

MATILAL SEAL

Son of Chaitanyacharan Seal, a dealer in cloth, Matilal Seal was born in Calcutta in 1792. He lost his father at the age of five. Educated at Nityananda Sen's School, he acquired enough knowledge of English with age.

Promoter of Education

Matilal Seal was a patron of learning. He opened the Seal's Free College on 1 March 1843 in the presence of the Chief Justice Sir J P Grant, the Advocate General of the Calcutta Bar, George Thompson, the Professors of the St. Xavier's College as well as some leading native gentlemen including Dwarkanath Tagore, Mr. Johnson of St. Xavier's College, the future Superintendent of the Institution opened the Proceedings and Lawrence Poet addressed the gathering.

Its main purpose was to make Hindu youths fit for posts of trust and emoluments through proper education in Western Science and English Literature under the guidance of the Jesuits well qualified to teach. The number of students was limited to 500. Under his fostering care, the college became "one of the best conducted educational institutions in the metropolis".

On the other hand, what motivated him to open the college was his son's negligence of his studies at the Hindu College where because of his indolence or disobedience, he was made to stand in a corner. Matilal felt hurt and resolved to found a college, which, under the superintendence of Jesuit teachers, could eclipse the Hindu College in manners, while protecting his son from any kind of ignominious treatment in future. The College would be open to such Hindus only as the founder thought proper to admit, but its management would be in the hands of the Directors of St. Xavier's College. The course of study comprised English Literature in all its branches, history, Geography, Elocution, Writing, Mathematics, the Philosophical Sciences and the practical applications of Mathematics.

BUSINESS ENTREPRENEUR

Known as the Rothschild of Calcutta, Matilal Seal was a self-made man. It was through his enterprising business career that he became a millionaire. Beginning as a trader in empty bottles and corks, he soon embarked on bigger projects. He worked as banian to eight European firms. "A first rate judge of country produce", he proved to be an acquisition to the firms he served. He did not take long to realise that the business of export and import provided fertile soil for exploitation and that the English were making the most of it aided by men like him with local knowledge. It was clear to him that a native enterprise backed by better knowledge of local produce could not only compete with the English but also undersell them. He thus, did not hesitate to stake his fortune on the bold venture of exporting indigo, silk, sugar, salt petre etc and importing cotton piece goods to and from Europe at a profit. From a banian, he became a business entrepreneur and, like Rustomjee Cowasjee and

Dwarakanath Tagore, set the pattern for posterity to emulate in the interests of national welfare.

Engaged in overseas trade, his attention was naturally drawn towards shipping. Within a short time, he became the proud possessor of a fleet and competed with foreign liners in shipping cargoes to Europe and to the Far East. An important subscriber to the New Bengal Steam Fund, he was one of the first to introduce tug steamers in coastal shipping.

AVERSION FOR PROSELYTIZATION

His college soon ran into rough weather over religious instructions imparted by the Jesuit teachers. The Rev. Krishna Mohan Banerjea, who had retired from the college, made it known that the exclusion of all kinds of religious instructions had never been formally demanded from any of the teachers by Matilal Seal. If the teachers did not in their turn ask for liberty to introduce theological lectures into the college, it was because they could not expect such indulgences from a Hindu in an institution maintained entirely by himself. Despite all caution, a storm broke out over a Jesuit teacher questioning a class of Hindu students reading English history. "When was the heresy of Wickliffe introduced?" this was taken by the Friend of India as "a condemnation of Protestant heresy in the College". Krishnamohan, no advocate for the Jesuits, pointed out for the enlightenment of the Friend of India that the phrase "the heresy of Wickliffe" might have been uttered merely because it occurred in Goldsmith's History of England, a class book, not a popish work. To him, the words were improper because Wickliffe was "the Morning Star of the Reformation". The situation had become tense and in the midst of it, Matilal took serious exception to the conduct of the European teachers who were guilty of improprieties including sharing tiffins of beef and beer with the students, which was inexcusably violative of the Hindu way of life. He at once dissolved the connection of the Jesuits and issued a Notice which read: "The connection of St. Xavier's College with Seal's College has been dissolved, and this Institution is from this day placed under the care of Rev. K.M. Banerjea - Calcutta September 20, 1844." The proselytization activities of the Christian missionaries led Matilal to join hands with Debendranath Tagore and others in establishing the Hindu Charitable Institution on 1 March 1846. He also generously helped those who founded the Metropolitan College in 1853.

A PROGRESSIVE

A liberal, he strongly censured the stalwarts of the *Dharma Sabha* for their attempts to thwart their progressive movements. He helped Vidyasagar in furthering the cause of widow remarriage.

A philanthropist, he donated Rs. 25,000/- for relieving the sufferings of the poor and the sick, of orphans and widows. He offered to pay Rs. 10,000 to any of his five sons agreeing to marry a widow, but none agreed out of fear of persecution at the hands of the *Dharma Sabha*. Matilal fully shared the political aspirations of his countrymen. In his letter to

Ramgopal Ghosh he regretted his inability to attend the Town Hall meeting of 29 July 1853 owing to illness. This meeting gave publicity to Indian grievances on the eve of the renewal of the Charter.

He passed away on 29 May 1854.

Bibliography : Hemendra Prosad Ghosh, *Matilal Seal* (Cal., 1364 B.S.); L. N. Ghose, *The Modern History of Indian Chiefs, Rajas, Zamindars* (Part II, 1881); B. N. Bandyopadhyaya, *Sambad Patre Sekaler Katha* (Vols. I & II, 1356 B.S.); B. Ghosh, *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitra* (Vol. I, 1962); *Friend of India*, Vol. IX 1843 and Vol. X, 1844.