

Sir Nilratan Sircar — *A Life Sketch*

Dr. Sanjoy Banerjee

Hony. Secretary, JIMA

Born of a poor family he rose to heights which can be reached by very few. He was born in a humble family in the village of Netra near Diamond Harbour in 1861. His father's name was Nanda Lal Sircar. After passing his Entrance examination from the Jaynagar H. E. School he qualified as a sub-assistant surgeon from the Campbell Medical School. The scope of a Sub-Assistant Surgeon could not satisfy his ambitious nature. He went up for University examination and took the B.A. degree of the Calcutta University. He served as the Head-master of the Chatra H. E. School for some time, but his burning ambition could not be satisfied with this small post.

He came back to Calcutta and joined the staff of the University School founded by Dr. Aghore Chatterjee (father of Mrs. Sarojini Naidu). He was in the school for about a year and then took his admission into the Medical College in 1885. In the Medical College he was noted both for industry and brilliance. He was the Goodeve Scholar and obtained honours in Midwifery and Medical Jurisprudence. While still a student, he read a paper on the Etiology of Infantile Liver (Biliary Cirrhosis) before the Calcutta Medical Society, which was published in the Indian Medical Gazette in 1887. He obtained his M.B. degree in 1888, and joined the Mayo Hospital as House Surgeon in the same year. His thirst for knowledge, however, could not be satiated with so little. He went in for the M.A. degree which he followed up by obtaining the M.D. degree of the Calcutta University.



Sir Nilratan started private practice in 1890 and soon his reputation spread far and wide. In those days consultation practice was almost a reserve for the European professors of the Medical College. Since the time he boldly started consultation practice, the ring has been broken and to-day it may be said that the Indian medical men are not looked down upon as mere assistant Surgeons. The public has also learnt to recognise the virtues and qualities of their own countrymen. His labours have borne fruit and his memory will be cherished as one of the pioneers who had the courage to set up private practice on equal terms with the members of the Indian Medical Service. For the first time in the history of the medical profession in this country he, along with his friend, Dr. Suresh Prosad Sarbadhikary, began to charge the same amount of fees as the highest European practitioners, Sir Nilratan held that they should establish this principle that, given equal opportunities, an Indian could rise to the level of a European in every sphere of life. Thus he was instrumental in raising the status of the Indian doctors.

A man of many sided activities, Sir Nilratan found time to devote his attention and energy to questions of public welfare. Sir Nilratan believed that Indian young men studying medicine should be taught by Indians and with that end in view, he together with the Late Drs. R. G. Kar and Suresh Prosad Sarbadhikary, started an institution in Calcutta, the first non Official institution of its kind in the whole of India. This institution was later amalgamated with the Calcutta Medical School and came to be known as the Calcutta Medical School and College of Physicians and Surgeons of Bengal. This was the nucleus around which the present Carmichael Medical College was built. He was also the President of Carmichael Medical College. In recognition of the distinguished services to this institution, a Research Institute named after him was created in 1942 for carrying on research in various problems peculiar to this country. He was the President of the Chittaranjan Seva Sadan and the Jadavpur Tuberculosis Hospital. He was the President of Calcutta Medical Club till 1940. Then he was made a Patron of the Club. His connection with the Indian

Medical Association was intimate for a long time. He was elected President of the Association once in 1918 and again in 1932. He was also one of the founders of the Journal of the Association, which made its appearance in 1930 under his editorship, It was then named as "Indian Medical World." The name was changed to the present title from 1931 but he continued to act as the Editor and served the Journal for over a decade. It was due to his untiring zeal and energy and his never-failing guidance that the Journal gradually took the present shape.

Besides devoting his energies to the spread of medical education, Sir Nilratan was also deeply interested in the progress of general education. He was an elected Fellow of the Calcutta University since 1893 and was its Vice-Chancellor from 1919 to 1921. He was Dean of the Faculty of Science as well as Faculty of Medicine of the University and was President of the Post-graduate Teaching in both Arts and Science. In 1920, he went as a delegate of the Calcutta University to the Congress of Universities of the Empire in London.

While there, he received the honorary degrees of D.C.L. of Oxford University and of L.L.D. of Edinburgh University. As an educationist, he realised that the salvation of his country lay in training young men to manufacture articles and receiving training in tanning, dyeing, bleaching and industrial chemistry, mechanical and electrical engineering and sheet metal work and he was found 'working day and night as Secretary to the National Council of Education and then conducting the Bengal Technical School and afterwards, in running the Jadavpur College of Engineering and Technology. He went to Baroda and Bombay for receiving practical training in industrial subjects in 1905 and 1907. He took an active part in the Student's Welfare Movement and in the introduction of the Science Course in the University Curriculum. In fact, he might be said to be the corner-stone of the big edifice of the Science College, Calcutta, which we see today."

He was also intimately connected with the Science Congress and delivered lectures there. He was also invited by the Andhra University to deliver a Convocation address. He took keen interest in the industrial development of Bengal and he encouraged, patronised and sponsored several industrial enterprises. His was an idealistic outlook and financial entanglement could not curb his zeal. The great possibility of Indian hide industry attracted his attention and he saw what a great drain it was on the wealth of the country.

Sir Nilratan took the bold step of founding an Indian-owned tannery, the first of its kind, in the face of tremendous opposition from vested interests. Then he undertook manufacture of soap and the soap works founded by him was a pioneer work in India.

Throughout his life Sir Nilratan took an active interest in politics and had been a delegate of the Indian National Congress since 1890. For several years he was secretary to the several sections of the Congress. Though he seceded from the Congress in 1919 along with other Moderate leaders, he could not belong to the Liberal party either. He felt and made no secret of it that its political outlook and programme lacked idealism and vigour. He was a great admirer of Gandhiji, and Gandhiji also held him in high esteem. Sir Nilratan's statesmanship of high order; there was nothing personal about it. He never had his own axe to grind and it was in the spirit of service and sacrifice for the motherland that he worked. He never had desire to be in the limelight and scrupulously shunned publicity.

He was in the Bengal Legislative Council from 1912-1927. He did his work in the Council in his usual thorough way and devoted much time. A Knighthood was conferred on him in 1918.

Sir Nilratan was a deeply religious man, a Brahmo of the old order. To him religion was a living force, a matter of practice and not only of theory. Presiding over the All India Theistic Conference some years ago he declared: "No form of religion has any life-value today which fails to yield a living inspiration and social service, more specially the service of the lowly and the over-burdened, the afflicted, the downcast, the oppressed and the fallen: and devotional religion in our Samajes, if it be not a mere luxurious sensation, must go out among the depressed classes in loving humility and patient life-giving sacrifice." His religion was firmly rooted in the 'Fatherhood of God and Brotherhood of Man', and he made Service and Sacrifice the motto of his life.

His relation with his colleagues had always been most cordial and most honourable. He always upheld the banner of truth and righteousness, honesty and integrity till the last days of his career as a physician.