

CHAPTER XIV

Without Fear or Favour

Curzon was to thunder in a speech on the eve of his final departure from India:

Let it be our ideal... to fight for the right, to abhor the imperfect, the unjust or the mean, to swerve neither to the right hand nor to the left, to care nothing for flattery, applause or odium or abuse - never to let your enthusiasm be soured or your courage grow dim, but to remember that the Almighty has placed your hand on the greatest of his ploughs...¹

To convince the mass of people that British rule is "juster, more beneficent" was a part of the benevolent despotism that Curzon had envisaged for himself in India. Even his inherent racialism had to take a backseat. He was first and foremost an imperialist. In his fashion, he had tried to play the role of the benevolent despot, visualizing himself

¹ Bombay, Nov.16, 1905, Indian Speeches 4 Vols. (Calcutta, 1900-6), Vol.IV, pp.241-2.

as the father figure who would act according to his duty, without fear or favour. Hamilton, Secretary of State for India, congratulated the Viceroy for having established "... a reputation for fearlessness, omniscience, and justice and action such as you have taken", for he believed it would "place the whole foundations of our Government on a stabler and more sympathetic basis than before."¹

Since the Mutiny, few cases of soldiers beating coolies were reported and fewer still brought to book. Curzon said:

When I came to this country, I found that in spite of excellent pronouncements on the part of many of my predecessors, the number of cases of violent collision between Europeans and natives was increasing with a rapidity that appeared to me to be dangerous and menacing. I found also that the general temper and inclination of European, as illustrated by the attitudes of many of our officers both military and civil, by the tone of the English newspapers, by the verdicts of juries, and by any other test that it was possible to apply, was in favour of glossing over, palliating rather than exposing and punishing these crimes.²

Curzon made inquiries and found out that in the last twenty years in the recorded cases of violence, 84 natives had been killed compared with only five Europeans and 57 natives had been seriously injured as compared with 15 Europeans. He said:

I further found that so strong is the racial feeling in this country between the dominant

¹ Hamilton to Curzon, Jan.3, 1901, CP. Vol.160.

² Notes by the Viceroy in the Military Dept., 1902. CP. Vol.402.

and the subject race that in the last half century on only two occasions have Europeans ever been hanged for the murder of natives, though the cases proved against them may be counted by the score.¹

He was in Simla in his first summer when news came to him of the Rangoon outrage. Some officers of the West Kent regiment had raped a Burmese woman but the whole case had been, as usual, hushed up. It would have never been investigated had it not been for Curzon's intervention. He said, "When I first mentioned it to the then Commander-in-Chief nearly two months after it had happened, it had never been so much as reported to him."² Curzon declared, "that such gross outrages should occur in the first place in a country under British rule; and then that everybody, commanding officers, officials, juries, departments should conspire to screen the guilty, is, in my judgement, a black and permanent blot upon the British name."³ He had the entire regiment banished from Rangoon, "to the worst spot that I could find; they were accordingly sent to Aden."⁴

Curzon personally rebuked the senior officials who had played a role in suppressing the affair and had the order-in-council published to inform the public of the government's anger over the affair. The Viceroy's decision was greatly hailed by the Indian press. The British tried to echo these

¹ Notes by the Viceroy in the Military Dept. CP. Vol.402.

² Ibid.

³ Curzon to Hamilton, June 13, 1900, CP. Vol.159.

⁴ Notes by the Viceroy in Military Dept. CP. Vol.402.

sentiments, but it was a feeble echo. The British community in India was privately appalled.

Even members of the Viceroy's council had not wholeheartedly endorsed Curzon's measure. The Commander-in-Chief and the Military Member warned Curzon of another mutiny.¹ But the greater their doubts, the greater became Curzon's determination to take the stern measure. Besides, was he not, in his majestic robes of the Viceroy, a sovereign in all but name?

But alas! the Viceroy did not annex the Indian goodwill and attach it to his name; if the Indians chose to take this action to mean that the Viceroy was on their side, they were mistaken. The Viceroy had only done what he deemed was his duty - without fear or favour. Tact was never his strong point and while he was routing out the West Kent Regiment, he was extolling the British name by helping to fan memories of Indian outrages on the British. He had proceeded to erect a monument over the Black Hole of Calcutta and the well at Cawnpore. The Secretary of State stirred himself to protest: "My Council are very averse to the idea of re-erecting this obelisk. They say that parading our disaster and consequences which ensued has a very bad effect upon the native mind and I am rather disposed to agree with them."²

But Curzon paid scant heed to the warning. He soon got another opportunity for demonstrating that he was the

¹ Curzon to Hamilton, May 9, 1900, CP. Vol.159.

² Hamilton to Curzon, Nov.9, 1899, CP. Vol.158.

benevolent despot capable of acting without fear or favour.

Two troopers of the British Army Cavalry Regiment, the 9th Lancers, soon after their arrival in India on April 9, 1902 quarrelled with their native cook Atu for failing to provide them with prostitutes and brutally kicked him. He died nine days later.

The news came to Curzon's ears two months after the event when the dead man's relative wrote to the Viceroy. Curzon declared:

I will not be a party to any scandalous hushings up of bad cases of which there is too much in this country, or to the theory that a white man may kick or batter a black man to death with impunity because he is only a d...d nigger.¹

Prior to Atu's death, "no attempt had been made by the regimental authorities to investigate the case," he complained, "though it had been brought immediately and directly to their notice: After his death a Court of Enquiry was ordered by the Commanding Officers; but it consisted only of officers of the regiment; its proceedings were of a perfunctory description, and it made no effort to discover the guilty persons."²

The Viceroy entered the picture himself. The whole regiment was to be punished: all officers and men of the regiment on leave in India were to be recalled, and no more

¹ Curzon to Lord Knollys, Dec.14, 1902, CP. Vol.136.

² Notes by the Viceroy in the Military Dept. CP. Vol.402.

leave granted for six months. He had calculated the consequences of punishing such a crack regiment and was prepared for them.

He said:

If it be known that the Viceroy backed by the Secretary of State, will stand up even against the crack regiment of the British Army, packed though it be with dukes' sons, earls' sons and so on -- then a most salutary lesson will be taught to the army. If we yield to military and aristocratic clamour no Viceroy will dare to go on with the work that I have begun.¹

He had written earlier to Godley, Permanent Under-Secretary of State at the India Office:

These soldiers, with their violence and their lust, are pulling the fabric of our dominion down about our ears; I for one will not sacrifice what I regard as the most solemn obligation imposed upon the British race to the licence of even the finest regiment in the British Army.²

The 9th Lancers, as expected, did not lose this opportunity to take their revenge against the Viceroy who dared to cast aspersions on their famous name - equally publicly. Ironically, it was Curzon who gave them the opportunity to do so. The 9th Lancers had been scheduled to take part in the Delhi Durbar of January 1903, which, as we have noted in Chapter XII, marked the zenith of Curzon's Viceroyalty. With the changed circumstances, the Military Secretary advised the Viceroy to withdraw them. Curzon, in his characteristically high-handed manner, refused to do so. In a communique to the press he

¹ Curzon to Hamilton, Nov.27, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

² Curzon to Godley, June 18, 1902, CP. Vol.161.

boasted that he had rejected the Military authorities' proposal to strike them off the strength of troops to attend the Durbar, "because of the illustrious record of the regiment and the desire to spare it a public disgrace."¹

At the Durbar the 9th Lancers rode by in all their faultless grace, and the European populace surged to their feet, giving them a hysterical ovation. Even the Viceroy's guests joined in the cheering. Curzon later moaned, "I could do nothing but deplore my own ill-timed generosity in ever having allowed the regiment to go to Delhi at all."² He was downcast with shame. He later wrote:

The 9th Lancers rode by amid a storm of cheering. I say nothing of the bad taste of the demonstration. On such an occasion and before such a crowd. (for of course every European in India is on the side of the Army in the matter) nothing better could be expected. But as I sat alone and unmoved on my horse, conscious of the implication of cheers, I could not help being struck by the irony of the situation. There rode before me a long line of men, in whose ranks were most certainly two murderers, amidst the plaudits of their fellow countrymen. It fell to the Viceroy, who is credited by the public with the sole responsibility of their punishment, to receive their salute. I do not suppose anybody in that vast crowd was less disturbed by the demonstration than myself. On the contrary, I felt a certain gloomy pride in having dared to do the right.³

In that one supreme moment of his Viceroyalty Curzon came closest to touching the hearts of the Indian populace who had also watched the white man's glee with sullen and

¹ Notes by the Viceroy in the Military Dept. CP. Vol.402.

² Curzon to Hamilton, Feb.12, 1903, CP. Vol.162.

³ Curzon to Hamilton, Jan.8, 1903, CP. Vol.162.

angry silence. The Army denounced the Viceroy for what they felt was lowering their prestige in Indian eyes. The public trial was looked upon as a blot on their fair name. Curzon was denounced by his own people as an Indian-lover. The Viceroy had let his own side down, as it were, to enhance his own image with the Opposition. But alas! this was hardly the case. Curzon failed to gather for himself the fund of goodwill in India that must have generated over his courageous stand. It might have stood him in good stead during the trials he was called upon to face during the latter part of his Viceroyalty. But then it might be interpreted as stooping to conquer and the Viceroy was not prepared to risk that. Besides, perhaps he derived some masochistic pleasure from allowing the 9th Lancers to insult him in public at the Delhi Durbar.