

The Indian Administration of Lord Cornwallis (1786-1793)

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The Governor-Generalship of India was given to Lord Cornwallis probably because of his connections with influential persons in English politics and administration. William Pitt, the Prime Minister of England, was his personal friend and so was Henry Dundas, the President of the Board of Control of the East India Company.¹ According to the Regulating Act of 1773, the Governor-General of India could not overrule the wishes of his Council if a majority of members voted against his decisions. In order to remove this curb on the Governor-General's authority, Pitt was able to move the Act of 1786 through the House of Commons giving the Governor-General the right to overrule the decisions of his Council. As a result, Cornwallis was given far greater authority than any other Governor-General who preceded him.² The reason for this was that the ministry of Pitt's predecessor, Lord North, had been overthrown by the success of the American war of independence. Lord North's successor, Lord Rockingham, quickly made peace with the Americans and recognized their independence at Paris in 1783. Pitt was able to rouse support against the administration and himself take office as Prime Minister in 1784. The loss of the American colonies led him and his associates to contemplate its compensation in the form of an Indian Empire. Another reason is to be discerned in the fact that Cornwallis was the British general fighting the Americans. He and his army were surrounded and compelled to surrender in Yorktown, Virginia, on 19 October 1781. It was probably felt that as a fighting man, Cornwallis could prove somewhat better in India than in America and in this opportunity for service, Cornwallis saw perhaps a chance to retrieve his reputation which had suffered severely as a result of his surrender in

¹ P.E. Roberts, *History of British India*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), p. 222. The Board of Control was the governing body of the East India Company with headquarters in London.

² *Ibid.*, p. 222.

America. Thus he had been given such overwhelming powers so that he could give his attention, without bureaucratic obstructions, to the British expansion in India.

Cornwallis was also the first Governor-General to be appointed without having had any previous experience in India.³

On arrival in India in 1786, Cornwallis first received a request from the Nawab of Oudh⁴ for the removal of the great many soldiers of the East India Company who had been stationed in Oudh ostensibly to 'protect' him but actually to promote British territorial aggrandizement. The entire expenses of the troops were defrayed by the Nawab. Cornwallis disregarded the request. He 'described the character of the Nabob as a pure compound of negligence and profusion. And though, at that time, Oudh was threatened with no particular danger, and the expense attending the continuance of the brigade at Futtyghur exceeded the sum which he was entitled to exact of the Nabob, he adhered to the resolution that the troops should not be removed'.⁵

Before leaving England, Cornwallis had been invited by the Directors of the Company to demand from the Nizam of Hyderabad⁶ the return of the Circar of Guntoor.⁷ Cornwallis did not immediately send the demand lest the Nizam contract an alliance with Tipu Sultan, the powerful ruler of Mysore.⁸ But the Nizam was jealous of Tipu and was ready to purchase the friendship of the foreigners. Observing this, Cornwallis sent an officer, Captain Kennaway, to the Court of the Nizam while simultaneously rushing troops into the area demanded. Mill describes the transaction thus:

No intimation was to be given to the Nizam of the proposed demand, till after the arrival of Captain Kennaway at his Court. The Government of Madras, under specious pretences, conveyed

³ A. Aspinall, *Cornwallis in Bengal* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1931), p. 7.

⁴ This was the state to the north-west of Bengal now forming part of the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh. 'Oudh' was to be written as 'Awadh', *Nawab* (Ang. *Nabob*) was the title of the ruler.

⁵ James Mill, *History of British India* (London: Longman, 1858), I-X, V, p. 222.

⁶ *Nizam* was the title of the ruler of Hyderabad. The state now forms part of the Indian province of Andhra.

⁷ Circar is an administrative district. Guntoor was one such district south of the Kistna River, in the Carnatic.

⁸ Mysore was a large state almost to the southern tip of the Indian peninsula. Under its brave rulers, Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan, it offered severe resistance to the British in the 18th century.

a body of troops to the neighbourhood of the Circar and held themselves in readiness to seize the territory before any other power could interpose, either with arms or remonstrance.⁹

Cornwallis now sought to engage Tipu Sultan in conflict. His first provocative act was to assure his ally, the Nizam, of adherence to the old treaty of 1768 which stipulated the supply of English troops to the Nizam on condition that they would not be used against the Company's allies. At that time, the country of Mysore was regarded as a joint enemy of the British and of the Nizam. But in 1784, the British signed the treaty of Mangalore with Tipu Sultan whereby the state of Mysore, ruled by Tipu Sultan was recognized as an ally of the Company. Cornwallis' proclaimed adherence to the 1768 treaty amounted to a unilateral annulment of the 1784 treaty and constituted an act of aggression. Cornwallis now saw the chance to commence hostilities by alleging that Tipu Sultan was attacking Travancore,¹⁰ an ally of the Company. The Sultan himself had no intention of waging war either against the Raja of Travancore or against the British. B.D. Basu writes:

From all accounts it appears that there was no desire on the part of Tipu to go to war with the English. As said before, Cornwallis was determined to find a pretext to make war on him.¹¹

Tipu Sultan even went to the extent of writing to the Madras government¹² suggesting negotiations even though the charges were unfounded. The Governor of Madras, John Holland, wrote to Cornwallis that Tipu Sultan had no intention to break with the Company and would be disposed to enter into negotiations for the adjustment of the points in dispute.¹³

Cornwallis, using his minion Council, removed the Governor of Madras from his post and replaced him with General Medows, a soldier who was better suited to serve Cornwallis' aggressive intentions. Cornwallis now wrote to Medows:

Good policy, as well as a regard to our reputation in this country, requires that we should not only exact severe reparation from Tippoo, but also, that we should take this opportunity to reduce

⁹ James Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 222.

¹⁰ A tiny state south of Mysore now part of Kerala.

¹¹ B.D. Basu, *Rise of the Christian Power in India*, (Calcutta: R. Chatterjee, 1931), p. 271.

¹² The second 'Presidency' in order of importance after Calcutta. The third was Bombay. The 'Madras government' refers to the British colonial administration at Fort St. George, Madras.

¹³ Quoted in Basu, *op. cit.*, p. 272.

the power of a Prince who avows upon every occasion so rancorous an enmity to our nation.¹⁴

The Nizam of Hyderabad and the Marathas,¹⁵ enemies of Tipu Sultan, entered into a triple alliance with the British in July, 1790, and immediately afterwards the war began.

Tipu Sultan was faced with a formidable three-pronged invasion. He first advanced against the British forces and defeated them. While they were in retreat towards Madras, he turned upon the Nizam-Maratha forces and rapidly disposed of them. The designs of the invaders were frustrated by the courage and good strategy of the Mysore forces. One of the contributory factors to the Sultan's success was that he had arranged for the breeding of a special strain of oxen called the 'Amrit Mahal' cattle which could travel thirty-five to forty miles a day while the cumbersome British army with its tents and trunks, women and servants could hardly travel ten miles a day.¹⁶

Cornwallis was appalled at the way things were going. He wrote to Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control of the East India Company, thus:

We have lost time and our adversary has gained reputation, which are two most valuable things in war.¹⁷

Cornwallis sailed from Calcutta to Madras and on 29 January 1791 personally took over command of the English forces. Since the war had been thrust upon him suddenly, Tipu Sultan had not had time to make large-scale preparations. Consequently, he did not engage Cornwallis in the field but followed a scorched-earth policy, retreating before him and harassing his troops with guerilla operations. Believing the Sultan to be weak, Cornwallis rapidly pursued him. Tipu Sultan vacated the city of Bangalore and crossed the mountains falling back on his capital, Seringapatam. Cornwallis, hot on his track, also crossed the mountains and arrived within sight of Seringapatam. He pushed forward hoping to capture the capital but just then, as Tipu Sultan had calculated, the heavy monsoon rains began. The supply lines over the mountains were cut off and the men were faced with starvation. Now Tipu Sultan,

¹⁴ James Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 243

¹⁵ The name given to Marhatti-speaking Hindu militant tribes spread over central and south India. They rose in importance after the weakening of the central authority at Delhi.

¹⁶ Meer Ibrahim, 'The Amrit Mahal Transport of Haider Ali' *Pakistan Times*, 23 February 1968, p.1.

¹⁷ Quoted by Majumdar, Raychaudhuri & Datta, *An Advanced History of India* (London: MacMillan & Co. Ltd., 1967), p. 679.

using his fresh troops, mounted severe attacks on the British forces. Cornwallis had no choice but to retreat as soon as he could. The nineteenth-century writer, L.B. Bowring, states:

Lord Cornwallis, finding his position no longer tenable and all communication cut off, destroyed his siege-train, threw his shot into the river, and burning his carts and tumbrels, retired on May 26 towards Bangalore Cornwallis' troops were half-starved and greatly suffered on their return eastward from the inclemency of the rainy season.¹⁸

Cornwallis remained at Bangalore from where he wrote to his son that he had grown old and rheumatic and had lost all spirit while he awaited the arrival of fresh troops.¹⁹ The first two campaigns against Tipu Sultan during the tenure of Cornwallis had ended in failure.

With the arrival of fresh troops, Cornwallis resumed hostilities and, after re-capturing the hill forts, encamped near Seringapatam. Tipu Sultan's limited resources, not being replenished by allies or a colonial empire, gave way and he was forced to open negotiations. According to the preliminary terms, Tipu Sultan was to cede half of his dominions to the British, pay an indemnity of three million pounds and surrender two of his minor sons, Abdul Khaliq and Muizzudin, as hostages. These terms were agreed to and the treaty was signed. But Cornwallis included the cession of the district of Coorg²⁰ in the treaty which 'clearly did not come within the precise language of the preliminary terms accepted'.²¹ The Sultan had paid a large part of the indemnity and sent in his sons before he realized that he also had to part with Coorg. The affairs in Mysore thus drifted towards an uneasy settlement.

As a civil administrator, Cornwallis is characterised by a xenophobic distrust of all Indian people. He rigorously excluded the natives from offices of responsibility. Soon after the assumption of office, he declared that he could not leave the criminal courts in Indian hands.²² He therefore appointed British judges only and combined the three offices of Magistrate, Civil Judge and Collector of Revenue in one person. As a result, the courts became congested and cases of all nature

¹⁸ L.B. Bowring, *Haider Ali and Tipu Sultan* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1893) p.158.

¹⁹ W.S. Seton-Kerr, *The Marquess Cornwallis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1890), p. 21.

²⁰ A small principality on the western Ghats in Malabar.

²¹ Vincent A. Smith, *The Oxford History of India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1922), p. 580.

²² A. Aspinall, *op. cit.*, p. 70.

accumulated. Business shows that sixty thousand lawsuits remained undecided, many for years.²³ In waiting for trials to commence, prisoners often suffered a longer term of imprisonment than was prescribed after conviction.²⁴ The British judges were unacquainted with local knowledge and thus themselves felt this. The Midnapore²⁵ judge declared: 'I am inclined to think that an intelligent native is better qualified to preside at a trial than we can ever be ourselves'.²⁶ But Cornwallis excluded the people from participation in government. 'I conceive,' he wrote, 'that all regulations for the reform of that (criminal) department would be useless and nugatory, whilst the execution of them depends upon any native whatever'.²⁷

Prior to the coming of the British, the Muslims and Hindus were subject to their personal law and were judged by learned men from both communities. Justice was dealt several hours each day and even on certain days by the Mughul Emperor in person. The British methods of litigation were unsuited to the Indian temperament. Mill has correctly observed:

For courts of law, provided for a people, among who justice had always been distributed in the method of simple and rational inquiry, was prescribed a course of procedure, loaded with minute formalities; rendered unintelligible, tedious and expensive, by technical devices.²⁸

The local policemen (darogas or thanadars) were given an area twenty miles square to control and were paid twenty-five rupees²⁹ a month. Due to the prevalence of crime in the Company's territories, the darogas were 'a terror to the well-disposed rather than to the evil-doers'.³⁰ The Bengal historian, Sir W.W. Hunter, states the same thing thus: 'The thanadars appear as frequently on the side of the banditti as on that of the authorities'.³¹ The same writer enumerates five defects of the

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²⁵ A district of Bengal west of Calcutta.

²⁶ A. Aspinall, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

²⁷ Quoted in Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 571.

²⁸ James Mill, *op. cit.*, p. 355.

²⁹ A rupee was the highest unit of currency. In those days, it possessed great purchasing power.

³⁰ Vincent A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 570.

³¹ W. W. Hunter, *The Annals of Rural Bengal* (London: Smith Elder & Co., 1883), p. 331.

police system of those days: disproportionate distribution, overwork, deceit, security from retribution, and lack of promotion.³²

The jails in British India during the tenure of Cornwallis were in a deplorable condition. They were ramshackle, insanitary and dangerous. In 1786, more men had died of disease in a single jail than were punished capitally throughout Bengal.³³ In 1791, 179 men were confined in a room 72 feet by 48 feet; at night their feet were locked in stocks and each prisoner was allowed a space of twenty-five inches. The floor, of damp earth, was filthy and most of the prisoners could scarce lift their chains. The room had only one door which was closed.³⁴ The jails, built of mud, straw and bamboo, were liable to be destroyed by storms or fire. Many of the Bangal jails were burnt between 1786 and 1793. In 1789, a fire in Chaplia jail killed 211 out of 444 prisoners.³⁵

The Permanent Settlement, one of Cornwallis' agrarian experiments, is now generally recognized as a failure.³⁶ Briefly, the Indian land revenue system presents these details: of the total agricultural produce, the state claims a share called the 'state demand' which, varied according to the quality of land, amount of produce, and the revenue policy of the Mughul emperors. When the East India Company began to acquire territory in India, it began to collect its revenue as well. This revenue was paid mostly in kind. It was assessed and collected by hereditary collectors who charged a small fee for their services. The original leases of land to the tenants were generally perpetual. If the state demand was willfully withheld, the revenue officials could imprison the peasant or forcibly harvest the state's share. But never did they disturb the arrangements that had been continuing for generations. In 1765, the East India Company received the *Diwani* of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa, i.e. the right to collect revenue from these three provinces.³⁷ Since then it had been collecting revenue in the traditional manner.

In his 'Permanent Settlement', Cornwallis presented his alternative to this mode of revenue collection. He argued that as the revenue varied due to variation in the amount of harvest, the income from this source was unpredictable. Also there was no incentive to increase production. If the revenue was fixed, the peasant would be

³² *Ibid.*, pp. 333-34.

³³ A. Aspinall, *op. cit.*, p. 114.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 115-16.

³⁶ For details, see Vincent A. Smith, *op. cit.*, pp. 561-70.

³⁷ '*Diwani*' is derived from '*diwan*' or ledger. Bihar and Orissa are contiguous to Bengal.

encouraged to increase production and keep the surplus. This would also have the effect of bringing down the price. The office of revenue collector would become redundant and valuable commission could be saved. If the revenue was not paid in time, the lands could be confiscated and put for auction.

The implementation of this settlement resulted in the peasant having to pay a fixed rate of revenue regardless of low yield. The land had to be divided and portions of it sold to keep up with the state demand. If payment was delayed by a day, the estates were sequestered and auctioned. The purchasers were generally selfish speculators who in turn re-sold the land for profit. Cultivation declined. Thousands of collectors, whose livelihood depended on their hereditary profession, were reduced to abject poverty. The Collector of Midnapore wrote in 1802 about the effects of the Permanent Settlement:

All say that such a harsh and oppressive system was never before resorted to in this country; that the custom of imprisoning landholders for arrears of revenue was, in comparison, mild and indulgent to them.³⁸

In matters of military administration, Cornwallis practiced the same discrimination which continued in the civil branch. Although Indian recruits formed the bulk of the British ranks, no Indian could obtain a position higher than of a *subahdar* which was as inferior to an ensign as an ensign to the command-in-chief.³⁹

At the end of a review of Cornwallis' Indian administration, we observe that he does not shine even if we begin by being entirely in his favour. His conduct in the battlefield indicates psychological urgings for redemption of the Yorktown surrender. He impoverished the agriculturists by his short-term logic. In affairs of law, the condition of courts, captives and jails was very poor. In administration, he branded all Indians as vile and dishonourable. The subjects had to mutely accept decrees from above and the spirit of participation was non-existent. On the other hand, he added to the Company's territory by his annexations under the Treaty of Seringapatam. He consolidated the Company's position in Oudh and Guntoor. In doing so, he had the support of the British government which had, at first, given him arbitrary powers. In fact, it was the support that caused him to be re-appointed as Governor-General at the conclusion of the term of the Marquess Wellesley. He came to India for the second time in July, 1805, but died in October of the same year and was buried near Calcutta.

³⁸ Quoted in Vincent A. Smith, *op. cit.*, p. 567.

³⁹ A. Aspinall, *op. cit.*, p. 175.