THE MUTINY OF THE BENGAL ARMY, AN HISTORICAL NARRATIVE, BY ONE WHO HAS SERVED UNDER SIR CHARLES NAPIER

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G. B. MALLESON

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THE MUTINY

OF

THE BENGAL ARMY.

An Historical Narrative.

BY ONE WHO HAS SERVED UNDER
SIR CHARLES NAPIER.

SIXTH THOUSAND.

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TO

THE LIVING AND THE DEAD—

THE LIVING EARL OF ELLENBOROUGH

AND

THE DEAD SIR CHARLES NAPIER,

WHO BOTH KNEW

HOW TO CHECK A MUTINY,

TO SELECT EFFICIENT PUBLIC SERVANTS,

AND TO GAIN THE AFFECTIONS OF THOSE OVER WHOM THEIR

SWAY EXTENDED,

These Pages are Dedicated.

India, July 2, 1857.

INTRODUCTION.

I PURPOSE to write an historical narrative of the rise, progress, and termination of the mutiny and revolt of the Bengal Army. It will be my object to expose, in the first instance, the causes of the disaffection, to state then the consequences to which that disaffection led, and to conclude by pointing out the remedies which ought to be adopted to ensure the country against a repetition of the fearful outrages that have disgraced it. As my object is simply to present to my countrymen in England a true account of this awful disaster, and of all the causes which, either directly or indirectly, have led to it, I shall be deterred by no feeling of favour or affection for any individual from speaking out as the occasion demands, awarding praise where praise has been earned, but not shrinking from denouncing those whose conduct has at all contributed to the rise and progress of the mutiny.

It will, I think, be advisable in the first instance, for the benefit of non-professional readers, to present a slight sketch of the organisation and interior economy of a Bengal Infantry Regiment, more especially as on the maintenance or entire abrogation of the existing system the future discipline and efficiency of the army will depend.

Organisation of a Bengal Regiment.—A Regiment of Infantry on the Bengal Establishment is composed of 1000 privates, 120 non-commissioned officers, and 20 native commissioned officers. It is divided into ten companies, each containing 100 privates, 2 native commissioned, and 12 non-commissioned, officers. The regiment is never quartered in barracks, but in lines—such lines consisting of ten rows of thatched huts—one being apportioned to each company. In front of each of these rows is a small circular building, in which the arms and accoutrements are stored, after having been cleaned and the key of which is generally in the possession of the havildar (sergeant) on duty. Promotion invariably goes by seniority, and the commanding officer of a regiment has no power to pass over any man, without representing the fact to the Commander-in-Chief. A Sepoy, then, who may enter the service at the age of 16, cannot count on finding himself a naick (corporal) before he attains the age of 36, a sergeant (havildar) at 45, a jemadar (native lieutenant) at

54, and a subahdar (native captain) at 60.* By the time he has attained the age of 50, a native may generally be considered as utterly useless. The blood in his veins and the marrow in his bones have been dried up or wasted by constant exposure to the trying climate of India; his energies are relaxed, his memory impaired, and in governing and controlling the men who are especially under his surveillance in the lines, he can be of but little use to his European superior.

Caste.—But there is a principle at work, unknown to the European soldiers, which operates with tremendous force on the mind of the native, and either essentially adds to, or vitally detracts from, the authority of the native officer. This principle is *caste*. Now the predominating race in a Bengal regiment is the Hindoo; the followers of that religion, as a general rule, being to the Mahomedans in the proportion of five to one. A regiment, a thousand strong, will therefore be found to contain about eight hundred Hindoos. Of these it often happens that more than four hundred are Brahmins or priests, about two hundred Rajpoots (a high caste, but lower than the Brahminical order), and the rest of a lower caste.

The Brahmins are the most influential, as they are the most bigoted of the whole race of Hindoos. In their mythological tales the gods themselves are constantly made to do penance and propitiation to this superior order. As these tales form the only kind of literature circulated amongst the Hindoos, and as the acts they record, however absurd they may appear to the educated, are implicitly believed, it is not to be wondered at that the Brahmins are the objects of veneration to the other castes. "The feet of a holy man are like the waters of life," is a proverb which gains implicit credence from all classes, and is at the same time practically acted upon. His curse is dreaded as a fate worse than death itself, whilst his protection is earnestly sought after by means of small presents, and of what to them is more valuable, constant prostrations or salaams publicly performed, so as to show the world the extent of the belief in their mighty power. When it is considered that in each regiment of the Bengal Army there are several of these men, in many regiments from three to four hundred, the mighty influence they have in their power to exert for good or evil may be imagined.

The manner in which this influence can be brought to bear on the discipline of a regiment may be easily conceived. We will suppose that one company is composed of 20 Mahomedans, 40 Brahmins, and 40 Rajpoots and lower-caste Hindoos. The influence of the Brahmins over the 80 Hindoos is paramount, and the Mahomedans being a small minority, would not contest the palm with them. The whole company may, therefore, be said to be under Brahminical influence.

* These are the extreme ages. In the regiments engaged in the Affghanistan, Sutlej, and Punjab campaigns, promotion has been attained at much earlier ages than are here set down

If a low-caste Hindoo happened at the time to fill the responsible post of subahdar, he would be entirely under the spiritual guiding of the Brahminical clique. Were a mutiny hatching in the lines, he would not dare to divulge it, from the fear of a penalty more dreadful even than death — excommunication.

It is very evident, therefore, that by means of this pernicious system of caste, the men of a Bengal regiment, though nominally subject to the British Crown, are really under the orders and control of a Brahminical clique, formed in each regiment, constantly corresponding with one another, and acting without any sense of responsibility whatever.

European Officers.—Hitherto it has been supposed that the example of, and association with their European officers, have done more than anything else to loosen the power of caste. And it has undoubtedly been proved that on many trying occasions, especially during the Affghanistan war, when the Sepoys were exposed to more than ordinary trials, these men, generally so tenacious, have forgotten their prejudices, and have infringed many of their strictest precepts. It was in Affghanistan that the Sepoy earned the character given of him by Major D'Arcey Todd, of Herat renown, that "he would go anywhere, and do anything, if led by an officer in whom he had confidence." He earned and deserved that character in that rude country. Removed from the influences which hourly thrust themselves upon him in India, he was in Affghanistan a different and a far more useful being; but the moment he returned, he indued his prejudices at once, and became again the bigoted, relentless Brahmin. Still, even upon him then, the example of his officer had a certain influence. That is to say, he was prompt to recognise a daring, chivalrous nature, and to pay a sort of homage, not unmixed with fear, to high intellectual powers. Where an officer was at all lax in the performance of his duty, the Sepoy was certain to be lax also; and in cases where a stern strictness was unaccompanied by an occasional warmth, a good word off duty, or an inclination to patronise their sports, the officer was obeyed, but uncared for. Twenty-six officers make up the complement of a native regiment, but of these nearly half were generally absent, and there were seldom more than fifteen present at head-quarters. For the management of a regiment under Brahminical control, as all Bengal regiments are, this number is amply sufficient in times of peace. That is to say, the management is not affected by the mere number. In fact, the conduct of Irregular regiments, which possess only three officers, has always contrasted so favourably with that of Line regiments, with their fourteen or fifteen, that the natural conclusion one would arrive at is, that the latter are over-officered.

The officers live in bungalows, or thatched houses, near the lines of their regiments, but too far off to enable them to have any direct control over the movements of their men during the day; and for eight months of the year at least, the weather is too warm to allow them to ride out, except in the morning and evening. In order, however, to have the whole regiment under constant European supervision, two