

CHAPTER XIII

The Imperialist

The 39-year-old Curzon who went over as Viceroy to India was a peculiar blend of three contemporaneous interactions of the psyche, body and environment. His patrician mid-Victorian background with its impregnable self-assurance had conditioned him to a static society whose development was apparently complete. The Empire was viewed not as an illusion but as a god-given fact made permanent. Against this backdrop was the man himself, his body already racked by pain and taxed by self-imposed overworks struggling to maintain homeostasis under its impact. More important was the ego pampered by the virtually unbroken train of success on one hand and the passionate adulation of friends and family on the other.

In becoming Viceroy at 39 Curzon seemed to have fulfilled the great expectations he had of himself and the confidence of others in him. At last some sort of a balance seemed to have been arrived at between hope and achievement. But this was only apparently so. The ego was already taxed by a somatic

strain. In India the ego was fed further; everywhere the Viceroy went he was treated like a god descended from heaven. He toured the country on triumphal marches accepting the cheers of the multitude as though it was his birthright. So great could be the illusion in India that it was possible to forget the real for the sham.

It was but natural that the super-human image could not be sustained forever. Curzon tried hard. Like a typhoon of duty he whirled through India, prodding up the lethargic civilian, taking a bold stand on crimes against 'natives' by British soldiers, overhauling the education system and personally supervising the restoration of India's monuments. The physical pace he had set for himself could not be sustained forever.

In his growing-up years - in fact until the assumption of Viceroyalty - the environment had prepared him by and large only for success. By hook or by crook he had generally managed to get his way, whether it was to get a new Eton dinner jacket from his father, or to wangle an invitation from the difficult Amir of Afghanistan, or to get the Viceregal appointment from Lord Salisbury. Even when he failed to get a First at Oxford he had made up by winning the Lothian. In short, the environment had prepared him for an outer reality which only fed and nourished his ego. He was not conditioned for obstruction or setback. Alas! when they came his system was not prepared to absorb the shock.

Moreover, the very circumstances he had taken for granted were changing. The static society, which viewed life strictly

from the point of view of a small and select band of racially superior men destined, as it were, to rule a vast mass of lesser breeds, was giving place to a new scenario. In India, he found a house of shifting sands. The very people upon whom he had relied to maintain the sameness and continuity of British rule were to let him down: his colleagues and friends in the British Cabinet, the British civilians in India and the Indian masses themselves - especially the English-educated middle classes, who had hitherto looked upon the British as omniscient. The breaking point had come.

But Curzon could not foresee the break, for he had been trained in the school of Sir James Fitzjames Stephen and Sir John Strachey. Alarmed by Gladstone's pronouncements that not merely were the British in India for the good of Indians but that the question of what was good must be decided by the Indians themselves, Stephen and Strachey had taken it upon themselves to redefine British policy and to provide an intellectual justification for the continuation of autocracy in India.

The British ruled, they reasoned, not by consent but by force, their achievements being law and order. The unbroken tranquility that prevailed in India would be promptly broken if Britain were to move away. Certainly it was not popular government but then no foreign government could afford to be popular even if it could afford to be good. For reasons of policy Indians had to be admitted to official positions, but only in limited numbers. The British had no need to be hypocritical and apologetic about it. Sir John Strachey had argued:

The English in India are a handful of foreigners governing 250 millions of people ... the fact remains that there never was a country, and never will be, in which the government of foreigners is really popular. It will be the beginning of the end of our empire when we forget this elementary fact, and entrust the greater executive power to the hands of Natives, on the assumption that they will always be faithful and strong supporters of our government... it is clear that the only hope for India is the long continuance of the benevolent but strong government of Englishmen. Let us give to the Natives the largest possible share in the administration... But let there be no hypocrisy about our intention to keep in the hands of our own people those executive posts ... on which, and on our political and military power, our actual hold of the country depends.¹

Fitzjames Stephen had added that individual freedom was a mockery without law and order, saying "liberty from the very nature of things is dependent on power; and that is only under the protection of a powerful, well-organised government that any liberty can exist at all."²

Since then the Indian National Congress had come into being. Yet coming nearly a quarter century later, Curzon held similar views and saw little need for modifying them: He was, as he declared to John Morley, the Liberal statesman,

an imperialist heart and soul. I do not care a snap of the fingers for the ... lust of conquest. I am very far indeed from being a Jingo; and I am made very unhappy when the nation goes mad. But I differ from you, as it seems to me, in regarding imperial expansion firstly as an unenviable necessity, as irresistible as the waves that washed the feet of Canute; and, secondly,

¹ Sir John Strachey India, its Administration and Progress (London, 1888), pp.359-60.

² Sir J. Fitzjames Stephen, Liberty, Equality, Fraternity (London, 1872) p.183.

as carrying with it a noble and majestic obligation, which may some day break us down, but at which I am not in the least against since neither our race nor our political system seem to me yet to have reached snapping point. ... I do not see how any Englishman, contrasting India as it is now with what it was, and would certainly have been, under any other conditions than British rule, can fail to see that we came and have stayed here under no blind and capricious impulse, but in obedience to what some (of whom I am one) would call the decree of Providence, others the law of destiny - in any case for the lasting benefit of millions of the human race.

Surveying the Indian scene at the onset of his Viceroyalty, Curzon felt no reason to believe that he was not fully in control in India. Bal Gangadhar Tilak was making harsh cries against alien rule but they were scarcely heard outside of Maharashtra. By and large the opposition to British rule was moderate and the English-educated Indians were prepared for reform in slow constitutional stages. There was little indication that the movement could raise a potent force that would ignite India in a mighty upheaval against the British. Nevertheless Curzon was not going to take chances. Sir James Fitzjames Stephen had cautioned in 1883: "No country in the world is more orderly, more quiet, or more peaceful than British India as it is; but if the vigour of the government should ever be relaxed, if it should lose its essential unity of purpose, and fall into hands either weak or unfaithful, chaos would come again to flood."²

¹ Curzon to Morley, June 17, 1900, CP. Vol.181.

² Sir J.F. Stephen, 'Foundations of the Government of India', Nineteenth Century, Vol.Ixxx(October, 1883), p.566.

Curzon stubbornly believed he could hope to hold the country "by convincing the mass of people that our rule is juster, purer, more beneficent, than either any other foreign rule could be, or than would be the rule of their own men."¹ Even during the height of the agitation against his Partition of Bengal Curzon had the unabashed conceit to believe, that he could go through life doing things his way. Hitherto he had succeeded with his arbitrary manner. At Eton he had carried away the prizes by defying the Masters. He saw no reason to change in India. Besides, he believed he had racial superiority on his side. "The real strength of our position lies in the extraordinary inferiority, in character, honesty and capacity" of Indians, he boasted!²

This overweening racial arrogance perhaps owed something to Darwin whose Origin of the Species was published in the year of Curzon's birth. Darwin by laying stress on the importance of hereditary factors had, unconsciously, hardened racial attitudes. Curzon always remained a racialist. There is the famous story of how once when watching troops bathing behind the lines of the Western Front he remarked "Dear me, I never knew that the lower classes had such white skins."³

It was the same racial superiority that drove Curzon

¹ Curzon to Balfour, March 31, 1901, CP. Vol.181.

² Ibid.

³ Kenneth Rose, Superior Person (London, 1969) p.151.

to say at a Convocation of Calcutta University:

I hope I am making no false or arrogant claim when I say that the highest ideal of truth is to a large extent a Western Conception I do not thereby mean to claim that Europeans are universally or even generally truthful, still less do I mean that Asiatics deliberately or habitually deviate from the truth. The one proposition would be absurd, and the other insulting. But undoubtedly truth took a high place in the moral codes of the West before it had been similarly honoured in the East, where craftiness and diplomatic skill have always been held in much repute.¹

The Mutiny had sharply reversed the early Victorian faith in the perfectability and equality of mankind. Indians were viewed as chronically deceitful, indolent and impossible to improve. Their vices were racially inherent, and therefore incurable. They were born subservient and incapable of leadership. Surely it was the duty of the British, endowed with superior morals, to take them in hand and provide these children with their guiding hand.

Curzon's own views were stiffened in his childhood, from the many tales of Indian character and temperament told to him by his father's school friend from Rugby and neighbour, Sir Henry Wilmot. A member of Parliament from South Derbyshire, Sir Henry had served in India during the Mutiny and had been awarded the Victoria Cross for his efforts there.²

Indians to Curzon were children and to be treated as

¹ Calcutta, Feb.11, 1905, Indian Speeches, (Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.IV, p.75.

² Interview with 3rd Viscount Scarsdale.

such: "They are very strange people. These natives, they have such an extraordinary respect for strength of decision and action that, if it is based upon sincere purpose and expressed in sympathetic language, there is scarcely anything that they will not accept from their rulers, however contrary to their own previous utterances and prepossession."¹ Scepticism about fundamentals had hardly been encouraged in either school or at home. And Curzon, because of his own inner conflicts, clung more stubbornly than his contemporaries to the past and to what he had been taught.

The imperial mission must be animated by duty; it required knowledge, moral basis and sacrifice. Curzon felt he had brought to bear these qualities upon his mission. He had spent years travelling, studying and preparing himself for the post which he hoped would one day be his. He persuaded himself to believe that he had postponed his marriage to Mary only in order to enable himself to study at first-hand the strategic buffer state of Afghanistan. In order to ensure blind justice over those whom he ruled he knew he would gain unpopularity even among his own fellowmen. But Curzon accepted it was the inevitable price for the performance of imperial duty. In fact, the thought that his own people were also against him gave him a certain masochistic pleasure.

Even after a happy marriage Curzon could not forego

¹ Curzon to Hamilton, Jan.25, 1900, CP. Vol.159.

the obsessive demands of the Empire. He saw it as a purgatory through which he had to almost compulsively pass. The strain made him dissolve in self-pity. The Viceroy once wept in a letter to his wife, "... grind, grind, grind with never a word of encouragement, on on on till the collar breaks and the poor beast stumbles and dies."¹ Yet he clung to his post and returned for a second term.

Time and again he went out of his way to seek pain in the pursuit of what he conceived his imperial duty. As we shall see, he stubbornly returned to India to resume the second term of his Viceroyalty, even though his feud with Kitchener was going badly for him, and Mary, who had been grievously ill, could never hope to rejoin him in India. He could have seized upon this excuse to honourably stay out of India. But Curzon insisted on flying straight into the storm.

When he returned to India in December, 1904 without Mary, he said by way of explanation:

The question may, perhaps, be asked why in these circumstances I should have come back at all. It is true that I have exceeded the longest term of office since that which sent Lord Canning home, more than forty years ago, to die... May I give the answer in all humility as it rises in my own heart? Since this country first laid its spell upon me, I have always regarded it as the land not only of romance but of obligation. India to me is 'Duty' written in five letters instead of in four.²

¹ Curzon to Mary, July 23, 1901, MCP.

² Bombay, Dec.9, 1904, Indian Speeches (Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.III, pp.467-8.