

**THE LAW AND CUSTOM OF  
SLAVERY IN BRITISH INDIA, IN A  
SERIES OF LETTERS TO THOMAS  
FOWELL BUXTON, ESQ.**

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The law and custom of slavery in British India, in a series of letters to Thomas Fowell Buxton, esq. by William Adam

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**WILLIAM ADAM**

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OF  
SLAVERY IN BRITISH INDIA,

IN A SERIES OF LETTERS TO  
THOMAS FOWELL BUXTON, ESQ.

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BY WILLIAM ADAM.

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"A *vis inertiae*, hostile to all change, seems inherent in the local governments of India."—"Responsibility is avoided by following the beaten track, and silence is the safest reply to those who propose a deviation from it, even for the sake of humanity. The outcry raised in India against the author was long powerless, until it received reinforcement from the British shore; and that against slavery will continue disorganised, unless it receives support from all the sources of the home government."—*A. D. Campbell, Esq., late Member of the Board of Revenue at Madras.*

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## LETTER I.

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TO THOMAS POWELL BUXTON, ESQ.

Introduction—Hindu Law of Slavery—Muhammadan Law of Slavery  
—British Law of Slavery.

SIR,—Having been requested by a benevolent institution in Boston to deliver a public lecture on some subject connected with India, I thought of presenting a view of the state of slavery in that country, a subject to which I had paid some attention while resident there; but on preparing a memorandum of the materials I possessed for such a purpose, I found that they far exceeded the limits of a single discourse. I therefore selected another topic, and resolved, as my leisure might permit, to bring under full review the whole subject of slavery in British India, and to take some other mode or occasion of drawing public attention to its details. I now propose to submit to you the results of my inquiries, observations, and reflections.

My primary design is to co-operate with a society which has lately been established in England, called the British India Society, the objects of which are to collect and communicate information respecting India, to excite an interest in the welfare of its people, and to promote measures for their protection and improvement. By the force of circumstances I have been separated both from India and England, but my thoughts are constantly reverting to both countries, and I shall be in some measure satisfying equally the affec-



tions of my heart and my convictions of duty in contributing my aid to give a right direction to the efforts of that association.

There are various reasons which encourage me to prosecute the consideration of this subject. Slavery is indeed only one of many evils under which India suffers, and I will even admit that its operation is less extensive and its effects less injurious than some other evils that I could mention. But it is of such a nature that, while it exists and wherever it exists, it checks the improvement of human character and the development of human society; aids all other bad influences and impedes all good influences; and its removal, therefore, will not only remove a large amount of positive injustice, degradation, and suffering, but is essential to the free and salutary working of every other measure that may or can be devised for the advancement of mankind in the country where it prevails. This is the inherent and radical attraction of the subject; but there are also collateral and subordinate inducements to bring it before the public.

Slavery in India has not received, and, as far as I am aware, is not likely to receive, the attention of the benevolent society to which I have referred, unless by some such means as that which I am employing. Even in India it has excited so little active discussion, that I have known its very existence denied by generally well-informed persons, although in certain parts of the country it is found in its most aggravated forms. In England, the subject is not known or publicly recognised as one affecting the welfare of India or the honor of Great Britain; and it even seems to be generally assumed, since the abolition of slavery in the British West Indies, that it has ceased to exist throughout the British dominions, although it may be shown that the number of slaves in the East Indies, under the authority of the British government, is probably as

great as the number of those who have been emancipated in the West Indies. I say that the number is probably as great, because, since there has been no complete census of the population in India, much less a registry of slaves, it is impossible to speak of their number with certainty or precision. But if there is even only half or quarter so many, it is proper that the facts of the case should be known, that all undue exultation and vaunting may be repressed, and that the necessary impulse may be given to the friends of humanity in England to complete the work which they have only begun. Slavery may not be the greatest—I will admit, if required, that it is the least—of the evils tolerated or inflicted by the British government of India; but if the pre-occupation of the public mind with this subject in relation to other countries has qualified the Christian world to judge of the facts belonging to it in relation to India, it is justifiable, it is obligatory on the well-wishers of that country to avail themselves of this advantage in the existing state of the public sentiment, in order to fix attention on the condition, the wants, and the interests of a people whose numbers alone constitute them an important division of the population of the world; and whose distance, whose isolation, whose ignorance, and superstition and degradation, whose uncomplaining helplessness, shut them out from the ordinary sympathies of mankind. There will be this advantage also in taking what may be called low ground, that if slavery in India, such as on indubitable authority I shall depict it to you, is the least of the evils under which that country groans, you will be the better able by this standard to judge of the greater evils under which it suffers.

There is another point of view in which the exposition of this subject may be attended with advantage. Great Britain, by an extraordinary combination of circumstances, has established her dominion over a hundred millions of

people in India, and her influence over at least fifty millions more, and the civilized world is entitled to know for what purposes of good or of evil such an unexampled power is exercised. The British Crown and Parliament, by an act passed in 1833, have delegated the sovereignty of India, for a period of twenty years, to a corporation of private citizens, exercising their authority through a board of directors, and the people of England are specially bound to inquire and to judge how this grave trust is fulfilled. England, in establishing the existing system of government for India, may be discharging her duty to the world, or she may not; and the East India Company, in the administration of that system, may be discharging her duty to England, or she may not. But neither the negative nor the affirmative can be determined by indiscriminate censure or praise; it can be ascertained only by a dispassionate examination of details, and by an impartial estimate of the spirit and character of the British Indian government and administration, and every honest and well-meant contribution to such an object may aid in arriving at a right conclusion. The question of slavery in India certainly covers only a very small portion of the whole ground, but it does cover a portion in itself not insignificant, and when the judgment of the world is pronounced on England, or that of England on the East India Company, it will not be difficult to show that it is no unimportant item in the account.

It may perhaps be deemed that here the agitation of the subject of slavery in India is inappropriate, and that it will do no good, and may do some harm. I certainly feel that what I have to say will establish a charge of inconsistency against England, tending to lessen the force of her example in the West Indies, and to furnish a temporary triumph to the friends of slavery in this country. This triumph, however, will only be temporary, for the agitation of the subject cannot fail to lead to the removal of the evil; and whatever