



Chapter 19

● Albion Banerjee

Albion Banerjee, an I.C.S. officer succeeded Sirdar M. Kantaraja Urs as the Dewan on 1st May 1922. He had joined the Mysore service and was a Council Member when Sir M. Visvesvaraya and Kantaraja Urs were the Dewans. It is under strange circumstances that he ascended the Dewan's *gaadi*. D.V. Gundappa outlines the peculiar circumstances under which this took place.

Banerjee was on the verge of retirement from the Mysore service and was packing his household items preparing to leave the city. On the day he was to leave Bangalore, Dewan Kantaraj Urs fell seriously ill and the Maharaja sent word that Banerjee should stay on, and appointed him as Kantaraj Urs' successor¹. During the earlier period of illness of Dewan Kantaraj Urs, Banerjee had also been the acting Dewan. After his appointment, Banerjee worked as Dewan between 1st May 1922 and 1st May 1926.

His father Devavrata Sasipada Banerjee was a leading light of the Brahma Samaj during its early years. His father-in-law Sir Krishna Govinda Gupta was a member of the Council of the Secretary of State for India in London. Born in England, he was named Albion Rajkumar, first part of the name in honour of the ancient name of England. He was educated in England where he secured an M.A., degree and qualified for the I.C.S.

Banerjee was posted in Madras Presidency and served as Collector (Deputy Commissioner) in many districts, before he became a member of the Viceroy's Council. Lord Hardinge recommended his case for appointment as the Dewan of Cochin (Kochi) in 1910 and in 1917 he entered Mysore service as a member of the Dewan's Council during the period of Sir M. Visvesvaraya's Dewanship. Being an I.C.S. officer, having had wide experience as a Collector in Madras

1. D.V.G. Gundappa, Mysurina Divanarugalu (kan). P.211

Presidency and as a member of the Viceroy's Council, Banerjee was accustomed to objecting to suggestions or proposals of the Dewan due to his bureaucratic training and going the rule books literally. But Sir M.Visvesvaraya had close contact with the Maharaja and could override the Councillor's objection.

Some persons felt that Banerjee wanted to project himself as more capable and efficient than Sir M.Visvesvaraya., and that Sir M.Visvesvaraya 'lacked' administrative experience. But since the Council was a body to check the powers of the Dewan and to function as a 'corrective' to the Dewan's arbitrary decisions, it was natural that a Council Member had to play this role. But D.V.Gundappa believes that Banerjee's role was to point out that there could be a second opinion or alternative course for every policy, thereby making an allegation that he self-aggrandized might not be justifiable ².

"In accordance with his British Council System, he acted as watchdog of the Dewan's administration, raised objections and levelled criticism against many schemes of the Mysore Dewan Sir M.Visvesvaraya He thus proved successful in creating checks over the highhandedness of the Dewans," says Shyamala Ratnakumari ventilating the views of many critics³. But when he opposed Bhadravati Iron Works and many other useful schemes, this was regarded as opposition for its own sake. In fact this caused hurdles in the implementation of the projects and the Residents perhaps took a clue from Banerjee's attitude of opposition and criticism. It is really an irony that Banerjee as Dewan later had to strive to implement many programmes which he himself had opposed or criticised in Sir M.Visvesvaraya's time.

Sir M.Visvesvaraya in-charge of Iron Works

Hettne even describes Banerjee as Visveswaraya's "main enemy." He says, "The Cauvery Project thus had a long and painful birth and so was the case with the Mysore Iron Works. In fact, the latter was almost still born," when Sir M.Visvesvaraya left as Dewan⁴. The Iron Works was not approved by the Supreme Government. Banerjee had criticised Sir M.V. saying that the Tatas were being shown undue favour. Without consulting the Supreme Government, machineries for the iron unit had been ordered from abroad. The Resident insisted on securing approval from the Supreme Government. Finally the project was approved and Sir M.Visvesvaraya resigned from Dewanship some months later. Hettne has also pointed out that Banerjee as Dewan, had to later meet Sir M.Visvesvaraya in Bombay to persuade him to take charge of the totally stagnant iron works. Hettne quotes the notes Banerjee had prepared: "His help now makes it a success. At all events, the position cannot be worse than now. The reputations of His Highness and of the Mysore Government are at stake. Finances are at stake. Credit of Mysore at stake."⁵

2. Ibid, p.214.

3. Quarterly Journal of the Mythic Society (QJMS henceforth), vol.89, No.4, p.17.

4. Hettne, p.217.

5. Ibid, p.273.



From the arrogance of a Council Member, Banerjee had to reduce himself to play to the tunes of the retired Dewan Sir M.Visvesvaraya. But Banerjee's commitment and sense of responsibility as a Dewan needs to be admired. He did not continue the jargon of the prophets of doom who continued to decry Visveswaraya for his plans and projects when he had been a Dewan, speaking pessimistically of the iron works. But Sir M.Visvesvaraya also put the condition while accepting the responsibility that "nothing should be done on the side of the Government inconsistent with consideration due to my status as an ex-Dewan," he wrote to the Dewan⁶. However, Sir M.Visvesvaraya does not speak ill of Banerjee in his Memoirs while speaking of the latter, but mentions simply, "At this stage His Highness the Maharaja sent the Dewan, Mr.(afterwards Sir Albion) Banerjee, to Bombay where I was temporarily staying, to induce me to take over control and help the Government to put things right. I had to undertake the task, but did so on understanding that I should be given a free hand, subject to all reasonable financial audit."⁷

With all these developments, Hettne points out that Sir M.Visvesvaraya "did not receive full support from Dewan Banerjee, who however in 1926, was replaced by Mirza Ismail, a strong supporter of Visveswaraya"⁸.

Banerjee's Achievements

Shyamala Ratnakumari enumerates the following developments in the days of Banerjee's Dewanhood⁹:

- (1) Constitutional Changes
- (2) Local Self-government
- (3) Mysore Economic Conference
- (4) Industry
- (5) Cauvery River Dispute
- (6) Relief and Rehabilitation Measures during Flood and Famines.

There had been certain changes introduced in the functioning and election to the Assembly in April 1918. A uniform payment of Rs.50 as revenue or Rs.10 as *mohatarfa* (house tax etc) was the qualification of the voters to the Assembly and difference in the qualification for the voter and the candidate contesting for membership had been abolished. The Assembly members were granted right of interpellation on matters of public interest with certain restrictions. On 13th October 1919, the question of time for holding a second session of the Assembly was decided in a few days before the Maharaja's birthday. In 1920, the term of membership of representatives sent by Municipal councils and corporate bodies was extended from one year to three years. Retired

6. Quoted by Hettne, Ibid.

7. Memoirs, pp:91-92.

8. Ibid, p.279.

9. QJMS, Op.cit, p.18.

members of the Mysore State troops were given the right to vote and to contest elections. Already in July 1921, a deputation of ladies made a representation to Dewan Kantaraj Urs to remove gender disqualification for women for voting and contesting elections¹⁰. The Brajendranath Seal Committee was appointed to examine constitutional reforms. Seal was the Vice-Chancellor of the Mysore University.

The Seal Committee report was submitted in March 1923. The Committee was unanimous in its recommendations except over the issue of representing minorities. After long discussions, the Maharaja ordained that “the Representative Assembly established by my father by an executive order 42 years ago was for the future to be placed on a statutory basis with enlarged functions.” The Assembly was to have the privileges of being consulted on all proposals for the levy of new taxes and all legislative proposals with cognisance of the Legislative Council. Only royal privileges and palace matters, military forces, the Maharaja’s relations with the British Paramount Power including treaties, conventions and agreements, interest on loans and charges on sinking funds already guaranteed and expenditure specified under any law were not to be under the purview of the Assembly.

The Representative Assembly was to have 250 members, but with nominations etc. the number could be increased to 275, in view of the new interests being recognised and constituencies that might emerge in the future.

The Legislative Council was also enlarged and number of elected members increased to have non-official majority. On selected major heads of budget, the Council had the power to vote. The Government could overrule the decision of the Council wholly or partly in cases of budgeting provisions and to fulfil important or emergency needs of any department. The voters were all landowners or tenants paying revenue of Rs.25 (formerly it was Rs.50), all persons paying a municipal tax of Rs.10 graduates, and all retired government officers.

The Assembly and the Council elected standing committees with the Government retaining its advisory capacity. This helped the elected members to have constant or regular contact with the various government departments and give advice to the Government. Every Committee had six members, four from the Assembly and two from the Council. The Economic Development Boards dealing with (a) Education, (b) Agriculture and (c) Industries and Commerce were continued.

The Legislative Council had the strength in between 40 to 50 members. The number of members to be elected from the Representative Assembly increased and provision was made for special interests such as industries and commerce, plantations, minorities and people from the educational field.

The Assembly and the Legislative Council were permitted to discuss all issues of internal administration. Their resolutions had to be approved by the Government. Provision was made for Standing Committees created by

10. Shama Rao, II, p.311-12.

the members of the Assembly and the Council. The existing Budget Finance Committee was abolished.

During the Dasara festival in 1923 Albion Banerjee, on the conclusion of the session spoke of the Report thus: “No scheme however perfect can please everybody.... Every shade of opinion expressed has been carefully weighed and considered and they have reason to believe that the scheme will receive the enthusiastic support of the whole of moderate opinion of Mysore.”

Seal Committee Report at Work

In June 1923, the Seal Committees recommendations were accepted with minor changes and the newly constituted houses under the Reforms was inaugurated on 17th March 1924.

“The main features of the constitutional changes introduced may for the sake of convenience be thus summarised: “Property qualification was reduced by one-half. A large number of urban constituencies were created. The disqualification of women on the ground from exercising franchise was removed. By these changes the total strength of electorate increased from 28,000 to over 1,00,000,” says Shama Rao¹¹. The representation of special interests was systematised including the Labour Class. Communities who could not get representation in the Assembly due to their small number or backwardness were represented by nominations.



Brajendranath Seal

The Dewan reviewing the functioning of the new Houses in 1925 said “The representatives of the people of both the Houses have taken the fullest advantage of the opportunities offered by the reforms. The keenness of the members to obtain information and help the Government with useful advice has been a pleasing and prominent feature of the two Houses..... This is a clear indication of the interest, earnestness and public spirit displayed by the members in the discharge of their duties, responsibilities”.¹² As the Representative Assembly was given a statutory position, the Government was obliged to consult with it on all legislative measures.

Local Bodies

The constitution of Taluk and District Boards had been defined by the Regulation V of 1918 called Taluk Boards and Village Panchayats Regulation. Representation was provided for important communities and interests on these Boards. The town and minor municipalities had been permitted to elect their own Vice-Presidents. In 1921, Local Boards and Village Panchayats were obliged to pay attention to economic development and to levy education cess.

11. Ibid., p.328.

12. Ibid., p.335-36.

The Bangalore District Board had an elected President, but in Hassan and Kolar District Boards, non-official persons were nominated as Presidents. In 1923, a Local Self-Government Conference was held where 48 resolutions were passed which included a request to abolish village improvement committees and placing the Village Panchayats on a statutory basis.

The Government agreed to constitute the Village Panchayat in every village or a group of villages. Each Panchayat was to consist of 5 to 12 members, of which at least half had to be elected. The Panchayat Chairman was nominated by the Government. If the Panchayats did satisfactory work, the privilege to elect the Chairman was extended. The duties of Panchayats were under two categories - obligatory and optional. Obligatory functions were sanitation and communications and optional functions were health, convenience or comfort of the villages. Select Panchayats were given powers to run village courts, tank panchayat works, forest panchayat work by forming rules, control over Muzrai institutions and village elementary schools. Amildars supervised their work.

The Taluk Boards were abolished and elected District Boards secured more power and financial resources. Kolar Gold Fields Sanitary Board was continued with special duty of sanitation in 1924-25. The elected component in minor municipalities was increased from $\frac{1}{3}$ to half. The President of city and Town Municipalities were elected posts. Such elections could be held even by the general body of voters, if the municipalities so decided. Extension of popular participation was achieved by these reforms by Banerjee though it was a long-standing demand. Women were granted franchise for the first time.

The erection of the plant of Iron Mines at Bhadravati was completed on 18 January 1923 and a new Board of Management was appointed in April. To the Board was transferred the supervision of the factory's Forest, Mining and Transport Departments which were till then looked after by the Government departments. The working of the factory was thus brought under a single united authority, making its directions easy and efficient.

On the various objections raised by the Madras Government regarding the construction of the Kannambady Dam, after prolonged discussion, an agreement was signed in 1924. The reservoir had a storage capacity of not higher than 112 feet above the still of the under-sluices or about 124 feet above the bed of the river. If Madras undertook irrigation works in the Cauvery's tributaries in its area, Mysore could also follow suit. The agreement was to be reviewed after 50 years and in case of a difference of opinion, Supreme Government's arbitration was invoked.

Administrative Changes

The cess of one anna to be levied on revenue to support education was proposed, but could not mobilise funds. Only Rs.2,92,000 was collected in 1924 when the rate of cess levied was only half an anna. Only five districts had raised the levy and most municipalities had remained indifferent to the order. Government took strict steps to urge the Revenue Department and the local



bodies to raise the prescribed levy, so that education would not suffer due to scarcity of funds.

Provincial officers were appointed to inspect educational institutions, instead of two circle inspectors who were responsible for it. An Inspector to supervise science teaching was also appointed. A Girls' High School was started at Tiptur in Tumkur District. The Chamarajendra Sanskrit College of Bangalore which was earlier restricted to only Brahmmins was opened to all communities after there was an agitation demanding it. At colleges, subjects like agricultural, technological and vocational orientation as a part of science teaching was proposed to be introduced in 1923 as job opportunities for arts and science graduates were limited.

A well equipped Department of Industries and Commerce was founded in 1923. All government industries were brought under its purview. The three Economic Conference Boards in 1923-24 drew comprehensive schemes. The Boards consisting of seven official and 15 non-official members met four times in the year and formed five sub-committees to work over 36 subjects. They decided on six industries to be encouraged by the government.

- (1) Lac (Sealing wax)
- (2) Minor cottage industries
- (3) Lacquerware industry, by deputing persons to Burma to get training
- (4) Hand spinning of yarn
- (5) Manufacture of paper and pulp, and
- (6) Cart Wheel production.

No details about the implementation of these programmes are available, but some constructive work by the Economic Conference is clear.

The Malnad Improvement Scheme thought of earlier was reviewed in October 1924. To indicate worklines of further advances, a general economic investigation of one typical Taluk in each of the districts of Shimoga, Hassan and Kadur (Chikmagalur) was ordered with a view to improve the conditions of the people of Malnad. Steps were also taken to improve the medical and communication facilities in the Malnad area from October 1924. A Match factory was launched at Shimoga in 1924 with all concessions from the government. It began production in 1927. Of the Rs.10 lakh investment, the Government's share was 10%.

A Bill to impose a cess on coffee cultivation was introduced in 1924 and passed in 1926 as an Act. It introduced a levy of Rs.1 per acre on temporary gardens and Rs.1.50 on permanent gardens. This levy was not directed to mobilise revenue, but to create a fund to extend special assistance to coffee planters as the industry faced occasional crises. It aimed at establishing mutual co-operation between the Government and the coffee growers. The earlier practice of collecting a *halat* (excise) of Four annas to Rs. One per maund was stopped. The Act was helpful to the coffee growers.

A new Amended Tank Regulation was brought into force in 1923 as the earlier arrangements did not help the protection of tanks fully. The voluntary contribution of farmers who used the tanks for irrigation was made compulsory with a levy of one-fourth of the estimated cost use for the upkeep of the tank. Execution of repairs was taken over from the Revenue Department and entrusted to the Public Works Department to execute the work as soon as the estimate was approved without waiting for the recovery of contribution.

In 1920, the Government appointed a committee headed by Lallubhai Mehta as the Chairman to review the progress of the co-operative department who submitted its report in 1923. The Department was reorganised in 1924 with one Registrar, four Asst. Registrars and 30 Inspectors. Each Inspector was in charge of about 50 Societies. As per the recommendations of the committee, an Apex Co-operative Bank was founded in 1925.



*Apex Co-operative Bank
Bengaluru*

An exhibition of resources of all parts of British India was organised in London in April 1924. The Mysore Government opened a pavilion and S G Shastri, the Industrial Chemist of the State was placed in charge of the pavilion. Mysore's products like coffee, silk, sandal oil, sandal soap, sandalwood articles, lacquer ware and a variety of items were able to secure new markets as a result of participation in the exhibition.

In 1924, unprecedented floods were witnessed in five districts. The Cauvery, Kapila, Taraka, Hemavati etc rose to a height of over 30 feet of normal flood level. Nanjanagud, Yedatore, Srirangapatna, Talakadu and T.Narsapur towns suffered greatly. At T.Narsapur people took shelter on temple tops for three days. Nearly 4000 houses collapsed and public works like roads, bridges, canals, tanks etc were severely damaged. Shimoga district too bore the brunt with the collapse of 250 houses. In Shimoga, 750 houses were under water. Hassan and Chitradurga district too experienced serious damages. Harihar and Ramnathpur were among the worst hit.

The herculean task of rehabilitation was taken up by the Government. Relief parties were deputed and there were no deaths (except for one boy in a house collapse) due to prompt action. Donations were collected from the public by holding meetings at Bangalore, Mysore and other places. The Servants of India Society, Kolar Gold Field Mining Board and other agencies participated in flood relief work or by cash donations. The Dewan and Council Members extensively toured the area affected by the flood. Yedatore was reconstructed as was Krishnarajanagar by creating new extensions. A sum of over Rs.5 lakhs was allotted for relief work. Land Improvement Loans at 3.5% interest were released to ruined agricultural land. House Building Co-operatives were started at Shimoga, Nanjangud, T.Narasipur and Talakad. Rs.1.25 lakh was allotted to the societies to issue loans. An amount of 1.36 lakh was allotted for shifting villages. The Dewan, Council Members and other officers toured the district and personally supervised relief and rehabilitation works. They not

only distributed *ad hoc* relief in the form of cash, blankets and material support, but also provided seeds to raise crops to farmers who had lost everything.

Administration - Modern and Strict

Banerjee modernised the administration further by bringing about changes in the working of many departments. In 1924 an Inspector of Revenue Audit was created to conduct a revenue audit by examining the revenue system and ascertain its defects. The Officer was required to examine the present arrangement for safeguarding the interest of the Government and major sources of revenue like land revenue, excise and income tax. The Officer inspected 26 revenue offices and submitted 45 notes and reports. The accounts system was reorganised and the work of the District office was simplified. The number of registers with multiple entries was reduced. A simplified system was introduced in Bangalore and Hassan district first. Audit system was introduced in the offices of Inspector of Education and Chief Electrical Engineer. This had salutary effect on the tightening their administration.

Three-fourths of the surplus revenue of the Civil and Military Station was secured after negotiations with British Government through the Resident. Surplus revenue was the balance that remained after meeting the administrative costs of the tract. One-fourth of this surplus was left with the Administration for development works of the tract. There was drought in certain areas in 1924 and Rs.1.30 lakhs was spent in parts of Tumkur and Kolar districts to sink wells.

In 1923, the Dewan delivered a lecture in the Mythic Society, at Bangalore and sanctioned an annual grant of Rs.300 in appreciation of the Society's academic work. The policy of separation of Judiciary and Executives thought by the State in 1907 was implemented in 1917 by appointing special magistrate courts in Bangalore and Shimoga. Banerjee implemented the policy in all districts in 1925. As an experiment, an Itinerary Court was started at Tirthahally in 1925. Banerjee was known for his talent in examining records and did it in the many parts of the State where he found many cases of irregularities and misappropriation. "Banerjee was an expert in inspecting the *daftars* of taluk offices and reviewing the records maintained by clerks," says D.V.Gundappa¹³.

He also says that he was "expert administrator having a tight hold on the administration. He had worked in all departments in Madras administration," and the anomalies and the methods of irregular deals that were typical of various departments were well known to him. He could look into records very briskly and grasp the main points for discussion.¹⁴

Banerjee had a sound knowledge of English and was an eloquent speaker. He was connected with the Rotary Movement, especially after his retirement in 1930 till 1945. He was also extensively travelled and had visited many

13. D.V.G., p.312.

14. Ibid., p.212.

Jewels of Administration

countries. He was Dewan to Cochin (Kochi) when the Cochin Port Plan was finalised. He wrote hundreds of articles for the newspaper as well as several books in English which include *Through an Indian Mirror*, *Rhythm of Life*, *The Indian Path Finder* and *what is wrong with India*. He was conferred the title 'Rajaseva Dhureena' in 1921 by the Maharaja and CSI award when he was the First Member of the Council.

Brindavan Gardens, Krishnaraja Sagar

