Charles Bradlaugh - ‘Member for India’

Charles Bradlaugh was the Member of Parliament for Northampton from 1880 until his premature death in 1891. He is remembered as a leading freethinker and Republican, but he also championed many other progressive causes such as universal suffrage, land reform, trade unionism, and Irish Home Rule. He took a special interest in the plight of the subjects of India under the rule of the British Raj.

After his election as Liberal Party MP for Northampton in 1880, a prolonged constitutional dispute over his right to affirm the oath of allegiance prevented him taking his seat as an MP for six years. When this was settled in 1886 he was approached by the leaders of the Indian National Congress to use his position as an MP to promote the interests of the people of India in the British Parliament. A great public meeting took place at the Northampton’s Guildhall on 21 August 1888 to gain the support of his constituents.

Invited speakers included Dadabhai Naroroji and Umesh Chunder Bonnergee who: “told of the plight of their 200 – 300 million fellow citizens, exploited, disenfranchised, and countless others undernourished and starving”. Bradlaugh explained that he was aware of their suffering and would like to become their voice in ‘the mother of Parliaments’. Aware that this would be complex and difficult work, and that it would limit his time available for Northampton, the people said they would gladly make this sacrifice, and Bradlaugh was ‘nobly consecrated "Member for India".

Dadabhai Naorji (1825-1914)
Liberal MP for Finsbury 1892-75, educator and intellectual, remembered as ‘The Grand Old Man of India.’
Umesh Chunder Bonnergee: (1825-1906). The first President of the Indian National Congress. He laid the foundation stone of the Bradlaugh Hall in 1900.

At the next Parliamentary session Bradlaugh highlighted the extent of famine – previously denied by the British Government and Indian authorities – in Ganjam Province. He showed that since 1878 a special annual tax of £1,500,000 had been levied ‘for the purpose of providing… an insurance against famine, and for no other purpose whatsoever’. Over the years this money had been spent on ‘war and annexation and the erection of costly buildings at Simla….while the people of India have been starving.’

It was claimed Bradlaugh’s intervention saved ‘lakhs [thousands] of human lives’. He complained that salt duty had been raised 25%, mining concessions were granted in secret, and that there were too few native representatives on provincial councils, and that there should be a Parliamentary Committee to study Indian questions. Over the following months he continued diligently to ‘approach every question as the Indians themselves would.’

After falling seriously ill through overwork in late 1889 he was advised to escape the English winter and he took up an invitation to attend the Indian National Congress held in Bombay in December. He was welcomed with ‘rapturous enthusiasm’.

On returning to England he brought in an Indian Council Bill which introduced elective and representative principles – the Bill was rejected.”

From ‘President Charles Bradlaugh’ by David Tribe 1971.

In her biography of her father Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner wrote:
'In India, he was joyfully called the 'Member for India', and at home his views on Indian matters were heard with growing respect. He took up the cause of India with no thought or prospect of personal gain; out of sheer zeal for justice and hatred of oppression.'

Portrait by Alfred Edward Perrin, 1891, Northampton Central Library

Charles Bradlaugh died 30th January 1891. His funeral at Brookwood, Surrey was attended by 3,000 mourners, including the 21 year old M.K. Gandhi and ‘Every Indian residing in London’ (An Autobiography, 1927).

For further reading about Bradlaugh’s life and career we recommend the excellent recent biography; ‘Dare to Stand Alone, the Story of Charles Bradlaugh’ by Bryan Niblett. Please see the Independent review:

The unveiling of the Bradlaugh Statue, Abington Square, 25 June 1894. The panel is inscribed: ’India too chose him her Representative’