marked the twentieth century.

Race barriers were challenged successfully before 1947, though not by the Bengal Club which remained lily-white till after Independence, but gender barriers had to wait till after the sexual revolution. At the Bengal Club, it was not till 1911 that the ladies were even invited to tea, and the wisdom of this daring stroke of social radicalism was being hotly debated as late as 1923. White non-English members began to be inducted in the aftermath of the exodus of the English after Independence, but it was not till after 1959 that Indians entered as members. Prominent among the pioneers were two who represented the pick of the old and the new: the Maharaja of Cooch Behar and the horshot young Tata executive whom everybody was talking about, Russi Mody. The Club had to wait another generation before women entered in their own right, but in this the Bengal Club has proved more progressive than its sister organisation, the Calcutta Club, where women still cannot be members off their own bat.

The Club changed because the world had changed, and a new order was knocking on the door. But its guardians of the time calculated the step so that things, though changing, would remain the same the Club would continue to perform the function it had always performed, but for a different constituency. Invitation to join would confer what it had always acknowledged: the prize of having arrived. Other clubs might be base

camps for the climbers of the world: the Bengal Club was for those already standing on their summits. Age and field of endeavour were secondary (though of course not totally negligible), but the point was, you joined the Club as a reward for being well known, not as a means to become so, and you expected to rub shoulders with people who were similarly placed. This factor has remained a constant to the present day in the way the Club has functioned as a social benchmarking system in Calcutta's society. To trot out the old cliché, everyone who's anyone is whom you expect to meet at the patrician house between Chowringhee and Russell Street.

But this begs certain questions. For example, what does it mean to have arrived? In earlier and simpler times, such things were fairly clear-cut. Everyone who had arrived knew everyone else and as you walked through the door of social achievement people turned to look, with the objective of being first to introduce you to the right people. But today we not only don't know what constitutes a door, we can't be sure who has or hasn't walked through it.

Democracy and progress have inevitably widened the scope of club culture. In the transitional period between what the Club was fifty years ago and what it is now, it performed an acculturation function: it passed on habits relating to European manners and customs to people who were taking their places in India's new aristocracy. Before the transition and for a while after (i.e. in the nineteen fifties and sixties), this was immaterial: in the main people who arrived had automatically picked up European manners on the way, probably at their mother's knee or at school, and the Club did not need to teach them anything, only keep them in practice if the home environment was too *desi* to provide this. But as the generation that grew up learning the King's English died away, the Club primarily its staff, cooks, and retainers acted as a repository of a way of living that it subtly but firmly taught to the new arrivals. By insisting on certain standards of behaviour and courtesy, the Club provided a safe, supportive environment

where these could be internalised without the tension of having to learn the arcana of European table manners, for example, while on a stressful business trip to Zurich. So it added to the prize of having arrived, the survival skills necessary for the rarefied air of the heights.

But there is a danger in this that has become ever more glaringly obvious in recent times. Since the seventies, in the Western world, the old ways have been radically modified. Perhaps because of the rise of youth culture and the class/gender/ethnic challenges to dominant cultural motifs, non-U (or street hipness) has become cool. Think first of the 'BBC accent' of the seventies and then of the aural bouquet of intonations you hear on that channel today. Britain has largely reinvented what it means to be British since the days of the Raj, such that the semi-fossilised cultures scattered throughout the forme: empire sometimes seem quaint to present day Brits. British culture today is obsessed with world cuisine to the point where even the archetypal Brit.sh yob has abandoned fish and chips for beer and curry, while everyone seems to be eating Thai or Italian or West Asian or at least some Brit interpretation of the same. Compare this with the Bengal Club's fond recreation of the more artery-challenging British culinary artefacts such as shepherd's pie and sugared ham, still honouring the gastronomic bukum of a vanished tribe of public school men.

So has the cultural capital of the Bengal Club gone out of date, or does it still have some value in acquainting the inevitably ever more *desi* constituency of its members with global influences? Even before we answer that question, it gets worse: capital, as everyone knows, does not stand still. Along with a certain cultural arteriosclerosis of the British legacy, there has on the other hand been a gradual chutneyfication of the Indian component that has probably got the Honourable J. Finch spinning in his grave. Cultural pressures have injected a creeping *desi*-ness into everything from the menu to the dress code, causing some members to

be concerned that it is destroying the very uniqueness that makes the Club valuable and gives it the right to benchmark social arrival.

But in India today, there is not and cannot be one monolithic standard of arrival. We are no longer ruled by a recognisable and organised oligarchy, although there are still considerable barriers to the entry of those out on the margins to the corridors of power. Social mixing has been slower in acquiring vigour, but surely the ideals of democracy and equality that India has espoused since 1947 will eventually lead to a more equitable society? In that case, are institutions like the Bengal Club outmoded relics of cultural hegemony that should be quietly and decently got rid of, or changed beyond recognition?

Before we answer 'yes' and have done with it, let us consider the following: people thirst for badges of achievement, and continually invent them. Independent India has generated its own civilian awards for achievement, from the Padma Shri to the Sahitya Akademi Award. Every ad copywriter knows that one of the surest ways to sell a prestige item is to play up its social brag factor. Half the fun of succeeding is gone if you do not have rituals of success to tell the world that you have, indeed, made it. Hanging out in the club, any club, is one of the most comprehensive and satisfying ways of doing this. So the question is not about the necessity of clubs as such, nor about their benchmarking capacity, but specifically about Bengal Club's capability to do this as it is now.

Some members of the Club would argue that Bengal Club has already lost its exclusivity, and that membership no longer carries the cachet it once had. Others will say that Bengal Club is still the *ne plus ultra* of social achievement, but that the acculturation in social graces it once offered has deteriorated. Still others will be happy with things as they are now, and yet others will demand more Rabindrasangeet, *pau bhaji, shorshe ilish* and Diwali Nites. Everyone draws the line in a different place, and the result is emphatically not a join-the-dots picture.

However, the issue today is different from what it was half a century ago. Today the problem of where and how the Club should go is essentially an internal one. It has little impact on the rest of society, because the nature of elites has changed. The Club is now only one of the venues of validation that people aspire to, and it has to compete with other benchmarking systems. Part of the frustration that some members feel at the Club's 'decline' is a response to this changing situation: it's a disappointment with society for moving on and rendering the Club's method of social gatekeeping slightly obsolete. In practical terms this might translate to eligible corporate hotshots wanting to spend their Friday evenings at a happening disco rather than at the Club, and thus sapping the old networks of new social input. In addition many members belong to more than one club in Calcutta, resulting in a kind of cross-fertilisation with ideas of fashion shows and rock concerts coming in with their organisers from other clubs. Bengal Club has not gone that far yet, but perhaps it is just a matter of time?

But before we start lamenting the end of an era, let us contemplate the beast chosen by the founders for their mascot. Rather than select a tiger or an elephant or suitable noble animal (the tiger being especially eligible for Bengal), they chose a snake. Legend has it that the snake was surprised while the foundations of the club's premises were being dug, and was persuaded to depart only after suitable (probably Tantric) rites of appeasement. What is more, the snake does not feature with any of the shields or heraldic devices so beloved of the English: it is nothing but a great big poisonous reptile curled on itself with its hood raised, more appropriate for a secret society or a circle of illuminati than a gentleman's club. Are we to conclude that the founders did not apply much thought to the choice of mascot, or were they trying to tell us something?

The thing about snakes (unlike tigers, Royal Bengal or otherwise) is that they are capable of renewal. Of course, they are usually in a foul mood while they undergo this painful process, but when they do finally change they do so with grace and élan, gliding smoothly out of their past and turning it neatly inside out in the process, to appear with glowing colours and polished scales. It remains to be seen whether the Club can pull off this difficult feat as well.

# The Famous Bengal Club Brand

#### Nicholas Roe

My visits to Kolkata in 2001 and 2003 began in the middle of the night. KLM. BA. Arrivals. Then speeding from airport to city along empty roads and streets, sweeping into elegant grounds where the car pulled up at the main entrance of the Bengal Club. A lighted hallway; a cordial welcome; and much-needed sleep. A succession of happy days followed in conference at Jadavpur University, interspersed with visits to the Victoria Memorial; St. John's Church with the grave of Peter Pan; the Asiatic Society; the Indian Museum and National Library; and South Park Street cemetery with its overarching trees, vaults, and obelisks among which I sought, and found, the monument to Sir William Jones.

Walking back to the Bengal Club I was struck by how the clamour of Russell Street recedes in hushed rooms where past, present and future meet and mingle. The elegant portraits - one by Sir Joshua Reynolds - and the gilded lists of illustrious names hark back to the imperial capital and the magnificent banquets hosted in the Bengal Club for visiting princes and viceroys. Behind the well-stocked bar are glittering silver beer mugs gifted by members when they left India to retire to leafy Burnham; to the Isle of Wight, and Ventnor's cliffs; or to Cheltenham, with its limes and long Promenade. As recently as 1970, I gather, a ninety-year-old colonel was still in residence: 'His reminiscences are interesting', the *Times* observed, 'but few are interested' (19 February 1970). The sun has long since set on the British Empire, and the front

of the Club with its open view across Chowringhee and the Maidan to Fort William and the masts of ships on the Hooghly, has been demolished to make room for a gigantic sky scraper. And yet, turning from the bar, a wide screen television was showing the Cricket World Cup in Durban, South Africa, where Ashish Nehra was taking one of six wickets in the match that saw India defeat England by 82 runs.

What appears most striking about the Bengal Club at the start of the twenty-first century is how it accommodates change, remaining in touch with its nineteenth-century—heritage while responding to the present and the call of the future. In the age of e-mail and the internet—the—spacious Dining Hall, the elegantly furnished—bedrooms, the Library and Reading room all retain the ambience of former eras. There is everything here that the visiting scholar or diplomat or business consultant could wish: comfortable beds, modern facilities, all forms of electronic communication, and courteous—service. Although the pace of public life has quickened immeasurably in the last few decades, the need for repose at the end of the day remains the same. Many visitors have—commented on the serenity of the Bengal Club, recalling a time jus: within living memory when readers of the London *Times* who scanned advertisements—for 'A PERFECT FURNISHED SUSSEX COTTAGE' and 'A GUEST HOUSE JUST a LITTLE DIFFERENT' at Hove, might also have noticed:

WANTED, a Secretary for the EENGAL CLUB, CALCUTTA, age not over 45. Rs. 750 per mensem with free quarters and messing. Period of appointment three years. Applicants with previous experience of Residential Clubs preferred. (17 May 1934)

As this announcement intimated, the Bengal Club was modelled on the London clubs that dated from the coffee-house culture of the eighteenth-century city familiar to Reynclds and Jones. All the same, the advertisement could have mentioned the Club's installation of the 'Henley Wiring System' - also noted in the pages of the *Times* - an early

twentieth-century patent high-tech electrical circuit that was 'unaffected by sudden changes in temperature' and 'impervious to moisture' (7 January 1914).

During my visits I enjoyed the finest spiced fishcakes with puris brought to my room for breakfast; excellent lunches from the Bengal Club buffet; and leisurely dinners from the a la carte menu. This culinary excellence is properly highlighted on the Bengal Club website (go to http://www.thebengalclub.com/) and has for long been world-renowned. In an on-line copy of the *Times* from 1955, I came across this advertisement from an enterprising Cornish entrepreneur:

# FOR THE EPICURE IF YOU LIKE CURRY ...

Now available in limited quantities in 1 lb tins
The famous Bengal Club Brand
Real Prawn Curry
This is possibly the finest canned food
On the market - AND it is hand-made.

Just try it.

Send P.O. or cheque 8s. 6d. for 1 tin, Or £1 for 3 tins, to sole distributor D. BELL, 7 FORE STREET, HAYLE CORNWALL.

(5 Februar 1955)

Had 'D. Bell' visited the Bengal Club, one wonders, and come away with the recipe? The 'famous Bengal Club Brand' is a West Country measure of the Club's global fame - and, in 1955, a fascinating token of how one appetising aspect of Anglo-Indian cultural relations would evolve in the second half of the century.

The Bengal Club is among the oldest and most distinguished of its kind in India. As well as the architectural splendour of the building, its charm

and hospitality reside in skilful, discreet management and punctilious service. This attention to detail is evident everywhere - from the fresh flowers in my bedroom, the bottled water for drinks, the starched table linen and the polished presence of the staff. It is a Club in the fullest sense of the word: 'An assembly of good fellows, meeting under certain conditions', as Samuel Johnson put it more than two hundred years ago, and as the current Oxford English Dictionary agrees. Certainly, the conditions of good fellowship are thriving in the Bengal Club today.

To be privileged to stay at the Bengal Club, as I was, is to be aware of the vitality of continuing traditions at the heart of a noisy, energetic, vibrant city. Where better to come to terms with a cool beer, and gallant England 168 all-out? Long may the Bengal Club continue to prosper, to welcome new generations of members and guests in its third century.

# The Fortune Teller: Reconstructing the History of the Bengal Club

#### Malabika Sarkar

If there is a single dominant symbol that matches the Cobra, the Club's chosen emblem, in creating the mystique that is the Bengal Club, it is the painting The Fortune Teller, said to be by Sir Joshua Reynolds, which occupies pride of place in The Reynolds Room and gives the room its name. It is a hauntingly beautiful piece depicting a mysterious dark gypsy holding the palm of a young girl sitting on the lap of a young man in a red hat. The girl looks away, laughing, seemingly uninterested in the predictions being made, while the young man, his face taut with anxiety, gazes into the distance, as if straining to look into what Shakespeare described as "the seeds of time". Only the gypsy is focused on the here and now as she looks at the young couple, her face an intriguing blend of the prophetic and the realistic. This painting, which occupies a place of prominence in the minds of all who visit and use the Bengal Club, is almost an allegory of the writing of the Club's history. When the Club moved from its magnificent building on Chowringhee to the much smaller premises it now occupies on Russell Street, it not only gave up a heritage building but, indeed, with the seeming unconcern of the young girl in the Reynolds painting, discarded also all archival records. No minute books, no members' registers, no visitors' log books survive to be researched into and reveal glimpses of the pulsating life of Bengal Club in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. H.R. Panckridge's invaluable but somewhat idiosyncratic A Short History of the Bengal Club 1827-1927, supplemented by R.I. Macalpine's The Bengal Club 1927-1970, together with the addendum for 1970-2000 by Arabinda Ray remain apparently the only documents that tell us something about the Club's past. And yet, like the young man in the Reynolds painting, we want to know more.

Searching for ways of reconstructing the history of the Bengal Club, I turned to the rich collection of artefacts that the Club possesses – paintings, portraits, silver, clocks and furniture. It seemed to me that if only one could read what was encoded in these pieces, some aspects of the history of the Bengal Club could be recovered. I began this investigation into the material culture of the Club by looking at the paintings. Reynolds's The Fortune Teller has intrigued Club members for many years. Is it a genuine Reynolds? Some years ago I was told, with some authority, by a very senior member of the Club, that experts from Sotheby's (or was it Christie's?) on a visit to Calcutta had authenticated the painting as either a genuine Reynolds or a copy made by a contemporary of Reynolds. Emboldened by this piece of information, I set out to investigate the authenticity and provenance of the painting. The two leading authorities on Reynolds today are David Mannings of Aberdeen University and Martin Postle, Curator and Head of British Art to 1900 at the Tate in London. A short search led me to their catalogue of the Reynolds paintings published in 2000. Looking into this two volume catalogue I discovered, to my bitter disappointment, that the original Reynolds painting entitled A Fortune Teller was a property of the National Trust in the United Kingdom and is now at Waddesdon Manor. I looked at this painting and realized that the Bengal Club Reynolds was an exact replica. Some pride was salvaged by the fact that of the seven "authentic" copies listed by Mannings and Postle, one reads "Bengal Club, Calcutta, India. Information supplied by Mr. Tyrel Broadbent".

Since no records survive, and Panckridge, too, is silent on this subject, we shall never know who painted this copy and how it made its way to the Bengal Club. The names of the painters of at least two mid-nineteenth century copies are known, but the identity of the artist who painted the

Bengal Club copy is shrouded in mystery. However, a scrutiny of the details surrounding this painting revealed an interesting fact. The original Fortune Teller was exhibited by Reynolds in 1777. An inventory of 1799 at Knole, another National Trust site, mentions the painting as hanging in the Drawing Room there and records further show that by 1828 the room had come to be known as the "Sir Joshua Drawing Room". At the Bengal Club, in the old club building on Chowringhee, there had also been a Reynolds Room, with The Fortune Teller visible as one looked in through the doorway. Perhaps one can see here again the familiar attempt to transplant a piece of one's own culture in an alien land. A replica of the "Sir Joshua Drawing Room" had been created, perhaps in the nineteenth century, in this home away from home, the Bengal Club.

The other nineteenth century painting the Club possesses, strangely neglected and hardly ever noticed, is now in Salon 175, earlier known as the Large Guest Room. The inscription on the metal plaque reads "The Bay of Naples by Joseph Firmenick 1860. Presented by W. Withall Esq. 1909." While the identity of both Firmenick and Withall has been difficult to determine, the date of the gift is significant. The painting seems to have been given at the time when the Club was preparing to move to a new building on Chowringhee, formally inaugurated in 1911. The Club's original home was in a part of Gordon's Buildings in Esplanade East from which it moved to a large four-storeyed building at Tank Square, later known as No. 4 Dalhousie Square, in 1830. Both buildings have since been demolished. In 1845, the Club moved to Chowringhee, to a building occupied by Lord Macaulay from 1834 to 1838, about which Rudrangshu Mukherjee writes in this book. No. 1 Park Street and Nos. 1 and 1/1 Russell Street were added to provide accommodation for members. After the expiry of the lease on the Chowringhee building, the Club bought the freehold and, a design for a new building having been approved, the construction work began in 1908. During the interim period, the Bengal United Services Club graciously offered their hospitality to members of the Bengal Club. The

magnificent new club house on Chowringhee was formally inaugurated on 17th November 1911. It was sold to pay debts in 1970, the gracious building demolished, and the Chatterjee International Centre has come up in its place. The Club retreated to the annexe on Russell Street, some of the "chambers" rooms being converted into the Nagraj Bar, the Dining Hall and the new Reynolds Room. Perhaps the Joseph Firmenick painting was a gift to the Club to commemorate the acquisition of its first permanent home. The Bay of Naples was a favourite subject in nineteenth century painting, and Firmenick's Bay of Naples is strikingly similar to Turner's The Bay of Baiae, with Apollo and the Silyls exhibited in 1823. The Bengal Club possessed more paintings and prints and some of these may have been of the same quality as The Fortune Teller and The Bay of Naples. But they could not be accommodated in the much smaller premises the Club now occupies since the sale of the Chowringhee building. Some were given to the Victoria Memorial, others made their way elsewhere, but no accurate records were maintained. Even before the problem of space constraints arose, there were occasions when the Club did not keep the paintings it received. In 1934, says Panckridge intriguingly, a set of nineteen paintings or sketches were given to the Bengal Club by the Hon'ble Sir H.T. Prinsep, President of the Club from 1899 to 1902, but these were handed over to the Victoria Memorial the following year as the Club was unable or unwilling to keep them. It would be fascinating to know what these paintings were. Their identity, in the context of the Club's refusal to keep them, might have told us much about the character of the Club in the decade or so before Independence. Unfortunately, the Victoria Memorial's inventory is incomplete and this mystery remains unsolved.

It is remarkable how resilient the Bengal Club has been in retaining its *pucca* British identity. Not a single Jamini Roy or Gaganendranath has intruded into its carefully preserved colonial splendour although Indians have been admitted into the Club as members since 1959. Indian lifestyle in terms of Indian food, both Bengali and North Indian cuisine, Indian

customs, such as the observance of *Id* and *Janmastami*, celebration of *Nababarsho*, the Bengali New Year, with an evening of Bengali songs, have all established themselves at the Bengal Club. But all this is part of the flux of life and permanent markers of the rich culture of Bengal where the Club is located are nowhere to be found. Prints of old Calcutta and recently commissioned impressive portraits of the great figures of Renaissance Bengal in Room 300 are some attempts to fill this void.

Perhaps some sense of the cultural location of the Club is to be found, however, in the number of magnificent portraits the Club possesses. The upper end of the Dining Hall on the first floor is adorned by the portrait of Field Marshall Viscount Combermere, G.C.B., G.C.H., K.S.I., first Patron of the Club at its foundation in 1827. Sir Stapleton Cotton, first Viscount Combermere, had been given the name "Young Rapid" by his family when he was a boy as he was lively and energetic. He later earned the nickname of "Lion d'Or" in the army for his bravery and the splendour of his uniform. He was held in high regard by the Duke of Wellington. There is some confusion about the commissioning of the portrait although Panckridge (17) tells us that a committee was formed, perhaps in 1829, to solicit Lord Combermere to sit for a portrait. The inscription below the portrait indicates that it was painted by George Duncan Beechey (1798-1852). Allowing for a slight error in the inscription, the painter was presumably the same George D. Beechey (1817-1855) mentioned in the Dictionary of National Biography as the son of the famous portrait painter Sir William Beechey. After enjoying considerable success on account of his father's influence, "about 1830 the rapid decline in the number of his commissions induced him to leave England and proceed to Calcutta, whence he sent to the Royal Academy in 1832 a portrait of 'Hinda', an Indian lady whom he married". He subsequently left Calcutta for Lucknow, where he attained great celebrity, becoming court painter to the King of Oudh. While there is no evidence of the date of the Combermere portrait,

it is a matter of record that Combermere left Calcutta in 1830 and Beechey arrived in Calcutta the same year. It is quite conceivable that the portrait of Combermere was one of Beechey's first assignments in India. Beechey's portrait of Viscount Combermere is the cynosure of all eyes at the Foundation Day dinner at the Bengal Club every year on the first of February as it is the tradition for the Vice President of the Club to propose a toast to Viscount Combermere after the President's toast to the President of India.

The portraits of four past presidents of the Club are also on display – those of Sir Charles Metcalfe, President 1827-1837, Sir James Outram, President 1860-61, Charles Marten, President 1871-73 and Sir William Macpherson, President 1886-88 and 1890-95. Sir Charles Metcalfe was incidentally the first student admitted to Lord Wellesley's College at Fort William. The portraits of Metcalfe and Outram, presented respectively by Sir Alexander R. Murray and O.S. Martin, Esq., are copies of portraits at the Oriental Club in London, while those of Marten and Macpherson may have been specially commissioned. The portrait of Outram is to be found in a quiet corner of Salon 175, the others in the Dining Room. Charles Marten, Panckridge tells us, was different from earlier Club presidents in being "neither of the services nor of the learned professions" (p.47). He was an eminent broker, prosperous, with a strong interest in racing and other sports and it is quite conceivable that he may have wished to have his portrait painted as a gift to the Club. Macpherson, who belonged to the "learned professions", was a judge of the High Court from 1884 to 1900.

Two other portraits are of interest for two entirely different reasons. Both adorn the walls of the Dining Room. One is the portrait of Sir Edward Ryan, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Calcutta, 1833-1841, described on the plaque as "an original member of the club", presented in 1935 by his grandson Brigadier General C.M. Ryan, C.M.G., D.S.O., C.B.E. Sir Edward Ryan, educated at Trinity College, Cambridge, where he was a friend and fellow student of the astronomer and mathematician

John Frederick William Herschel, son of Sir William Herschel who discovered the planet Uranus, had a distinguished career in India and in London and one can imagine that his presence would have added considerable weight to the proposal for founding a social club in Calcutta. At the other end of the Dining Room, and holding his own in the company of distinguished past presidents and the first patron, is William Bracken, Collector of Customs, 1845-55, his portrait presented to the Club by the Collector of Customs in 1961. Macalpine notes that Bracken's name does not appear in the list of members published in 1901 and it is not known whether he ever joined the Club. Nor is it clear today why Bracken's portrait was presented to the Club. Perhaps the Bengal Club was regarded as the most suitable repository of nineteenth century portraits in Calcutta. Macalpine is impressed by Bracken's "elegant attire", but one wonders if some degree of irony is intended in having a Collector of Customs cast a watchful eye on the wining and dining at the Club.

These nineteenth century figures whose portraits adorn the walls of the Dining Room of the Bengal Club were founder members and club presidents. They were men with distinguished military careers, civil servants and judges. Their position and achievements are an index to the character of the Club in history, in the past as well as today. Bengal Club is essentially a club for those who have achieved professional and corporate distinction, not for those who might regard membership of the Bengal Club as a way of moving forward. The Bengal Club portrait gallery bears this out. There may have been a Charles Marten or two in their midst, but the founder members were essentially men of distinction from the important professions for the British in nineteenth century Bengal - the army, the civil service and the law. But this did not mean that life within the four walls of the Bengal Club was grave and sombre. The warmth and conviviality that existed in the Bengal Club in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and continues till today, is borne out by other markers of the material culture of the Club.

One of the most fascinating me norabilia the Club possesses is a printed evening programme for the Bengal Club's farewell dinner for Sir Henry T. Prinsep on 24th March, 1904, more than a hundred years ago. The beautifully crafted card announces "Bengal Club, Farewell Dinner To The Hon. Sir Henry T. Prinsep, KT., I C.S., Calcutta, March 24th, 1904". Within two oval frames, embellished with typically Victorian floral design, are the photographs of Sir Henry T. Prinsep and the Bengal Club building. Attached is a menu card with the dinner menu for the evening. It begins with Consomme a la Fausse Tortue and Potage a la Reine followed by Becti a la Sicilienne. The next course is Filets de Boeuf a la Carlsbad and Chaufroid de Volaille, then the Dinde Rotie, Jambon d'York and Selle de Mouton followed by Cailles ard Asperges en Branches and finally the dessert course consisting of Meringue au Chocolat, Pain de Fraises and Crème a la Bisque. Wines and such other minor accompaniments are not indicated. A six-course dinner that Wodehouse's Anatole would have approved of. But there was feast of another sort on offer also that evening. One of the panels of the card sets out the "Programme of Music". There were two "Band Masters" for the evening, W.G. Leeson and C. Lobo, and the thirteen pieces were divided between them. The evening began with a festal march followed by overtures, waltzes and other selections, the last piece to be played being "Joycaux Negres" by Dupret. The selection of pieces shows the popularity of the Viennese conductor and composer Franz von Suppe (1819-95) ard the very English Elgar (1857-1934). The last item on the programme of music is "God Save the King" and one can almost hear today, looking at this card, the echoes of the rousing notes with which the evening must have ended. A total of seventy diners attended and their names are also printed on one of the panels of the card.

The Bengal Club's exquisite collection of old silver is another index to the character of the Club as it once was. Perhaps the most priceless of these pieces is a silver tankard inscribed with the words "Field Marshall Viscount Combermere, G.C.B., G.C.H., K.S.I., First Patron of the Club,

1827". Macalpine tells us that "it has been the tradition for members retiring from India to present to the Club a parting gift" (p.138). Combermere, as we know, left Calcutta and India in 1830. If this is indeed his parting gift, this excellently preserved silver tankard is not only a proof of a tradition of warmth and generosity, but also testifies to the honesty and care of the staff of Bengal Club. Over many years of association with the Bengal Club in many capacities - member's spouse, member of many subcommittees, creator of the Millennium Room - I have been impressed by the commitment, dedication and cordiality of the Bengal Club staff, unparalleled perhaps in any other social club in the city. And if the kitchen and the Club members generally are indebted to the late Mr. P.K. Dutta, for many years Chief Steward of the Club, for upholding the standards of excellence in the Club's cuisine, one should also make a special mention of Md. Salauddin, faceless to most members, but devoted, loyal and efficient custodian of the Club's silver. Salauddin and his assistants take immense pride in the "family silver" of the Club and take great care to keep it secure and in good condition. The custom of members retiring from India leaving a gift, often of silver, for the Club has been replaced, in recent years, by similar gifts of silver by retiring Presidents of the Club. In a unique gesture, in 2001, during the celebrations for the Club's 175 years, the staff of the Bengal Club presented their gift of a silver ship to add to the Club's collection. Unfortunately, no detailed inventory exists, nor, indeed, appropriate display or storage facilities of the silver the club possesses from the time of its foundation.

Among other pieces of historical value are the Haileybury Cup of 1856 and an elegant aagdaan of 1918. The large ornamental cup inscribed with the words "The Last Term Club Haileybury 1856" and the names of eleven members has a history narrated by both Panckridge (p.39-40) and Macalpine (p.133). Briefly, before the Indian Civil Service came under the system of competitive examinations, those selected for the service by the Directors of the East India Company had to go through a two-year course at the

East India College at Hailey bury. When the system was discontinued, eleven of the last entrants at Haileybury, mostly Public School and two "from the Universities", formed themselves into a club, the Last Term Club, and it was a custom to have a silver Loving Cup passed around at their meetings. That Cup was presented to the Bengal Club in 1913 by two of the last surviving members of the Haileybury Club, Sir James Lyall and Colonel Rivett-Carnac, in acknowledgement of "many happy memories" of the Bengal Club. As a Loving Cup it was apparently last used to celebrate the Queen's birthday in 1952 when it was passed round to all diners. Bengal Club members familiar with the rituals at High Table dinners at Cambridge and Oxford and similar institutions will immediately find this familiar. It is a proof of the authenticity of the British experience that Bengal Club provided, that the last surviving members of the Haileybury alumni decided to donate their cup to the Club. The aagdaan presented by Major S.C. Berridge in 1918 reminds one of a lifestyle totally different from today's frenetic world. The gentle pace of gin in the afternoons and brandy and cigars lit by the aagdaan after dinner could only be punctuated by the tinkle of silver bells summoning the abdar to refill a glass or the bearer to fetch the mulligatawny soup. The Club possesses a total of 37 exquisite silver bells, all with nagraj handles, and each one with a name and date inscribed on it. The late Mr. P.K. Dutta, Chief Steward, whose family had served the Bengal Club for many generations, told me that these bells were indeed used in the old days in the Dining Hall.

The strength of Bengal Club today is its food, drink, rooms, ambience and social status. It is not a Club that one associates with any kind of sporting activity. Yet the Club possesses a unique collection of silver sports trophies. These include the Calcutta Light Horse Tent Pegging Challenge Trophy with dates inscribed from 1892 to 1898 and a Billiard Marker's Cup of 1936. The Coochbehar Cup of 1911 presented by H.H. Maharajah of Coochbehar and the Billiards Championship Cup of 1914 are on display in the Reynolds Room. Another intriguing piece is the one

often erroneously referred to as the lamplighter. This is in fact the Bengal Club Dud's Golf Championship Trophy for the Runners-up – hence the ladder – at a competition between Bengal Club and Tollygunge Club, between 1918 and the war years, for players with a handicap of 18 or over. No cricket, and certainly no football or tennis!

This brief and necessarily selective account of the Club's silver cannot end without mentioning another of the Club's treasures used at Annual General Meetings (perhaps to silence irrelevant questions!). This is the silver gavel engraved with the words "Presented to the President and Members of the Bengal Club" and dated 31. 10. 1952, the gift of Mr. L.J.L. Addison, C.M.G., C.B.E. It was apparently used to call members to order when the loyal toasts were proposed at the Queen's Birthday Dinner at which the Haileybury Cup circulated. Polished and carried on a velvet cushion, the gavel would surely add to the charm and distinction of Foundation Day dinners where it could be used to announce the toasts.

The Burmese gong presented in 1938 by Mr. R. Ellis is still in use as are the several vintage clocks the Club possesses. These include the clock made by Chas Frodsham & Co., of New Bond Street, London, Clockmaker to the King, presented by A.A. Vlasto Esq. in 1912, now in the Dining Room, the clock presented by Sir Frank Carter in 1922, now in Room 300, the clock given in 1939 by C.E.L. Milne Robertson, President of the Club in 1938, now in the Nagraj Bar, Mr. A.R. Cope's 1942 gift, the magnificent grandfather clock, restored by Mr. M.G. Satow, President of the Club in 1970 and a Whittington Westminster clock, provenance unknown, now on the mantelpiece in the Reynolds Room. Not much remains of the old furniture. The chesterfields in the Reynolds Room, a beautiful writing desk in Room No.1, one of the guest rooms, a pair of revolving bookcases in the Library Reading Room, and some occasional chairs are among the few that are still in use. One does not know what has happened to the beautiful Chippendales and Heppelwhites that must have graced this Club. Indeed, some of the beautiful wood panelling disappeared not so long ago. Of the three pianos the Club possessed, only one remains, the other two apparently having been sold or handed over to Fort William.

The history of the Bengal Club is inscribed in the paintings, the silverware, the clocks and other artefacts that still remain. And there is a need to tell their story because the Club today seems to have reached a critical point in its history. The pressures of a new millennium, financial viability, changing membership profile are all factors that seem to be initiating many changes in both the physical contours and the spirit of the Club. While there is a need to go forward and adapt to the compulsions of a new generation, this need not be attempted at the cost of history. History cannot be erased and, instead of holding one back, provides the impetus for moving forward. The eloquence of the silent forms from the past that still remain in the Bengal Club captures the history of British India in miniature. The military genius of Viscount Combermere, the robust materialism of Charles Marten, the quiet distinction of Metcalfe and Outram, the eminence of the jurist Sir Edward Ryan and the presumed diligence or perhaps insouciance of the Collector of Customs William Bracken - these are different facets of the British presence in Calcutta in the nineteenth century. The magnificent portraits at the Bengal Club bring this history alive. The finer nuances of life at the Bengal Club in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are brought to life by other objects that form a part of the Club's rich inheritance. The beauty and nostalgia generated by The Fortune Teller and The Bay of Naples, the elegance of the Prinsep dinner, the conviviality of the Haileybury group, the expansive aroma of cigars lit at the aagdaans, the energy and vivacity of the golfers and billiard players are among the many moods conjured up by the material objects still preserved in the Club. They are not only legacies of a colonial past. They tell us also of the secrets of gracious living, of warmth and generosity and fellow feeling, of status and distinction. These are the characteristics from the past that Bengal Club has successfully carried into the present. This attempt to draw attention to the material culture of the Club is in the hope that they will continue into the future. Plutarch attributed to Simonides of Ceos the saying that painting is mute poetry and poetry a speaking picture. Perhaps in the near future an exhaustive inventory will be made of the Club's treasures from the past and much more may be discovered about the Bengal Club in history.

\* I have relied on Panckridge and Macalpine for information about the Bengal Club in the 19th and early 20th centuries. I have supplemented this by drawing on the resources of the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and John F. Riddick, *Who Was Who in British India* (Westport Connecticut and London: Greenwood Press, 1998). Page references in brackets in the text are to the 1997 edition of Panckridge and Macalpine.

The Reynolds catalogue referred to is David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000).

I am grateful to Trinanjan Dutt for the suggestion that Joseph Firmenick could be the German painter J.M. Firmenich Richartz (1808-89), but I have not been able to look at any catalogue of Richartz's paintings.

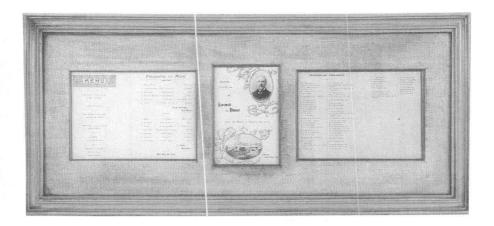
Mr. D.N. Mitra, Steward of the Bengal Club, drew my attention to the unique document, the programme for the farewell dinner for Sir Henry T. Prinsep, which, carefully framed, hangs in his room. Mr. Mitra, who joined the Bengal Club in 1960 and the late Mr. P.K. Dutta, who joined the Club in 1945 as junior billing clerk and was later, for many years, Chief Steward, have provided me with much information and insight into the affairs of the Club in the building on Chowringhee.



Sir Joshua Reynolds's  $\mathit{The}$  Fortune  $\mathit{Teller}$ 

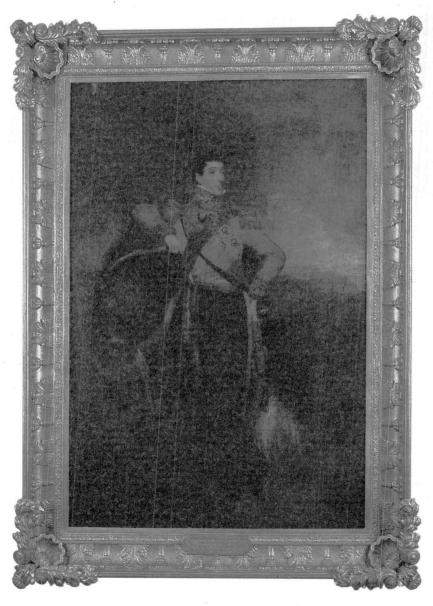


Joseph Firmenick's The Bay of Naples



Programme for the Farewell Dinner for the Hon. Sir Henry T. Prinsep, 24th March 1904





Portrait of Viscount Combermere, First Patron of the Club



Portrait of Sir Edward Ryan, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Calcutta, 1833-41, 'arı original member of the Club'.



Portrait of William Bracken, Collector of Customs, 1845-55



Silver Tankard. The inscription reads "Field Marshall Viscount Combermere, G.C.B., G.C.H., First Patron of the Club, 1827"



The Last Term Club Haileybury 1856



Calcutta Light Horse Tent Pegging Challenge Trophy 1892-98



Aagdaan 1918



Silver bells of the 1950s



Runners-up Trophy for the Dud's Golf Championship 1918 -



The Coochbehar Cup 1911



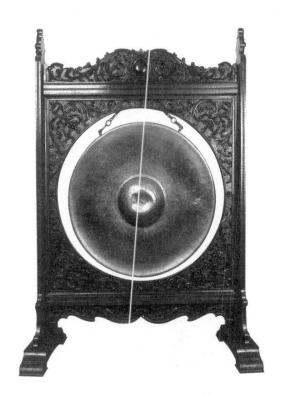
The Billiards Championship Cup 1914



The Billiard Markers Cup 1936



Silver Gavel 1952



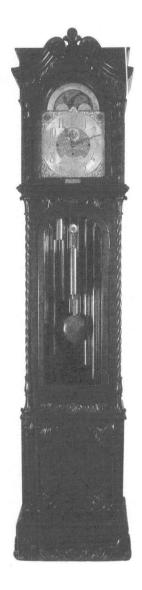
The Burmese gong 1938

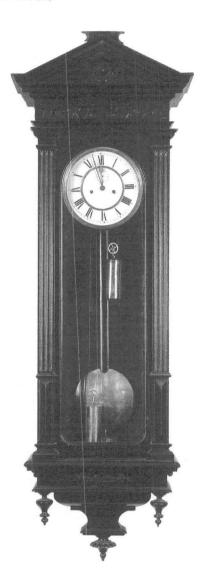
## Collection of clocks

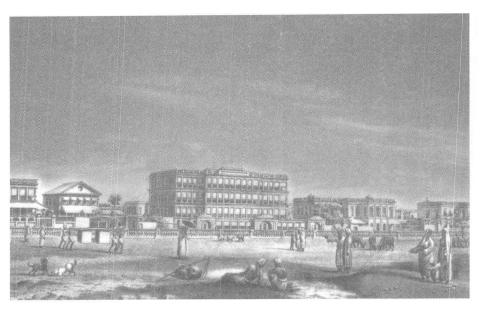




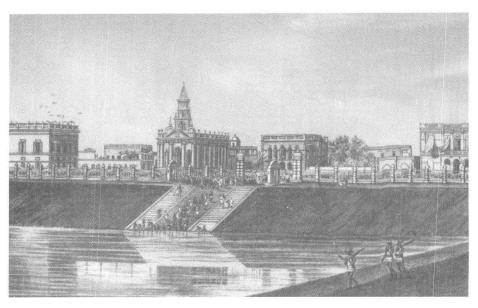
## Collection of clocks



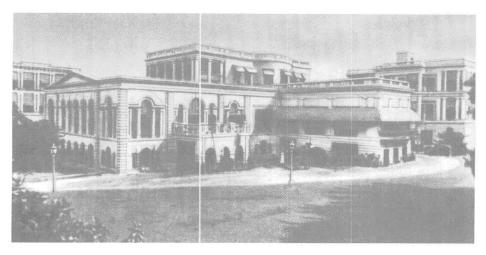




The first home of the Club, 'Gordon's Buildings', Esplanade East, 1827-1830



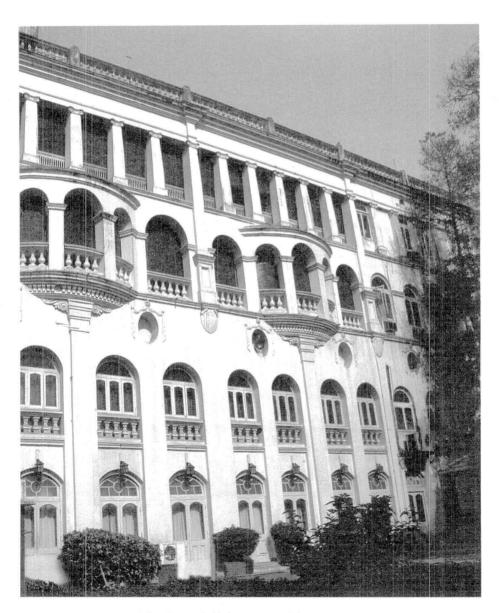
The Club House at Tank Square (Dalhousie Square) now renamed B.B.D.Bagh, 1830-1845



The Club House, 33 Chowringhee, 1845-1908



The new Club House on Chowringhee, 1911-1970



The Bengal Club at Russell Street, 1970

### Contributors

Rimi B. Chatterjee is a novelist and a lecturer in English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata. Her first novel Signal Red was published by Penguin in 2005, and the second, The City of Love, is due out in 2007. In addition she has recently published an account of Oxford University Press in pre-Independence India called Empires of the Mind (OUP-India, 2005). She has also translated various works from Bengali to English including Mahasweta Devi's Titu Mir (Seagull, 2000). After completing her D.Phil. from Oxford University, she worked in publishing before she became an academic.

Uma Das Gupta was educated at Presidency College, Calcutta, and the University of Oxford. Her post-doctoral research was on Rabindranath Tagore and the history of his institutions at Santiniketan and Sriniketan, 1901-41. She was head of the United States Educational Foundation in India (USEFI) in Kolkata. Her publications include A Difficult Friendship: Letters of Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore, 1913-40 (OUP-India) and Rabindranath Tagore: A Biography (OUP-India). Her forthcoming

publications include Rabindranath Tagore: His Life In His Own Words (Penguin Books) and the Oxford India Tagore edition of his works from OUP. She is currently editing a volume on Science, Colonialism and Nationalism, circa 1820-circa 1947 for the project of History of Indian Science, Philosophy and Culture of the Centre for Studies in Civilizations, New Delhi.

Sunanda K. Datta-Ray is Senior Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore. A former editor of The Statesman (Calcutta and Delhi), he has been Visiting Fellow, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, Senior Fellow, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore, Editorial Consultant to The Straits Times group of publications in Singapore and Editor-in-Residence, East-West Center, Honolulu. His publications include Bihar Shows the Way, Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim and Waiting for America: India and the US in the New Millennium. He is a member of many clubs including the National Liberal Club in London. His son, Deep Kisor, continues the family interest in clubs, joining the East India Club in London while still at school at Haileybury and in 2003 became one of the youngest members of the Travellers Club.

Bhaskar Mitter was educated at Cambridge University and qualified as a Barrister from Lincoln's Inn, London. He was the first Indian Chairman and Managing Director of Andrew Yule and Company Limited, one of the largest British companies in India at the time. He became President of the Bengal Chamber of Commerce and Industry and also of the Associated Chambers of Commerce and Industry (ASSOCHAM). He served as a Director of the Reserve Bank of India, ICICI Ltd., Life Insurance Corporation of India (LIC) and Industrial Development Bank of India (IDBI) and was a member of the Board of Trustees of the Unit Trust of India when it was founded. He was for many years a member of the Governing Body of the Indian Institute of Management (IIM), Kolkata. He was President of the Bengal Club in 1979. His hobbies are reading and gardening.

Rudrangshu Mukherjee is the Editor, Editorial Pages, The Telegraph. He studied history at Presidency College, Calcutta, JNU, New Delhi, and at St. Edmund Hall, Oxford. He taught history at Calcutta University and has held visiting appointments at Princeton University, Manchester University and the University of California, Santa Cruz. His publications include Awadh in Revolt, 1857-58: A Study of Popular Resistance (Delhi, 1984; repr. Delhi and London, 2001), Spectre of Violence: The Massacres in Kanpur in 1857 (Delhi, 1998) and Mangal Pandey: Brave Martyr or Accidental Hero? (Delhi,

2005). He is the editor of The Penguin Gandhi Reader (Delhi, 1993), A Vision Defined: The Art of Bengal, 1955-75 (Calcutta, 2002) and co-editor of Trade and Politics in the Indian Ocean World: Essays in Honour of Ashin Das Gupta (Delhi, 1997).

Bharati Ray taught History at Calcutta University where she was Pro-Vice Chancellor (Academic Affairs) from 1988 to 1999. She was Founder Director of the Women's Studies Research Centre at the University and is currently Honorary Professor and Member, Peace Research Group, Department of History, Calcutta University. She was a Member of Parliament (Rajya Sabha) from 1996 to 2002 and a Member of the Joint Parliamentary Committee on the Empowerment of Women. Her publications include Hyderabad and British Paramountcy, 1858-1883 (OUP-India, 1988) and Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (OUP-India, 2002). She has also edited several books including Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods (Sage, 2005) and From the Seams of History: Essays on Women in Colonial India (OUP-India, 1995). She is the wife of Sukhendu Ray, President, Bengal Club, 1988.

Nicholas Roe is Professor of English Literature and Head of the School of English at the University of St. Andrews, Scotland. He received his M.A. and D.Phil. from Oxford University. His publications include Wordsworth and Coleridge: The Raclical Years (OUP, 1988), John Keats and the Culture of Dissent (OUP, 1997), The Politics of Nature: William Wordsworth and Some Contemporaries (Palgrave, 1992; 2002) and Fiery Heart: The First Life of Leigh Hunt (Pimlico, 2005) as well as essays and articles in numerous books and journals. He has also edited several books and is the editor of the scholarly journal, Romanticism. He has lectured in Britain, Brazil, Europe, India, America and South Africa. He stayed at the Bengal Club in 2001 and again in 2003.

Malabika Sarkar is Professor of English, Jadavpur University, and Founder President of the Centre for Studies in Romantic Literature. Educated at the University of Cambridge, she has lectured at various universities including the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Lancaster University, York University and the University of Wales, Bangor. She was a Visiting Fellow at Clare Hall, Cambridge, where she was subsequently elected a Life Member. She was a member of the Jadavpur University Council from 1980 to 1985 and has served as a member of the University Grants Commission Panel of Experts in English and Foreign Languages and as a Panel Member of the National Accreditation and Assessment

Council (NAAC) of the UGC. Her publications include "The Magic of Shakespeare's Sonnets" in *Renaissance Studies* (OUP, 1998) and "Astronomical Signs in *Paradise Lost*" in *Milton and the Ends of Time* ed. Juliet Cummins (CUP, 2003). She is completing a book on astronomy, magic and alchemy in Milton's poetry. She is the wife of Sudipto Sarkar, President, Bengal Club, 1998.

S (Surendra) Nihal Singh has edited two of India's major newspapers, The Statesman and The Indian Express. He launched a new morning daily from Mumbai, The Indian Post, and was editor of the main English language newspaper in the Persian Gulf, The Khaleej Times. He spent many years in South-east Asia, Pakistan and East and West Europe as foreign correspondent of The Statesman. As Senior Associate of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace in New York he completed a book on Indo-Soviet relations, The Yogi and the Bear. His publications include The Rise and Fall of Unesco, Malaysia – A Commentary, From the Jhelum to the Volga, Indira's India and The Gang and 900 million – A China Diary. He received the International Editor of the Year award in New York in 1978 for his role as editor of The Statesman during the Indian Emergency of 1975-77. He is now based in Delhi and is a columnist of The Asian Age and The Tribune.

Aditi Syam Dua was for thirty one years with ITC, retiring as Executive Vice President in charge of Public Relations. She was the national President of the Public Relations Society of India, the only woman so far to hold that position. She was a member of the expert panel on communications and public relations of the University Grants Commission. She has served on the Board of the Indian Institute of Mass Communications, Delhi and as a member of the Film Censor Board, Eastern Region. She was the first woman to be recruited into the management cadre of ITC in 1969 and the first woman member of the Rotary Club of Kolkata. She was also the first woman to be admitted to a full membership of the Bengal Club in 1988.