

Hindu College

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THE Hindu College (Presidency College and Hindu School from 15th June, 1855) was founded on 20th January, 1817 “for giving a liberal education to the children of members of the Hindu Community”. A Government report based on unpublished records of the institution tells us that the subject had been agitated at various places more than a year previously. The effort which brought it into existence and the agitation in support of it were independent of Government.

It was clear that there was a sense of choosing rather than receiving a gift. New India thus accepted the West. The reception of Western culture was not initiated in Bengal from above downwards, nor from below upwards. It was deliberately secular. “The modern West had fabricated a secular version of its cultural heritage from which religion was eliminated”. The system of English education thus commenced in a simple way with public support two decades before Mac-alays’ *coup de main*.

Was it an institution meant for sons of wealthy babus only? In 1823 the number of boys attending the Hindu College, in its two sections, senior and junior, was 402 — pay boys 300, free 60, School Society 30, donation scholars 12. A contemporary journal noted in 1830 that the scholars of the Hindu College were “sons of dewans, brothers of clerks, nephews of cashiers and grandsons of sircars”. This disparaging description could only mean that middle class families of no distinction were very well represented. In Toynbee’s scheme of historical generalization those who received Western education in those days, were Brahmins and Banias. It is relevant to note that there was no great social change at this stage. Those who flocked to this new college to receive western education were Brahmins, Kayasthas and Vaidyas. Bhudeb Muko-

padhyay said later about those who received English education that something like the same position would have been assigned to them under the old system of Manu. “Brahmins and Banias”, “sons of dewans and brothers of clerks”—such descriptions suffer from the defects of smart writing.

Why was the College confined to Hindus only? “The mood of moslems” — a dark phrase—would explain much. They disclaimed the study of a foreign idiom. This disdain was patient and deep. They found in their Qoran “Edicta, mandata, decreta, rescripta, metaphysics and ethics”. They were proud of the polished language and literature of their own which they preferred to that of the strangers who had deprived them of their supremacy. To the Hindus of Calcutta who were sponsors of this College plan the idea of including the Mohammedans did not occur because the Mohammedans were not interested in the venture. The stress was on respectability, not on creed. The managers of the Hindu College wrote to Government in 1824, “The admission of persons likely to injure the respectability and consequently to contract the utility of the College will always be strictly prohibited”.

There was no public character, no public opinion, no public object in those days. The building of temples and bathing ghats, the founding of *dharmsalas* and *atithisalas*, pujas on a lavish scale, very expensive *sradh*s and marriage ceremonies dominated our social consciousness. In 1815-16, the Hindu College became a public question — possibly the first of its kind. There was a public subscription perhaps for the first time in India. Public life and public spirit started from this point. The Anglo-Indian society regarded this institution as an interesting experiment. In 1897 a writer in the National Magazine—“Idler”

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—went so far as to say that most of the members of the Anglo-Indian society—David Hare excepted—must have looked upon educating us as an amusement. Hardly any one of them expected that we would ever come to exceed their expectations. In 1853, after a rowdy demonstration by students of the Calcutta Madrasa, it was decided by the Government to abolish English classes in that institution and bring about organic changes in the Hindu College. It was considered expedient to keep the junior department of the Hindu College as a school exclusively for the Hindus, change the character of the Hindu College, abolish the existing management and convert the senior section into an open college for all. The secular character of the instruction maintained for about four decades facilitated this change. The junior department, which was now separated from the senior department to form the Hindu School, had 293 students in all classes of which 266 paid a monthly fee of Rs. 5/- each, realizing a total of 1330 rupees a month. For eleven “masters” and four pundits the expenditure amounted to Rs. 1,010/-. The school more than paid its cost. A monthly tuition fee of Rs. 5/- for school education was, in those days, prohibitive for lower middle class people. The Hindu School was thus an institution for sons of “wealthy babus”. The Hindu College, senior section, transformed into the Presidency College, had 132 students in 1856, 94 in the general and 38 in the law section. There were 82 pay students, 43 scholarship holders and 7 free pupils. It was not an institution for sons of rich and upper middle class families only, the scholarship holders and free pupils introducing that element in the set up with which we were familiar in our College days. Presidency College inherited from the Hindu College its appeal to the best in the growing generation. When the University of Calcutta was formally brought into existence by Lord Canning he hoped that University education would be the symbol of aristocracy. But the tradition of the Hindu College, senior section, made all the difference.

The most efficient part of education is that

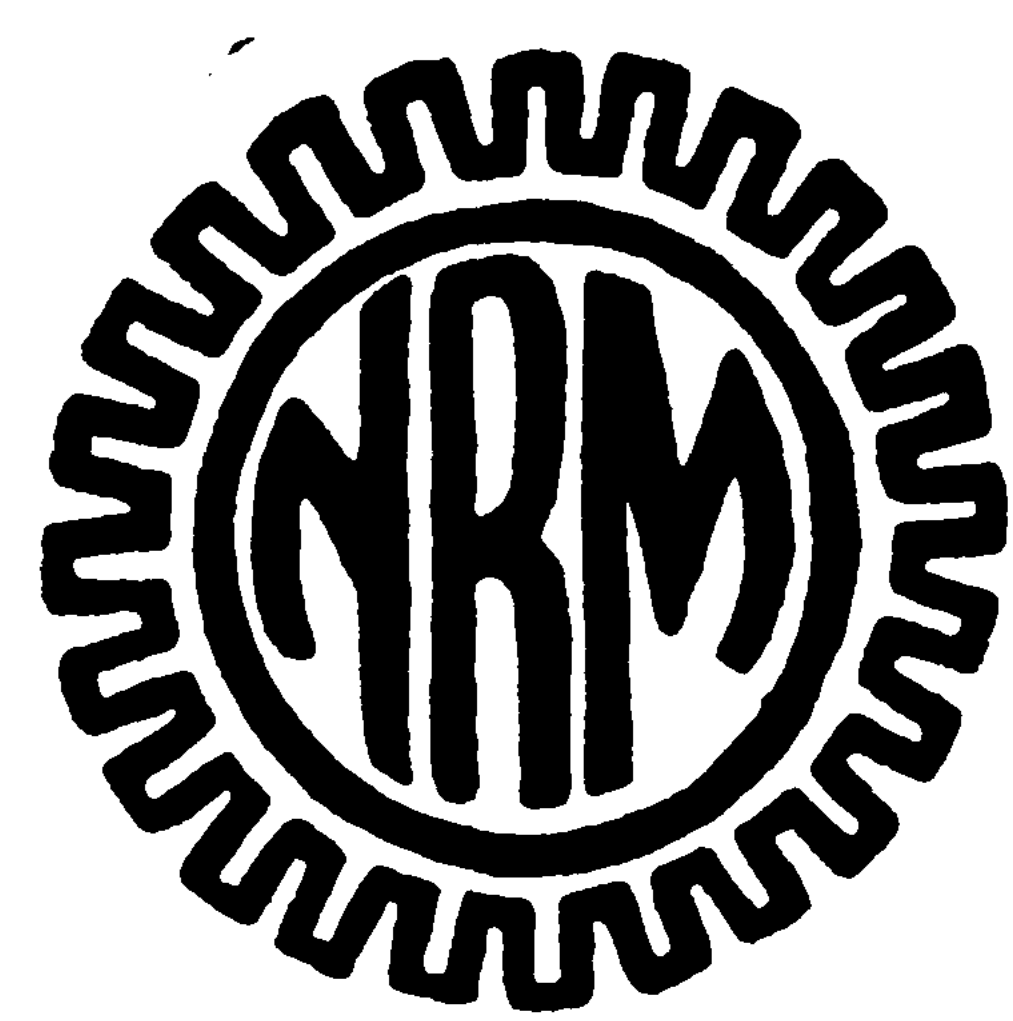
which is derived from the tone and temper of society. The western challenge, this Bengali-European contact, the opening of young minds, did not lead to a surrender of national ideas. Western education was an intoxicant for a few years but it very soon became a nourishment. It would be a mistake to think of the students to the Hindu College as intellectual aliens. Growing self-respect contained within itself the seeds of nationalism. It should not also be forgotten that nationalism is the natural religion of secularism. The founders of the Hindu College insisted when the Government was given a voice in the management that “works directed against the character and principles of our countrymen will be excluded”.

The public mind of Bengal expanded and old students of the Hindu College contributed very considerably to this expansion. The Hindu College was not the only institution of new learning. Much that was creative was also found outside this institution. Curricula, syllabi, compulsory study plans, tests and standards of this institution would not explain the atmosphere which old students of this institution also helped to create in Calcutta.

The Calcutta Review was founded in 1844 by eminent Englishmen. The object was to perform the same service to India which the Edinburgh and Westminster Reviews performed in England. It did perform this service for some decades. Among the early contributors of the Review were some eminent students of the Hindu College—Pearychand Mitra, Kisorichand Mitra, Govin Chunder Dutt, Rev. Krishnamohan Bandopadhyay and others, and their articles compared very favourably with those written by distinguished Englishmen like Sir John Kaye, Sir Henry Lawrence, Alexander Duff and John Clark Marshman. In the long array of students of the Hindu College who distinguished themselves in different walks of life mention should be made of the names of Kashiprosad Ghose, Radhanath Sikdar, Devendranath Tagore, Rajnarain Bose, Bhudeb Mukherjee, Michel Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, Pearycharan Sarkar, Jatindra Mohan Tagore, Kesab Chandra Sen and others. The list is only illustrative.

Sir Charles Wood's place in the history of Western education in India is, according to popular imagination, second only to that Macaulay. But he regarded Calcutta as a dangerous spot for higher education, not so Madras and Bombay. His political apprehension is reflected in a letter he wrote to Dalhousie; "These highly educated natives are likely to be very disgruntled persons unless they are employed and we cannot find employment for them all". He added, "your Bengalis reading Bacon and Shakespeare.....future detractors, opponents, and grumblers." He could

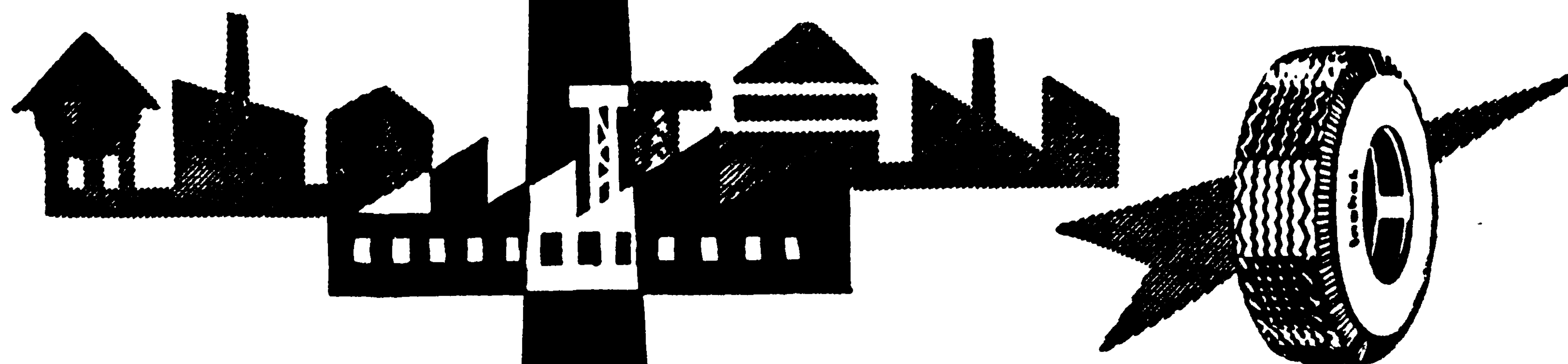
not refuse them a University in Calcutta while Bombay and Madras were each to get one. But he insisted on high education being mainly supported by those who were anxious for it, that is to say, on maintaining an impoverished University without Government aid. The air of those days was surcharged with a new public spirit. Calcutta was no longer silent and submissive. Wood knew that the Hindu College and Western Education had much to do with it. The imp of history was grinning at the Anglicists.



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