

CALCUTTA

IN THE 19TH CENTURY

(COMPANY'S DAYS)

Edited by
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FIRMA KLM PRIVATE LIMITED
Calcutta * * *

CONTENTS

	Preface		vii
1	Lord Valentia	Calcutta in 1803	1
2	I.H.T. Roberdeau	Calcutta in 1805	36
3	Maria Graham	Calcutta in 1810	86
4	Maria, Lady Nugent	Calcutta in 1812	110
5	Anonymous	Calcutta in 1814	186
6	Rafail Danibegashvili	Calcutta in 1815	197
7	An Officer	Calcutta in 1819	199
8	Walter Hamilton	Calcutta in 1820	220
9	Fanny Parks	Calcutta in 1822	245
10	R.G. Wallace	Calcutta in 1823	301
11	Bishop Heber	Calcutta in 1823-24	335
12	William Huggins	Calcutta in 1824	411
13	Naufragus	Calcutta in 1827	427
14	Mrs. Fenton	Calcutta in 1827-1828	442
15	G.C. Mundy	A Day in Calcutta, 1829	478
16	Victor Jacquemont	Calcutta in 1829	488
17	Edward C. Archer	Calcutta in 1830	520
18	Thomas Bacon	Calcutta in 1831	533
19	<i>Oriental Annual</i>	Calcutta in 1835	566
20	Emma Roberts	Calcutta in 1835	574
21	Henry Edward Fane	Calcutta in 1836	604
22	Honorina Lawrence	Calcutta in 1837	608
23	W.H. Leigh	Calcutta in 1838	619
24	Emily Eden	Calcutta in 1836-1837 & 1840-1842	650
25	A Bengalee	Calcutta in 1839	757
26	Howard Malcom	Calcutta in 1839	775
27	G.W. Johnson	Calcutta in 1840-1843	817
28	C.J.C. Davidson	Calcutta in 1843	855
29	Leopold von Orlich	Calcutta in 1843	860
30	A London Missionary	Calcutta in 1848	907
31	W.H. Russell	Calcutta in 1858	952
32	Miscellaneous Accounts		
	Mrs. Hofland	Calcutta in 1827	979
	Edward Thornton	Calcutta in 1854	985
	Montgomery Martin	Calcutta in 1857	993
	Anonymous	Calcutta in 1857	1006-1014
	Index		1015
	Glossary		1058
	Errata		1069-70

neighbourhood within a circuit of [260] twenty miles is supposed to contain a population of nearly two millions and half.

Just before sunrise the air is cool and refreshing; it is therefore the custom to rise early and take a ride before breakfast, which is ready about nine. At half-past one o'clock tiffin, or luncheon, is served, and dinner at sunset. The wines chiefly drunk are Madeira and claret. The tables are served with a variety of game, partridges, quails, peafowl, wild ducks, ortolans, hares, and venison. Fruits are to be had in great profusion and exceedingly cheap. But the chief luxury of Calcutta is the mango fish, so called from its only appearing during the mango season, and which is not approached in delicacy of flavour by any fish known in Europe. The style in which civilians live can scarcely be imagined by any one who has not crossed the Indian ocean. Even young writers affect such an air of state, and keep such extensive establishments, that notwithstanding their liberal allowances they often become so deeply involved as to be ever after unable to release themselves from the incumbrance.

SUNDERBUNDS

Nearly a hundred miles below Calcutta, at the embouchure of the Hoogley, is the delta of the Ganges, called the Sunderbunds, composed of a labyrinth of streams and creeks, all of which are salt, except those that communicate immediately with the principal arm of the sacred river; those numerous canals being so disposed, as to form a complete inland navigation

A few years before our visit to Calcutta, the captain of a country ship, while passing the Sunderbunds, [261] sent a boat into one of the creeks to obtain some fresh fruits which are cultivated by the few miserable inhabitants of this inhospitable region. Having reached the shore the crew moored the boat under a bank, and left one of their party to take care of her. During their absence, the lascar, who remained in charge of the boat, overcome by heat, lay down under the seats and fell asleep. Whilst he was in this happy state of unconsciousness, an enormous boa-constrictor emerged from the jungle, reached the boat, had already coiled its huge body round the sleeper, and was in the very act of crushing him to death, when his com-

*panions fortunately returned at this auspicious moment, and attacking the monster severed a portion of its tail, which so disabled it that it no longer retained the power of doing mischief. The snake was then easily despatched, and found to measure sixty-two feet and some inches in length.** The immense size of these snakes has been frequently called in question, but I know not why it should when the fact has been authenticated by so many eye-witnesses. Nor was it unknown to ancient historians; for Suetonious, in the forty third chapter of his Lives of the first Twelve Caesars, mentions that the Emperor Augustus over and above the regular shows, gave others occasionally for the purpose of exhibiting any extraordinary object of which he might have [262] obtained possession; amongst these he mentions a rhinoceros, a tiger, and a snake, seventy-five feet long—*quingenta cubitorum*.

The wild tract extends a hundred and eighty miles along the bay of Bengal, and is filled with tigers and alligators of the largest kind, together with other creatures of similar power and ferocity. There are two passages through it, the northern Sunderbund passage, and the Balliaghaut passage. The first opens into the Hoogley sixty-five miles below Calcutta, the other into a shallow lake on the eastern side of the city. The navigation of these channels extends more than two hundred miles through an impenetrable jungle divided by creeks occasionally so narrow, that in some places branches of trees almost meet on either side, and in others you sail upon an expanded river beautifully skirted with wood. Alligators innumerable are seen sleeping along the shores, looking like huge trunks of trees. It is scarcely possible to imagine them to be alive until they are disturbed, when they scramble with surprising activity into the stream and sink. Great numbers of natives who frequent the banks of the creeks that divide the Sunderbunds, to cut wood and collect salt, are yearly devoured by these and other beasts of prey; indeed, the tigers

* The original picture, painted by Mr. W. Daniell, is in the possession of le Baron de Noual de la Loyrie; and that of the "Favourite of the Harem," also by the same artist, is the property of R.W. Cox, Esq. of Lawford, Essex. (note on p. 261).

are so ravenous, that they have been known to swim off to boats and attack the crews at a considerable distance from the shore.

Notwithstanding these perils, many devotees erect their rude huts in this region of desolation. In spite of the charms which they pretend to possess, and their [263] propitiatory offerings to the tigers and alligators, these ignorant fanatics are almost invariably destroyed by them; still other fanatics supply their places: thus the wild savages of the forest are yearly supplied with no inconsiderable portion of sacred food. It is astonishing to what lengths fanaticism will go.

tion of driving and the appearance of all is such an odd mixture of Europe and Asia, that few objects attracted my attention more.

In the crowded streets of Calcutta one is struck with seeing so few women. Only the lowest description, the oldest and the ugliest are seen abroad. The younger are generally pretty, but age very early, and before thirty look very old. The *pan* they chew discolours the teeth. Their skin wrinkles, their eyes become bloodshot and their flesh flaccid. They then are very hideous, and the more so from the ornaments with which they load their persons. The women marry young, my *ayah* has with her daughter, a widow aged thirteen. Elephantiasis is a very common complaint among the females, affecting one leg with frightful swellings but not affecting the general health.

Most of the upper class of Europeans in the Presidency have houses out of town, especially about Chowringhee, a part bordering on the river and very pretty; each house is detached and surrounded by a compound, or enclosure laid out in garden and shrubberies. The houses are upper roomed and have generally flat roofs surrounded by a balustrade and open porticos in front. I saw but little of English society in Calcutta, but some points struck me as characteristic. One was that the conversation continually turned on home. "When do you go home . . . I took my furlough and went home five years ago." And when the papers come in of a morning the first questions are "Any news from England?" . . . "When does the next ship sail for England?"

AMERICAN ICE

One piece of luxury at the Presidency astonished me. It was American ice. It is packed surrounded with jam in the ship's hold and arrives with wonderfully little loss. A lump of it put into a glass of wine is as great a luxury as can be tasted in this climate. Indian etiquette is in some respects different to English. "May I take a glass of wine with you?" "Thank you, I'll take beer," sounds at first very odd. Moreover, here the signal for the ladies rising from the table is given by the principal lady guest, not by the mistress of the house.

The richer natives in Calcutta are imitating European manners, equipages, and buildings. Near Cossipore is a house with

large grounds belonging to a Hindoo.¹⁰ We went into the grounds one evening to look at his pet rhinoceros. There were four or five of these curious creatures, walking about tame and grazing or rather grubbing [46] in the earth for roots. Their keepers sat by, but their office was only to watch that their charge did not wander away. The animals were perfectly tame and allowed us to pat them, they followed their keepers and are quite harmless.

It is the universal feeling that in Calcutta, where the wealthier natives mix a good deal with Europeans, their Hindoo prejudices are fast giving way, not I fear to the Gospel but to English science and literature. Good however must be done by the extension of knowledge, and by a breach being made in the seven fold shield of *dustoor* (custom) which has so long defied improvement.

We were struck when reading the observations in *Saturday Evening* on the Grecianising Jews how much they applied to the Anglicised Hindoos of Calcutta. European female teachers are employed as day governesses of some rich natives and I heard a very intelligent Englishman, who had been long in the country, notice the great change when respectable native ladies were seen taking a drive in an open carriage. Some Hindoo gentlemen even eat with Europeans, and at the Hindoo College the youths are instructed in the English language and literature. Though they nominally continue Hindoos, they are in fact Deists. Government seminaries for the diffusion of education without any direct attempt at proselytising are established in all large stations. One lad who had been brought up at the college used frequently to come to Major Hutchinson. He was a fine, intelligent looking fellow, who seemed thirsty after information. He had a pretty correct idea of the outline of Christianity and spoke of the absurdities of Hindooism but seemed untouched at heart by either "the sinfulness of sin", or the beauty of holiness. This lad spoke English very well, and one day brought us a composition of his own in that language, a rambling essay on the advantages of science.

In the Indian papers and journals there are frequent contributions from the students, generally correct as to grammar, and shewing a considerable knowledge of our standard authors, but the questions are elaborately brought in and the style is

universally bad, inflated, full of false metaphor and frequently a mere caricature of Giffon's inversions and circumlocutions.

The sensuality of Hindoo faith and practice is so gross that to them the self denying doctrines of Christianity must be peculiarly distasteful, and the daily habits of falsehood and licentiousness must almost incapacitate their minds from comprehending the Christian standard of morals.

MRS. WILSON'S REFUGE

I went to see the Orphan Refuge of Mrs. Wilson and was much delighted with her and her labours. She is a widow and has an asylum for female orphans about eight miles above Calcutta on the Hooghly. The building is large and commodious, standing within an enclosure [47] which opens by a *ghat*, flight of steps, on the river. We entered and, walking across the courtyard, we found ourselves at the door of a room which is a chapel. Here on the matted floor were seated a hundred girls, their ages varying from three to twelve years arranged in rows of twenty-five each, the little ones in front, the older behind. All were dressed exactly alike and exquisitely clean and, not being disfigured with ear-rings and nose-rings, they looked simple and child-like. The dress consisted of one large piece of white muslin bordered with crimson, and each girl's name worked on it. This is called a *saree*. The girls all looked healthy and happy and either there was, or I fancied, much more intellectual expression in the countenances of the elder ones than I had seen in any other female. When we entered they were singing the evening hymn in Bangalee, and it was very sweet to hear a hundred young voices join in its simple music, especially when one thought from what they had been rescued.

Mrs. Wilson is an elderly woman, of lady-like, quiet, firm demeanour, with an intelligent, benevolent countenance. Nothing in her manner enthusiastic, but like one who had counted her cost, and given herself heart and soul to the work she had chosen. She prayed in Hindustanee, and afterwards, as we were there, in English. She wished us to question the children and we asked them of some of the leading facts and doctrines of the Gospel, Mrs. Wilson acting as interpreter. The children answered readily and intelligently. We then went into the school

of his racers broke its leg exercising, and he gave it over to some surgeon to try experiments on, and there was this poor highbred thing that had lived in a hot stable, and been cockered up and taken care of like a child, standing on three legs under a tree with only a cloth over it, and looking in the greatest pain. It disgusted everybody so much, that the gentlemen began a subscription to buy it of him to shoot it, and he was at last reduced to have it killed by mere shame. So it is a pity he has won the cup. George and I have been all three mornings to the races; they occur only every other day. Fanny has only been once, as she has been very poorly altogether for three days; and though she is much better to-day, she has not the least chance of going to the ball that is given to us on Tuesday, which is a great bore. For various reasons it has been put off two or three times, [289] greatly to the general inconvenience of Calcutta, which poor hothouse of a place cannot produce any plants that will stand two nights' amusement. So there is a play on Monday; the whole of Calcutta rests on Tuesday and comes out fresh and yellow again on Wednesday; and in this dissipated race-fortnight it has been found difficult to find a day for our ball. I do not know in what way it is to differ from the balls in general, except that we are told to come in feathers and that our names are said to be emblazoned all over the Town Hall, as well as on the buttons of the stewards' coats, but all the rest is a mystery

(Tuesday, January 17) [290] . . . However, in fact, there are only what they call [291] 'loose letters'—not in a moral sense; but we always hear per 'Semaphore' so many 'loose letters,' and so many 'box packets,' and the Post Office takes clearly twelve hours hammering away at unpacking those 'box packets.'

BALL IN HONOUR OF EDENS

[292] (To a friend. Wednesday, January 18, 1837). Fanny was not well enough to go to the ball³¹ after all; it was really a pity she missed it; it was so well done. Our whole household went in grand costume, and I was *tastefully* attired in a Chinese white satin, *elegantly* embroidered in wreaths of flowers (not the least like flowers) by my Dacca workmen; head-dress, feathers and lappets. Everybody went in new dresses, which made the

pore . . . [303] Dr. Drummond's little dog has been carried off twice and recovered. We have all sorts of little adventures of that kind. One of the rhinoceroses has taken to stray about the park, and ran after an old neighbour of ours when he was going home one evening, and he is not only very angry (naturally) that the rhinoceros should have run after him, but also that George should have laughed when he made his complaint, and not only that, but everybody else laughs when they think of this great heavy beast scuttling after old Mr.—. I quite agree with him in thinking it no laughing matter.

(February 12) A Mrs. Chester, from the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, and also from [304] Sidney and New South Wales, has deigned to tread the boards of the Chowringhee Theatre, and she wrote to me so many moving letters that at last we were obliged to go. She is by way of being a singer, so the first act was a concert and the second a farce. I forget now how *common people* are treated in England; here they never begin anything till we come, which is extremely gratifying, only it gives us the trouble of going to the very beginning of any sight, however tedious. George and I, with Miss—and some gentlemen, bravely sacrificed ourselves and sat through it all. Fanny and—came only to the farce. It was almost amusing from being so bad. It is a great pity they cannot import a tolerable actress, for the gentlemen amateurs are excellent actors . . . [306] Mars has no letter, but is more quietly pleased with unpacking four baskets of preserves the Nawab of Moorshedabad has sent us, particularly some hot chillis preserved in honey—I should think the most horrid mixture under heaven; but he brought them in triumph to my room, as something exquisite

(To the Hon. and Rev. Robert Eden³³. February 14, 1837)
[308] . . . I sent three of my servants to Barrackpore with them, as their own are gone on, and my jemadar came back this morning and said they set off at four, and 'the Choota lady Sahib' (or 'la petite miladi', as St. Cloud translates it) 'send her love, and say she have all she want, and she look remarkable comfortable in her palkee;' and he ended with clasping his hands, and 'Now, please, may I have leave to go home and see my children; me up at Barrackpore all one whole day,' which the servants look upon as the extreme of human misery . . . [309] . . . George and I are going to take advantage of the roads being watered to get

we drove that way to-day, and we were quite glad we went; they managed the sight so *courteously* and well. They were not sure we meant to go, so they posted relays of boatmen on the road to Government House to watch the carriage, and then, when they found we were coming, they sent out torch-bearers to run before the carriage in broad daylight. All the Government House servants live in streets according to their classes, and we found about 200 boatmen, all in their cleanest liveries, drawn up before their row of thatched huts, and in the middle of the street a temple, or *taj* as they call it, made of silver and red foil, with talc ornaments and flags waving round it, and in front they had put four arm-chairs with footstools covered with flags, that we might sit at our ease in an European fashion and admire it. However, we did not do that for fear the Bishop should hear of it and think we were Mahometans, but we admired it prodigiously as they walked round it with torches to show off the foil; and then they took us back to the carriage; and cost us £ 1 apiece, as everything does that we do, or don't do

(Saturday, April 22) [352] . . . He (Major—) has brought us some shawls, he says, and four curious pigeons for my pigeon-house.

(Volume II. To the Hon. and Rev. Robert Eden. Government House, April 12, 1837) [2] . . . I have not been well for five days; supposed to have caught cold by sitting in front of a *tattee*—the first day of the *tattees*, and the *bheesties* wetted it so well, that I caught my death by it.

HERONS' FEATHERS

(The Hon. F. H. Eden to a friend. Barrackpore, April 14, 1837) . . . [2] . . . I am also sending you, at [3] last, those herons' feathers. They came to me, as you will see, on two round ostentatious cases. I grumbled over them for a week, because I think they look rather like crows' feathers fainted away. However, when I was ejaculating over them, and showing them to Emily, sneering a great deal at clever—, and a great deal at you for thinking those could be what you wanted, his jemadars made a dart at them, expressed many Eastern signs of admiration and astonishment, and said that except Runjeet Singh nobody ever had such. From which I judge that you and he must be very

I was quite disappointed yesterday when Mrs.—sent me her presents to look at, that we might attest their magnificence was not appalling. Two old patched shawls and two bracelets, such as our ayahs wear . . .

[23] (From the Hon. F. H. Eden to a friend. Barrackpore, May 22, 1837) . . . The only civility we can show our female guests is to beg them to have *tiffin* sent to their bungalows, because it must be so unpleasant to cross in the sun; and [24] generally they most heartily accept it; so from breakfast to dinner we see nothing of them. Then we do contrive to get out half an hour earlier here than at Calcutta; and there never was anything like the green of the park and the beauty of the river just now. The school is finished—really a beautiful building . . . The menagerie is flourishing too, though the young tiger showed a young fancy for a young child, and is shut up in consequence; and the little bear gave a little claw at a little officer, and is shut up too; and the large white monkey, which was shut up, got out, walked into the coachman's bungalow, and bit a little boy's ear; and the three sloths have been taking a lively turn, which is horrid and supernatural; and his 'Excellency' has got an odd twist upon the subject of the rhinoceroses, and connives at their fence not being mended, [25] so that they may roam about the park, whereby a respectable elderly gentleman, given to dining out at the cantonments, has been twice nearly frightened into fits. The story, now twice repeated, of the two beasts roaring as they pursue his buggy is very moving to hear; and his 'Excellency' smiles complacently and says, 'Yes they are fine beasts and not the least vicious.'

(From the Hon. E. Eden to the Countess of Buckinghamshire. Government House, May 24, 1837). [26] . . . I never eat any fruit but mangoes, though I see all the others working away at the peaches (which used to make us die of laughing last year) and declaring that it is wonderful how the Indian peaches are come on.

LIVE-BURIAL

[27] . . . I heard a shocking story at dinner yesterday. The Archdeacon was sent for two days ago, to see a boy, the son of a friend, who was dying; and yesterday they sent to tell him