

THE VICEROY'S TOUR IN ASSAM.

SPEECH AT GAUHATI.

CALCUTTA, MARCH 15.

The Viceroy arrived in Calcutta this afternoon at about 4 o'clock. The usual salute was fired.

At Gauhati his Excellency the Viceroy received an address from the people of Gauhati. It was as follows:—

"The members of the Reception Committee appointed by the people of Assam beg to accord our most hearty welcome to your Lordship and Lady Curzon. We can only wish that in receiving you we had been able to accord you a more fitting reception. The connection of a province with the Indian railway system has nowhere been delayed so long as in Assam. The Assam-Bengal Railway has been under construction for nine years, and we earnestly hope that your Excellency's visit will lead to its speedy completion, and also to the commencement of the projected railway along the north bank of the Brahmaputra. We think a system of feeder lines is also urgently called for to secure the full advantage of these trunk lines. May we venture to hope that the question of allotting a permanent seat to Assam in the Indian Legislative Council may receive the favourable consideration of your Excellency's Government. It is a privilege that would be most highly valued by the people of Assam. The Ryotwari system of land tenure has not in our opinion improved the condition of the Assamese ryots, and we would beg that long term settlements be granted. Mr. Cotton, Chief Commissioner, has brought to the task of governing Assam a profound sympathy with the people, and an earnest and enthusiastic desire to benefit their interests, and we are grateful to the Government of India for appointing us such a ruler. In conclusion, we tender our hearty thanks to your Excellency for allowing us to address you to-day."

THE VICEROY'S SPEECH.

His Excellency the Viceroy, in reply, said:—"The configuration and physical features of the administrative area of the province of Assam are such that it is almost impossible for a Viceroy within the limited space of time at his disposal to visit the entire province, or to see more than conspicuous illustrations of its industry and life. Lord Northbrook in the famine year of 1874 visited the Surma Valley, and came over the hills to Gauhati—the only previous Viceroy who had set foot in any part of Assam. My own tour on the present occasion has been confined to that which in Assam itself you regard, I believe, as Assam proper, viz., the valley of the magnificent river, second to scarcely any in Asia in the volume of its water and in the productive quality of its alluvion. That a full fortnight will have been required, travelling at a very high rate of speed by water, and only spending five days on land to ascend and descend this mighty current between the confines of Bengal and a point short of that at which it pierces the Himalayan barrier and enters the plains of India is an indication of the wide extent of your province, and the degree to which the Brahmaputra and its tributaries are a vital artery of Assam. That the people of Assam, from whom I am now receiving an address, are a courageous and high-spirited race may, I think, also be inferred from the fact that although it is not yet three years since you were visited by the most appalling natural calamity that has ever befallen this part of India. I speak of the great earthquake of June, 1897, which wrought widespread havoc to property, and was attended with serious loss of life. There has nevertheless not been a single mention of this disaster in any of the three addresses which have been presented to me while journeying in this province, or in any of the subsidiary speeches to which it has been my good fortune to listen. The Government of India helped to the best of their ability in the heavy outlay that was entailed upon you, but the main brunt of the burden has fallen upon your own shoulders, and I congratulate you upon the patience and recuperative power that has been displayed.

THE RAILWAY QUESTION.

"Your address contains some observations upon the railway question in Assam. You note the long period over which the construction of the Assam-Bengal Railway has been spread, and you urge the commencement of the projected line to connect this place along the northern bank of the Brahmaputra with Eastern Bengal. I have already remarked at Dibrugarh that the Assam-Bengal Railway is the most expensive line that we have constructed for many years. I wish I could add that I think it will be one of the most promising. For many years to come I am afraid it will be a millstone round the neck of the Government of India, although if our loss were to be your gain I for one should not protest against the burden. Since I spoke at Dibrugarh on the matter I am happy to be able to state that the difficulty which I there confessed as to the provision of funds for the railway during the ensuing year has been removed by permission being accorded to the company to raise debentures to the extent of 75 lakhs, so that its financial requirements for the forthcoming twelve months have now been fully met, and there is no fear of that suspension of work which was apprehended in the earlier address. As regards railway connection with Bengal, with this splendid waterway at your doors, and with an efficient steamer service, I think you can afford to wait for a while, although with such means as we possess the line is being steadily pushed on from the west. The Teesta and Dhuola rivers are being bridged and the line to Moghul Hat is being converted from 2ft. 6in. to metre gauge, and is being extended in the direction of Dhubri. Later on whenever rail-head reaches the opposite shores of the Brahmaputra confronting this place you will be able to congratulate yourselves upon offering to the scientific engineer an opportune island in the middle of the stream, which I am sure will inspire him with dreams of an unprecedented mechanical triumph in the shape of the Brahmaputra Bridge.

GUARANTEES FOR FEEDER LINES.

"You proceed to urge upon me, as also did the community by whom I had the honour to be addressed at Tezpur, the advantage of the system of light feeder lines in Assam ramifying from the main system and bringing into connection therewith the outlying areas of culture or population. It is further represented that whilst the capital for many of these railways or tramways is forthcoming, an assertion about which I do not feel in every case quite confident, they can only be successfully financed if a guarantee or subsidy be given by Government. The other conditions that are asked for concerning the use of lands, roads, and timber, I need not enter into at the present moment, since it is not about these that I personally should ever wish to be stiff, or that on ordinary occasions any difficulty is apt to arise. Now as regards the general merit of these feeder lines, I am in substantial agreement with yourselves, and I believe that if more widely extended they would be a most effective forerunner of the prosperous future that we all hope awaits Assam. But different views may legitimately be held about the best methods of financing their construction, and when I have to consider the question of an imperial guarantee it is clear that I cannot look at the matter exclusively through Assamese spectacles, but that I am obliged to correlate it with the demands of other localities not less deserving and with the inexorable limitations of our annual programme. There does not seem to be any distinction in practical finance between a provincial guarantee and an imperial guarantee. Of course if the local Government can provide the money from its own resources without raising its demands upon the imperial exchequer, and without abandoning or neglecting other public works, a strong case is made out, but that is not the situation with which we are as a rule confronted, and when the proposal is made to guarantee provincially and then revise the provincial contract at the expense of the Imperial Government I can see no difference between such a procedure and an imperial guarantee pure and simple. Now if the guarantee be imperial the capital must be entered under the financial system to which we are bound by the Secretary of State upon the annual programme, that is, a strictly limited programme, which, for the ensuing year, amounts to Rs. 6½ crores. All expenditure upon railways within that sum is carefully examined out by the Government of India upon an examination of all conflicting demands and the needs of the entire country. No expenditure beyond it is possible except in a year when the revenue justifies an outlay more ambitious than the original forecast.

THE CALLS OF FAMINE.

"In a year such as the present, with the enormous calls for famine weighing us down, any such excess is absolutely impossible. If the Archangel from Heaven were to come and offer me a scheme certain to be ultimately remunerative but involving an immediate entry upon the programme of capital outlay I should be obliged to refuse him. You may call the system inelastic, exasperating, if you please, and in many respects I agree with you, and am struggling to effect a reform, but do not quarrel with the Government of India for doing that which it has no other present alternative than to do. Once a year at Budget time we cut our coat, and it is a big coat, but, like other tailors, we cannot make it bigger than the cloth provided to us admits of, and hence it results, that there are frequently parts of the body which remain for a while indifferently clad. If, however, the local Government is unable to accept the risk of a guarantee within its existing contract, and if the Imperial Government is crippled by plague and famine, what, it may be asked, are you to do? Now it does not seem to me that all financial possibilities are by any means exhausted. If in any particular case neither a provincial nor an imperial guarantee can be given, I own that I do not myself quite understand the position of those pro-

motors who represent to the Government of India a plea for an imperial guarantee that the chances of its being called upon are so remote, the prospects of the concession for which they ask so radiant, and the capital outlay involved so small, that the Government of India will not incur the faintest risk in giving a pledge, but who, nevertheless, are unable themselves either to produce the money, or persuade others to do so, without such a pledge. But even supposing the position be explicable and sound, I would point out that other methods are still open. I was travelling only three days ago on the Tezpur-Balipara Railway a 2 feet 6 inch line running for twenty miles from Tezpur on the north bank of the river into the interior, and serving several important tea gardens *en route*. This little line was constructed for a capital expenditure, including interest during construction of only four lakhs, or £26,000. In the fourth year of its existence it is already earning 5½ per cent. upon the capital outlay up to date. This itself appears to me to be a very remarkable and encouraging precedent, but the reason for which I especially notice is that the only form of outside assistance which the promoters received was not a guarantee either from the Imperial or Provincial Government nor any direct financial help from the latter, but a small subsidy from the District Board of Tezpur. I do not know if this subsidy was required to raise capital for construction, but whether it operated in that direction or not does it not suggest an example worthy of imitation. In Southern India I can quote you a precedent of an even more adventurous and stimulating character. The District Board of Tanjore has set aside a special additional cess of 3 pies per rupee in its taxes to constitute a fund against which capital can be raised. With the money so acquired it has succeeded in building many miles of metre gauge line upon which it is now earning substantial dividends, being joint proprietor of the line with the Madras Government. I cannot say whether the circumstances are such as to admit of a similar plan being adopted here, but at least it is worthy of examination.

SEAT IN THE LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL.

"Your next petition is that a permanent seat in the Legislative Council may be allotted to Assam. I quite appreciate the naturalness of this request, but it is one that has also to be considered from the wider standpoint of Indian interests at large. When the Council was expanded by the Act of 1892, there was not found to be within this province that substantial community of interest which would render any one delegate truly representative of the whole. Tea planters would faithfully represent the tea planting industry, and when the measures affecting that industry are under discussion we are usually able to rely upon the services of some gentleman, such as Mr. Buckingham at the present juncture, who does ample justice to his clients, but in the native population of Assam, so widely scattered and representing no such solidarity of opinion or counsel, whilst it might be possible, though it would be difficult, to find some one who would duly represent such divergent elements I doubt whether it would be possible to find any one who could represent the interests of the entire province, European and planting as well as native. The constituency is, in fact, too composite to admit of a permanent single mouthpiece. Moreover there are wider considerations to be borne in mind. Exclusive of the five non-official members who are returned to the Legislative Council of the Governor-General by the non-official members of the Councils of Bombay, Madras, the North-West Provinces, and Bengal, and by the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce, we only have five seats at the disposal of the whole of the rest of India. If I were to undertake permanently to allot one of these seats to Assam I should be adopting a course which would be resented as unfair by the rest of India, and that would not necessarily conduce to the representative character of the Council itself. You may rely upon me, and I doubt not upon my successors after me, to give you provisional representation from whatever section of the community when called for by the legislative programme of the Government, but the request for a permanent seat in the Council is one which, in the present stage of development of the province, which you have yourselves described as backward, it is not possible to concede.

THE LAND TENURE.

"Your remark upon the system of land tenure in Assam, and upon the desirability of a longer term, will be carefully considered when the new settlements are made at no great distance from the present time. Sooner or later there can be little doubt that longer settlements will come. It is a mark in every community of advancing agricultural development, but I would ask you to remember that the short term and *ryotwari* tenure now prevailing were devised in strict relation to the conditions both of agriculture and the population in the Brahmaputra Valley. You have here a Nomadic population which reclaims land from waste, cultivates it for a few years and then when the soil begins to be impoverished, moves on. In every year for one quarter of a million of acres brought into cultivation another quarter of a million are thrown out, the total temporarily settled area of 1½ million acres remaining comparatively stationary. It is to accommodate this tendency that annual leases have been permitted, and how faithfully they have responded to the needs of the time is shown by the fact that though any ryot who chooses to take a ten years' lease acquires thereby that proprietary interest in the land which you appear to advocate, only the scantiest advantage has hitherto been taken of this provision. The main reason for which cultivation does not extend in this province is that the indigenous population is stationary, and the main reason for which the indigenous population is stationary is not the system of land tenure but the nature of the climate. The question of sub-letting will be taken up when the new settlement is made. As to the question of land revenue rates, no answer can be given upon that point until the reports of the Settlement Officers are received, but the Government of India will as assuredly approach the matter with no *a priori* conclusion or prepossessions in their mind.

MR. COTTON'S WORK.

"I have been pleased to listen to the spontaneous testimony that you have borne to the labours of your Chief Commissioner. No one connected or unconnected with the Government of India can fail to recognise that his heart has been in his work, and that he has done his best to push the interests of this province with the zeal of a parent and with an enthusiasm proportionate to the magnitude of the undertaking. In the discharge of his task, to which he has applied great vigour as well as high abilities, I believe that he has earned the confidence of all sections, native as well as European, of a singularly diversified community. There is only one observation in your address which I would at all deprecate, and that is the sentence in which you modestly disparage the character of the welcome you have given Lady Curzon and myself. No such reflection has even dimly occurred to our minds. The loyalty of the people and the warmth of their feelings are capable of being testified in a score of other fashions than by magnificent preparations and costly displays. In Gauhati, however, we have been particularly struck by the good taste and spontaneity of your welcome. Here as elsewhere in this province we feel that we have met with a reception that has sprung from the hearts of those who have offered it, and in tendering to you one and all our thanks, let me assure you that in turning our back upon the Brahmaputra Valley, its noble waterway, its expanding industries, and its friendly people, we shall not banish Assam from our affections, but shall keep a tender spot therein for this enterprising and hopeful corner of the British Empire."