

**THE BENGAL  
REVERSION: ANOTHER  
"EXCEPTIONAL CASE."**

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The Bengal Reversion: Another "Exceptional Case." by Evans Bell

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Library of  
CALIFORNIA

BY

MAJOR EVANS BELL,

AUTHOR OF "THE MYSORE REVERSION," "THE OXUS AND THE INDUS," ETC.

"If in the pride of our power, we ever forget the means by which it has been attained, and, casting away all our harvest of experience, are betrayed by a rash confidence in what we may deem our intrinsic strength to neglect those collateral means by which the great fabric of our power in India has hitherto been supported, we shall with our own hands precipitate the downfall of our authority."

SIR JOHN MALCOLM.

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1872.

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**HENRY MORSE STEPHENS**

## INTRODUCTION.

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THE first actual outbreak of the Indian mutiny in 1857 took place at Berhampore, a military station on the banks of the Ganges about a hundred miles North of Calcutta. Sir John Kaye informs us that the place was "well suited by its position for the development of the desired results."

"For only a few" (five) "miles beyond it lay the city of Moorsshedabad, the home of the Nawab Nazim of Bengal, the representative of the line of Soubahdars, who, under the Imperial Government, had once ruled that great Province. It was known that the Nawab, who, though stripped of his ancestral power, lived in a Palace with great wealth and titular dignity and the surroundings of a Court, was rankling under a sense of indignities put upon him by the British Government, and that there were thousands in the city who would have risen at the signal of one who, weak himself, was yet strong in the prestige of a great name. At Berhampore there were no European troops; there were none anywhere near to it. A Regiment of Native Infantry, the Nineteenth, was stationed there, with a corps of Irregular Cavalry, and a battery of post guns manned by Native gunners. It was not difficult to see that if these troops were to rise against their English officers, and the people of Moorshedabad were to fraternise with them in the name of the Nawab, all Bengal would soon be in a blaze. No

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thoughts of this kind disturbed the minds of our people, but the truth was very patent to the understanding of their enemies."

The historian relates how the routine-action of our Government favoured the growth of the evil,—how detachments from the most disaffected Regiments of all came in succession to Berhampore "to spread by personal intercourse the great contagion of alarm," and were received by their comrades of the Nineteenth "open-armed and open-mouthed." He describes the state of excitement and panic—"so often the prelude of dangerous revolt,"—into which the station and its neighbourhood were thrown, and finally explains how the "hostile combinations, by which the mutiny of a Regiment might have been converted into the rebellion of a Province," were, at this time and place, baffled and overthrown.

"Under the guidance of Colonel George Macgregor, the Nawab Nazim of Bengal threw the weight of his influence into the scale on the side of order and peace; and whatsoever might have been stirring in the hearts of the Mussulman population of Moorshedabad, in the absence of any signal from their Chief, they remained outwardly quiescent."\*

The "indignities" that are very naturally supposed to have been "rankling" in the heart of the Nawab were not of distant date, and he had then very little prospect or hope of redress. Lord Dalhousie, in 1853, had pronounced the Nawab guilty of allowing "a monstrous outrage upon humanity" to be "perpetrated under his very eyes," on the mere assumption that his Highness must have been cognizant of whatever occurred in his hunting encampment, even when he was absent from it. A petty theft having been committed in the camp, two persons, a

\* *The Sepoy War*, vol. 1, chapter iv, p. 498-508.



boy and a beggar, were seized by the man who had been robbed, and violent measures were adopted by him and his companions to extort a confession and recover the goods. The two poor creatures were most cruelly beaten, and died a few days afterwards, and in the words of General Colin Mackenzie, who was Agent at Moorshedabad in 1858, and who carefully analysed the case in a report to Government,—“it is in the highest degree probable that they died from the beating, but there is no positive proof that they did so.” Several servants of the Nawab were tried on a charge of complicity in this murder—one of them, Aman Ali Khan, being a confidential chamberlain,—and were acquitted. The guilty parties were convicted and condemned. Lord Dalhousie, in defiance of the solemn verdict of the highest Court of Justice in India, decided that Aman Ali Khan, who had been acquitted, *was guilty*, and that the act of his Highness in agreeing with the Sudder Nizamut by believing him innocent, was a proof of his favour and affection for a murderer. He called for an explanation, but the expressions he used in so doing sufficiently show that he had made up his mind not only as to the guilt of the acquitted persons, but as to that of the Nawab Nazim himself. The Nawab Nazim was required to state “why he failed to exert his authority to prevent the perpetration of so outrageous a crime, *almost in his very presence*”, thus taking for granted that his Highness had known all about it.

The Nawab sent in an explanation which any impartial person would consider amply sufficient, but which Lord Dalhousie declared to be “most unsatisfactory”. In reply to Lord Dalhousie’s inquiry “why he continued to show favour and countenance to those who” (in his Lordship’s opinion, not in that of the Judges) “were concerned in the murder,” the Nazim naturally replied that

“when they were acquitted by the Sudder Court, after being so strictly tried, *I really thought them to be not guilty.*” The Nawab was peremptorily required by the Governor-General “to dismiss them altogether from his service,” and to “hold no further communication with any of them.” The Agent, Colonel Macgregor, was required to “report within one week” whether “this requisition had been complied with or not.”

We shall quote one more passage from the Narrative of 1858 by General Colin Mackenzie.

“His Highness had an undoubted right to be of the same opinion as the Sudder Nizamut, but this Lord Dalhousie would by no means permit, and being in the only position in the world in which a British Sovereign or subject can punish those who have been legally acquitted, he decided that the eunuchs were guilty, and punished his Highness for believing them innocent, not only by depriving him of air and exercise, and of his right to have his travelling expenses paid from the Deposit Fund, but by recommending to the Court of Directors to diminish his Highness’s stipend, to take away the salute of nineteen guns due to his rank as the acknowledged equal and brother of the Governor-General, or at least to diminish it to thirteen, ‘so that the Nawab should no longer receive in public as he now does, higher honours than the Members of the Supreme Government of India!’ He even declined to comply with an indent for military stores required for the Nazim’s use, and brought in a Bill depriving his Highness, his family and relations, including the ladies, of all immunities and rights which had been secured to them by Treaties, by pledges from successive Governors-General, and by no less than four Acts of Council.”

At this period Lord Dalhousie’s influence with the Home Government was unbounded; his word was law. The Nawab’s remonstrances were of no avail. The Court of Directors sanctioned all Lord Dalhousie’s proposals except that of abolishing the salute,—“it appeared sufficient that the number of guns be altered from nineteen to thirteen,”—and that of reducing his Highness’s income.

In 1859, as a reward for the Nawab’s “numerous and valuable services rendered to the British Government

during the Sonthal rebellion in 1855, and at the more serious crisis which followed, the mutiny of the Bengal army in 1857," the public honours due to his Highness were replaced on their former scale, and the restrictions and deprivations imposed by Lord Dalhousie were wholly removed; but the immunity from certain legal processes previously enjoyed by the Nawab and the ladies of his family was not restored, the Governor-General considering that such a step would have "undesirable consequences", and would not be so advantageous to the Nawab as he supposed. In Lord Canning's letter, announcing the good news, the Nawab was assured that the Minute on the subject by the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, "recorded in the archives of the Government, will serve as a perpetual remembrance of your Highness's active and zealous support, and of the firm friendship which exists between your Highness and the British Government".\*

The Nawab having now been reinstated very much on the old footing, it was, doubtless, expected by the authorities at Calcutta that, under a proper sense of these unexampled concessions, he would rest and be thankful. But the evil effects of an iniquitous act are not so easily dispelled. The Nawab was relieved from the personal indignity and the restraint over his movements ordained by Lord Dalhousie, but the charge of privity to a murder and of harbouring and favouring the murderers, which had been used as the pretext for these penalties, was not withdrawn or modified. The Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Frederick Halliday, on whose Minute Lord Canning's measures of recompense were based, had concurred in 1853, as a Member of Council, in Lord Dalhousie's condemnation of the Nawab. He had thus pre-

\* *Return to the House of Lords, Honours and Rewards to Native Princes* (77 of 1860), p. 163.