

The Case of Benoyendra Chandra Pandey

On December 4, 1933, one Amarendra Chandra Pandey died in a Calcutta hospital after a short and violent malady, diagnosed by the doctors in attendance as bubonic plague.

Ordinarily no investigations are undertaken by the police upon the death of persons, who become victims of plague or any other infectious disease, but there were some matters in connection with the death of Amarendra Chandra that called for an enquiry, and which led, eventually, to the unravelling of a story probably unique in the annals of crime.

Amarendra was the younger of two half-brothers and one of the heirs to the Pakur Raj Estate. In 1929 the Raja of Pakur died and the family estate was inherited jointly by Amarendra and his half-brother, Benoyendra, who was then twenty-seven years of age. Amarendra at the time of his father's death was sixteen. In addition to the Pakur Raj Estate, of which the brothers were joint owners, they were also joint reversionary heirs of their aunt, Rani Surja Bati Debi of Deoghar.

Benoyendra led a dissolute life. On his father's death he became karta of the joint Hindu family, but more attention was paid to a pretty dancing girl named Balikabala than to the ample estate he had inherited. His extravagance and course of life outraged the members of his family including the great lady, Rani Surja Bati. The relationship between the brothers was, also, none too good, and it was alleged to Benoyendra's failure to provide adequately for the maintenance and education of Amarendra.

In 1931, Amarendra attained majority and almost immediately began to take definite steps to assert his rights in the joint estate, and in open opposition to Benoyendra. On May 12, 1932 Amarendra executed a general power-of-attorney in favour of persons, whom he considered as unlikely to yield to the pressure of his Amarendra began to consult pleaders with a view to protecting his interests.

Meanwhile, suspicions had begun to gather round Benoyendra. Although he had successfully persuaded Amarendra to cancel the general power-of-attorney granted in May, certain events had taken place that led people to the belief that he was not likely to be very scrupulous in attaining his ends. During the Puja vacation of 1932 while at his aunt Surja Bati's house in Deoghar, Amarendra took ill after a walk with Benoyendra, and the illness was diagnosed as a tetanus infection. Dr. Surendra Nath Mukerji, who made the diagnosis, treated the patient with an anti-tetanus serum. During his brother's illness, Benoyendra suddenly disappeared along with a compounder friend by whom he was accompanied. A telegram was sent to Benoyendra at Pakur to bring the family physician.



Instead of complying with this request, he went afield to Calcutta, and fetched one Dr. Tara Nath, who was later to figure prominently in the proceedings against Benoyendra for the murder of his brother. This aroused the family suspicions, particularly when Dr. Tara Nath advised the abandonment of the serum treatment in favour of morphia. Technically, there seemed to be nothing wrong in the advice, as morphia appeared to have been the correct remedy, but there was something in the manner of Dr. Tara Nath that gave the shrewd Rani Surja Bati the impression that the specific was not quite as correct as it seemed. This illness of Amarendra left him with a damaged heart and he did not recover his health until April of 1933.

In the meantime, Benoyendra had begun withdrawals from the Allahabad and other Banks of the cash deposits belonging to the estate. By obtaining a succession certificate in favour of himself and Amarendra authorising them jointly and severally to collect the debts, he successfully obtained Rs. 13000 from the banks. In October, a sum of Rs. 17000 was deposited in court in a compromise decree in favour of the jointestate, and Benoyendra made strenuous efforts to withdraw it. On November 17, Amarendra filed objections with the result that the money was held up. This brothers met and discussed at length the question of partition. This, it was decided, should be effected at Pakur.

While in Calcutta, Amarendra went one evening to the Purna Theatre along with one Joytimayee and her friends. Benoyendra was not invited but did not fail to go to the same theatre and the same show. He was seen in the company of a man, described as "short, dark-complexioned and wearing khaddar", a description that would probably apply to three-quarters of Bengal. Anyway, there were people who said they could identify him, if they saw him again. Whether he has been seen or not, we cannot say, but it is in evidence that he has not yet been identified.

Rani Surja Bati decided to leave Calcutta with her nephew Amarendra on November 26. Benoyendra learnt of this the evening before. He said he would see his aunt off next day at the station. Considering the state of relationships within the family at the time, this surprised the Rani, but she took this new manifestation of courtesy with a smile. Perhaps, after all Benoyendra was not such a heartless nephew. He had no quarrel with his aunt, nor ought he, considering that he was a "reversionary heir".

To be continued..

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