

DECEMBER 1857

Home
 Current Issue
 Archive
 Forum
 Site Guide
 Feedback
 Subscribe
 Search

Browse >>

- Books & Critics
- Fiction
- Food
- Foreign Affairs
- Language
- Poetry Pages
- Politics & Society
- Science & Technology
- Travel & Pursuits

The Indian Revolt

by Charles Creighton Hazewell

For the first time in the history of the English dominion in India, its power has been shaken from within its own possessions, and by its own subjects. Whatever attacks have been made upon it heretofore have been from without, and its career of conquest has been the result to which they have led. But now no external enemy threatens it, and the English in India have found themselves suddenly and unexpectedly engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle with a portion of their subjects, not so much for dominion as for life. There had been signs and warnings, indeed, of the coming storm; but the feeling of security in possession and the confidence of moral strength were so strong, that the signs had been neglected and the warnings disregarded.

No one in our time has played the part of Cassandra with more foresight and vehemence than the late Sir Charles Napier. He saw the quarter in which the storm was gathering, and he affirmed that it was at hand. In 1850, after a short period of service as commander-in-chief of the forces in India, he resigned his place, owing to a difference between himself and the government, and immediately afterwards prepared a memoir in justification of his course, accompanied with remarks upon the general administration of affairs in that country. It was written with all his accustomed clearness of mind, vigor of expression, and intensity of personal feeling, -- but it was not published until after his death, which took place in 1853, when it appeared under the editorship of his brother, Lieutenant-General Sir W. F. P. Napier, with the title of "Defects, Civil and Military, of the Indian Government." Its interest is greatly enhanced when read by the light of recent events. It is in great part occupied with a narrative of the exhibition of a mutinous spirit which appeared in

1849 in some thirty Sepoy battalions, in regard to a reduction of their pay, and of the means taken to check and subdue it. On the third page is a sentence which read now is of terrible import: "Mutiny with [among?] the Sepoys is the *most* formidable danger menacing our Indian empire." And a few pages farther on occurs the following striking passage: "The ablest and most experienced civil and military servants of the East India Company consider mutiny as one of the greatest, if not *the* greatest danger threatening India, -- a danger also that may come unexpectedly, and, if the first symptoms be not carefully treated, with a power to shake Leadenhall."

[Discuss this article in the Global Views forum of Post & Riposte.](#)

The anticipated mutiny has now come, its first symptoms were treated with utter want of judgment, and its power is shaking the whole fabric of the English rule in India.

[Return to Flashback: Indian Passages](#)

One day toward the end of January last, a workman employed in the magazine at Barrackpore, an important station about seventeen miles from Calcutta, stopped to ask a Sepoy for some water from his drinking-vessel. Being refused, because he was of low caste, and his touch would defile the vessel, he said, with a sneer, "What caste are you of, who bite pig's grease and cow's fat on your cartridges?" Practice with the new Enfield rifle had just been introduced, and the cartridges were greased for use in order not to foul the gun. The rumor spread among the Sepoys that there was a trick played upon them, -- that this was but a device to pollute them and destroy their caste, and the first step toward a general and forcible conversion of the soldiers to Christianity. The groundlessness of the idea upon which this alarm was founded afforded no hindrance to its ready reception, nor was the absurdity of the design attributed to the ruling powers apparent to the obscured and timid intellect of the Sepoys. The consequences of loss of caste are so feared, -- and are in reality of so trying a nature, -- that upon this point the sensitiveness of the Sepoy is always extreme, and his suspicions are easily aroused. Their superstitious and religious customs "interfere in many strange ways with their military duties." "The brave men of the 35th Native Infantry," says Sir Charles Napier, "lost caste because they did their duty at Jelalabad; that is, they fought like soldiers, and ate what could be had to sustain their strength for battle." But they are under a double rule, of religious and

of military discipline, -- and if the two come into conflict, the latter is likely to give way.

The discontent at Barrackpore soon manifested itself in ways not to be mistaken. There were incendiary fires within the lines. It was discovered that messengers had been sent to regiments at other stations, with incitements to insubordination. The officer in command at Barrackpore, General Hearsay, addressed the troops on parade, explained to them that the cartridges were not prepared with the obnoxious materials supposed, and set forth the groundlessness of their suspicions. The address was well received at first, but had no permanent effect. The ill-feeling spread to other troops and other stations. The government seems to have taken no measure of precaution in view of the impending trouble, and contented itself with despatching telegraphic messages to the more distant stations, where the new rifle practice was being introduced, ordering that the native troops were "to have no practice ammunition served out to them, but only to watch the firing of of the Europeans." On the 26th of February, the 19th regiment, then stationed at Berhampore, refused to receive the cartridges that were served out, and were prevented from open violence only by the presence of a superior English force. After great delay, it was determined that this regiment should be disbanded. The authorities were not even yet alarmed; they were uneasy, but even their uneasiness does not seem to have been shared by the majority of the English residents in India. It was not until the 3d of April that the sentence passed upon the 19th regiment was executed. The affair was dallied with, and inefficiency and dilatoriness prevailed everywhere.

But meanwhile the disaffection was spreading. The order for confining the use of the new cartridges to the Europeans seems to have been looked upon by the native regiments as a confirmation of their suspicions with regard to them. The more daring and evil-disposed of the soldiers stimulated the alarm, and roused the prejudices of their more timid and unreasoning companions. No general plan of revolt seems to have been formed, but the materials of discontent were gradually being concentrated; the inflammable spirits of the Sepoys were ready to burst into a blaze. Strong and judicious measures, promptly put into

action, might even now have allayed the excitement and dissipated the danger. But the imbecile commander-in-chief was enjoying himself and shirking care in the mountains; and Lord Canning and his advisers at Calcutta seem to have preferred to allow the troops to take the initiative in their own way. Generally throughout Northern India the common routine of affairs went on at the different stations, and the ill-feeling and insubordination among the Sepoys scarcely disturbed the established quiet and monotony of Anglo-Indian life. But the storm was rising, -- and the following extracts from a letter, hitherto unpublished, written on the 30th of May, by an officer of great distinction, and now in high command before Delhi, will show the manner of its breaking.

"A fortnight ago no community in the world could have been living in greater security of life and property than ours. Clouds there were that indicated to thoughtful minds a coming storm, and in the most dangerous quarter; but the actual outbreak was a matter of an hour, and has fallen on us like a judgment from Heaven, -- sudden, irresistible as yet, terrible in its effects, and still spreading from place to place. I dare say you may have observed among the Indian news of late months, that here and there throughout the country mutinies of native regiments had been taking place. They had, however, been isolated cases, and the government thought it did enough to check the spirit of disaffection by disbanding the corps involved. The failure of the remedy was, however, complete, and, instead of having to deal now with mutinies of separate regiments, we stand face to face with a general mutiny of the Sepoy army of Bengal. To those who have thought most deeply of the perils of the English empire in India this has always seemed the monster one. It was thought to have been guarded against by the strong ties of mercenary interest that bound the army to the state, and there was, probably, but one class of feelings that would have been strong enough to have broken these ties, -- those, namely, of religious sympathy or prejudice. The overt ground of the general mutiny was offence to caste feelings, given by the introduction into the army of certain cartridges said to have been prepared with hog's lard and cow's fat. The men must bite off the ends of these cartridges; so the Mahometans are defiled by the unclean animal, and the Hindoos by the

contact of the dead cow. Of course the cartridges are *not* prepared as stated, and they form the mere handle for designing men to work with. They are, I believe, equally innocent of lard and fat; but that a general dread of being Christianized has by some means or other been created is without doubt, though there is still much that is mysterious in the process by which it has been instilled into the Sepoy mind, and I question if the government itself has any accurate information on the subject.

"It was on the 10th of the present month [May] that the outburst of the mutinous spirit took place in our own neighborhood, -- at Meerut. The immediate cause was the punishment of eighty-five troopers of the 3d Light Cavalry, who had refused to use the obnoxious cartridges, and had been sentenced by a native court-martial to ten years' imprisonment. On Saturday, the 9th, the men were put in irons, in presence of their comrades, and marched off to jail. On Sunday, the 10th, just at the time of evening service, the mutiny broke out. Three regiments left their lines, fell upon every European, man, woman, or child, they met or could find, murdered them all, burnt half the houses in the station, and, after working such a night of mischief and horror as devils might have delighted in, marched off to Delhi en masse, where three other regiments ripe for mutiny were stationed. On the junction of the two brigades, the horrors of Meerut were repeated in the imperial city, and every European who could be found was massacred with revolting barbarity. In fact, the spirit was that of a servile war. Annihilation of the ruling race was felt to be the only chance of safety or impunity; so no one of the ruling race was spared. Many, however, effected their escape, and, after all sorts of perils and sufferings, succeeded in reaching military stations containing European troops. * * *

"From the crisis of the mutiny our local anxieties have lessened. The country round is in utter confusion. Bands of robbers are murdering and plundering defenceless people. Civil government has practically ceased from the land. The most loathsome irresolution and incapacity have been exhibited in some of the highest quarters. A full month will elapse before the mutineers are checked by any organized resistance. A force is, or is supposed to be, marching on

Delhi; but the outbreak occurred on the 10th of May, and this day is the first of June and Delhi has seen no British colors and heard no British guns as yet. * * *

"As to the empire, it will be all the stronger after this storm. It is not five or six thousand mutinous mercenaries, or ten times the number, that will change the destiny of England in India. Though we small fragments of the great machine may fall at our posts, there is that vitality in the English people that will bound stronger against misfortunes and build up the damaged fabric anew."

So far the letter from which we have quoted. -- It was not until the 8th of June that an English force appeared before the walls of Delhi. For four weeks the mutineers had been left in undisturbed possession of the city, a possession which was of incalculable advantage to them by adding to their moral strength the prestige of a name which has always been associated with the sceptre of Indian empire. The masters of Delhi are the masters not only of a city, but of a deeply rooted tradition of supremacy. The delay had told. Almost every day in the latter half of May was marked by a new mutiny in different military stations, widely separated from each other, throughout the North-Western Provinces and Bengal. The tidings of the possession of Delhi by the mutineers stimulated the daring madness of regiments that had been touched by disaffection. Some mutinied from mere panic, some from bitterness of hate. Some fled away quietly with their arms, to join the force that had now swelled to an army in the city of the Great Moghul; some repeated the atrocities of Meerut, and set up a separate standard of revolt, to which all the disaffected and all the worst characters of the district flocked, to gratify their lust for revenge of real or fancied wrongs, or their baser passions for plunder and unmeaning cruelty. The malignity of a subtle, acute, semi-civilized race, unrestrained by law or by moral feeling, broke out in its most frightful forms. Cowardice possessed of strength never wreaked more horrible sufferings upon its victims, and the bloody and barbarous annals of Indian history show no more bloody and barbarous page.

The course of English life in those stations where the worst

cruelties and the bitterest sufferings have been inflicted on the unhappy Europeans has been for a long time so peaceful and undisturbed, it has gone on for the most part in such pleasant and easy quiet and with such absolute security, that the agony of sudden alarm and unwarned violence has added its bitterness to the overwhelming horror. It is not as in border settlements, where the inhabitants choose their lot knowing that they are exposed to the incursions of savage enemies, -- but it is as if on a night in one of the most peaceful of long-settled towns, troops of men, with a sort of civilization that renders their attack worse than that of savages, should be let loose to work their worst will of lust and cruelty. The details are too recent, too horrible, and as yet too broken and irregular, to be recounted here.

Although, at the first sally of the mutineers from Delhi against the force that had at length arrived, a considerable advantage was gained by the Europeans, this advantage was followed up by no decisive blow. The number of troops was too small to attempt an assault against an army of thirty thousand men, each man of whom was a trained soldier. The English force was unprovided with any sufficient siege battery. It could do little more than encamp, throw up intrenchments for its own defence, and wait for attacks to be made upon it, -- attacks which it usually repulsed with great loss to the attackers. The month of June is the hottest month of the year at Delhi; the average height of the thermometer being 92 degrees. There, in such weather, the force must sit still, watch the pouring in of reinforcements and supplies to the city which it was too small to invest, and hear from day to day fresh tidings of disaster and revolt on every hand, -- tidings of evil which there could scarcely be any hope of checking, until this central point of the mutiny had fallen before the British arms. A position more dispiriting can scarcely be imagined; and to all these causes for despondency were added the incompetency and fatuity of the Indian government, and the procrastination of the home government in the forwarding of the necessary reinforcements.

Delhi has been often besieged, but seldom has a siege been laid to it that at first sight would have appeared more

desperate than this. The city is strong in its artificial defences, and Nature lends her force to the native troops within the walls. If they could hold out through the summer, September was likely to be as great a general for them as the famous two upon whom the Czar relied in the Crimea. A wall of gray stone, strengthened by the modern science of English engineers, and nearly seven miles in circumference, surrounds the city upon three sides, while the fourth is defended by a wide offset of the Jumna, and by a portion of the high, embattled, red stone wall of the palace, which almost equals the city wall in strength, and is itself more than a mile in length. Few cities in the East present a more striking aspect from without. Over the battlements of the walls rise the slender minarets and shining domes of the mosques, the pavilions and the towers of the gates, the balustraded roofs of the higher and finer houses, the light foliage of acacias, and the dark crests of tall date-palms. It is a new city, only two hundred and twenty-six years old. Shah Jehan, its founder, was fond of splendor in building, was lavish of expense, and was eager to make his city imperial in appearance as in name. The great mosque that he built here is the noblest and most beautiful in all India. His palace might be set in comparison with that of Aladdin; it was the fulfilment of an Oriental voluptuary's dream. All that Eastern taste could devise of beauty, that Eastern lavishness could fancy of adornment, or voluptuousness demand of luxury, was brought together and displayed here. But its day of splendor was not long; and now, instead of furnishing a home to a court, which, if wicked, was at least magnificent, it is the abode of demoralized pensioners, who, having lost the reality, retain the pride and the vices of power. For years it has been utterly given over to dirt and to decay. Its beautiful halls and chambers, rich with marbles and mosaics, its "Pearl" *musjid*, its delicious gardens, its shady summer-houses, its fountains, and all its walks and pleasure-grounds are neglected, abused, and occupied by the filthy retainers of an effete court.

The city stands partly on the sandy border of the river, partly on a low range of rocks. With its suburbs it may contain about one hundred and sixty thousand inhabitants, a little more than half of whom are Hindoos, and the remainder nominally Mahometans, in creed. Around the

wall stretches a wide, barren, irregular plain, covered, mile after mile, with the ruins of earlier Delhis, and the tombs of the great or the rich men of the Mahometan dynasty. There is no other such monumental plain as this in the world. It is as full of traditions and historic memories as of ruins; and in this respect, as in many others, Delhi bears a striking resemblance to Rome, -- for the Roman Campagna is the only field which in its crowd of memories may be compared with it, and the imperial city of India holds in the Mahometan mind much the same place that Rome occupies in that of the Christian.

Before these pages are printed it is not unlikely that the news of the fall of Delhi will have reached us. The troops of the besiegers amounted in the middle of August to about five thousand five hundred men. Other troops near them, and reinforcements on the way, may by the end of the month have increased their force to ten thousand. At the last accounts a siege train was expected to arrive on the 3d of September, and an assault might be made very shortly afterwards. But September is an unhealthy month, and there may be delays. *Delhi door ust*, -- "Delhi is far off," -- a favorite Indian proverb. But the chances are in favor of its being now in British hands.

[Note: It is earnestly to be hoped that the officers in command of the British force will not yield to the savage suggestions and incitements of the English press, with regard to the fate of Delhi. The tone of feeling which has been shown in many quarters in England has been utterly disgraceful. Indiscriminate cruelty and brutality are no fitting vengeance for the Hindoo and Mahometan barbarities. The sack of Delhi and the massacre of its people would bring the English conquerors down to the level of the conquered. Great sins cry out for great punishments, -- but let the punishment fall on the guilty, and not involve the innocent. The strength of English rule in India must be in her justice, in her severity, -- but not in the force and irresistible violence of her passions. To destroy the city would be to destroy one of the great ornaments of her empire, -- to murder the people would be to commence the new period of her rule with a revolting crime.

"For five days," says the historian, "Tamerlane remained a tranquil spectator of the sack and conflagration of Delhi and the massacre of its inhabitants, while he was celebrating a feast in honor of his victory. When the troops were wearied with slaughter, and nothing was left to plunder, he gave orders for the prosecution of his march, and on the day of his departure he offered up to the Divine Majesty the sincere and humble tribute of grateful praise."

"It is said that Nadir Shah, during the massacre that he had commanded, sat in gloomy silence in the little mosque of Roknu-doulah, which stands at the present day in the Great Bazaar. Here the Emperor and his nobles at length took courage to present themselves. They stood before him with downcast eyes, until Nadir commanded them to speak, when the Emperor burst into tears, and entreated Nadir to spare his subjects."]

With its fall the war will be virtually ended, -- for the reconquest of the disturbed territories will be a matter of little difficulty, when undertaken with the aid of the twenty thousand English troops who will arrive in India before the end of the year.

The settlement of the country, after these long disturbances, cannot be expected to take place at once; civil government has been too much interrupted to resume immediately its ordinary operation. But as this great revolt has had in very small degree the character of a popular rising, and as the vast mass of natives are in general not discontented with the English rule, order will be reestablished with comparative rapidity, and the course of life will before many months resume much of its accustomed aspect.

The struggle of the trained and ambitious classes against the English power will but have served to confirm it. The revolt overcome, the last great danger menacing English security in India will have disappeared. England will have learnt much from the trials she has had to pass through, and that essential changes will take place within a few years in the constitution of the Indian government there can be no doubt. But it is to be remembered that for the past thirty years, English rule in India has been, with all its

defects, an enlightened and beneficent rule. The crimes with which it has been charged, the crimes of which it has been guilty, are small in amount, compared with the good it has effected. Moreover, they are not the result of inherent vices in the system of government, so much as of the character of exceptional individuals employed to carry out that system, and of the native character itself. -- But on these points we do not propose now to enter.

If the close of this revolt be not stained with retaliating cruelties, if English soldiers remember mercy, then the whole history of this time will be a proud addition to the annals of England. For though it will display the incompetency and the folly of her governments, it will show how these were remedied by the energy and spirit of individuals; it will tell of the daring and gallantry of her men, of their patient endurance, of their undaunted courage, -- and it will tell, too, with a voice full of tears, of the sorrows, and of the brave and tender hearts, and of the unshaken religious faith supporting them to the end, of the women who died in the hands of their enemies. The names of Havelock and Lawrence will be reckoned in the list of England's worthies, and the story of the garrison of Cawnpore will be treasured up forever among England's saddest and most touching memories.

The Atlantic Monthly; December, 1857; The Indian Revolt; Volume 1, No. 2; pages 217-222

[Home](#) [Atlantic Unbound](#) [The Atlantic Monthly](#) [Post & Riposte](#) [Atlantic Store](#) [Search](#)