AN EXPERIMENTAL PERIOD IN THE HISTORY OF THE BRITISH IN INDIA

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I. INTRODUCTION

The period between 1765–93 is a momentous one in the history of the British in India. The East India Company which was till then in a formative stage, had to devise a suitable method of administration at least in those regions where its authority had been recognised. A number of factories had come into existence. These factories offered security to the natives in the disturbed state of the country. As Prof. Dodwell observes, “Life and fortune were insecure in Indian States. They were threatened by invasion from without and the severity of the tax-gatherer within. The Company’s chief settlements offered an asylum to which Indians were glad to escape.”¹ The policy of Clive in Bengal ultimately decided that the Company should become a political power. It could no longer remain merely as a commercial concern. The Nawabs of Bengal had now become mere puppets in the hands of the Company’s servants. There was great disorder throughout the country. Centrifugal forces, which are the bane of India, had begun to assert themselves. That gave an excellent opportunity for the Company to become supreme. It was in Bengal that the foundation of the Indian Empire was laid. In the words of Romesh Dutt, “The feeble descendant of the Emperor of Delhi was now a homeless wanderer, but was still recognised as the titular Sovereign of India. All the kings and chiefs in the vast continent still owed nominal allegiance to him; all pretended to derive from him their power in the Kingdoms and Provinces which they conquered by force of arms. Clive imitated this example. He had conquered Bengal by force of arms in 1757; in 1765 he obtained from the Emperor of Delhi a charter making the East India Company the Dewan or Administrators of that province. The East India Company thus obtained a legal status, and also formally took upon themselves the responsibility of administering the province which they had conquered eight years before.”²

II. OBJECT OF THE COMPANY

The Company suddenly secured possession of a ready-made Empire, but there was no ready-made plan of administration, suitable and workable

¹ India, Prof. Dodwell, Part I, pp. 62–3.
² Economic History of British India, p. 5.
for the whole country. The second half of the 18th century was a period of experiments, investigations and enquiries. During this period of transition many blunders were committed by the officials of the Company. But they were actuated with a sincere desire to secure the well-being of the people, especially of the peasantry. The abundance of material collected in Bengal acted as a beacon-light to the future administration of the country. As Sir W. W. Hunter observes, "they (the settlement reports) disclose the complicated evils that rendered our accession, for some time, an aggravation rather than a mitigation of the sufferings of the people. They unfold one after another the misapprehensions and disastrous vacillations amid which our first solid progress was made. They impartially retain the evidence of low motives and official incompetence side by side with the impress of rare devotion and administrative skill. But taken as a whole, they reveal the secret of England's greatness in the East. They exhibit a small band of our countrymen going forth to govern an unexplored and a half-subdued territory. Before the grave heroism and masterful characters of these men the native mind succumbed. Our troops originated for us a rude Mahratta-like supremacy; but the rural records attest that the permanent sources of the English ascendancy in Bengal have been, not their brilliant military successes, but the deliberate Civil courage and indomitable will."3

III. ADMINISTRATIVE EXPERIMENTS

A series of administrative experiments were made. Not all of them proved successful. But the moment they were found unworkable, they were given up. Mistakes committed were frankly admitted. A keen desire was exhibited to understand the traditions of the people. The people were made to feel that change of masters was for their own good. They began to realise that the Company was actuated with high motives and that, after all stability and progress would come to prevail. It is in this respect that this period of error and trial sets an example to any new type of administration.

(a) The Diwani arrangement of Clive was the first of such experiments. "It was essentially as revenue Collectors that the English entered into the actual occupation of the country, and it was the exigencies of the revenue service that compelled them to elaborate a system of Government, and extrude the native sovereignty by a long process of exhausting its functions. The history of revenue administration is thus the backbone of the history of the English occupation of Bengal."4 The Company was averse to the

3 Annals of Rural Bengal, pp. 8-9.
4 Introduction to the Fifth Report, Firingher, p. iii.
acquisition of "territory" or "possession". As far as possible, there should be no interference in the affairs of the native powers. The Court of Directors wrote to the servants in Bengal on 16th February 1721, "Remember, we are not fond of much territory, especially if it lies at a distance from you or is not pretty near the water-side nor indeed of any, unless you have a moral assurance if it will contribute directly to our real benefit." They were unwilling to accept the responsibility of Government. The Divani arrangement of Clive was no new thing. It was merely a further extension of the principle which had already existed. The Divani conferred upon its owner the right to collect and administer all the revenues of the province, and Clive prevailed upon the Emperor, Shah Alam to confer this momentous power upon the East India Company. The Company, in theory, became the Mogul's revenue agent for the provinces of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. The Divani by Indian tradition, carried with it a share of civil jurisdiction. This would mean assumption of direct responsibility for at least one aspect of the Government. But Clive did not want to take up this responsibility. The direct collection of the revenue, and the civil jurisdiction associated with it were not undertaken by the Company. This meant power without responsibility. It was almost impossible at first to have taken over the full management, because of the limited number of the Company's servants and their ignorance of the task of administration. Open assumption of the Government of Bengal by the British would have caused a breach with other European powers. "All power had in effect been transferred from the Subahdar of Bengal to the English East India Company; but the lenient hand of time was necessary to soften that disgust, and quiet that alarm, which foreign nations, as well as the natives, might naturally conceive upon so great a change." The Select Committee's correspondence with the Court of Directors shows how the Company felt that it had to shoulder a great responsibility and how the direct administration of the country was only a question of time. "The time now approaches when we may be able to determine, with some degree of certainty, whether our remaining as merchants, subject to the jurisdiction, encroachments, and insults of the Government, or supporting your privileges and possessions by the sword, are likely to prove most advantageous to the Company. Whatever may be the consequence, certain it is, that after having once begun, and proceeded to such lengths, we have been forced to go on, step by step, until your whole possessions were put to the risk by every revolution effected, and by every


battle fought. To apply a remedy to these evils, by giving stability and permanency to your Government, is now and has been the constant object of the serious attention of your Select Committee." At any moment the Company could declare itself as the rulers of Bengal. But the time for doing so was not yet opportune. Clive expressed the same sentiment when he recognized that "it is scarcely hyperbole to say that tomorrow the whole Moghal Empire is in our power." Harry Verelst, in his farewell speech to the members of his Council, struck the same note of caution and moderation in extending the power and influence of the Company. "There is a rock, and a dangerous one, which requires the greatest circumspection to avoid. We have stepped forth beyond all former precedent or example..... If we were before the change, cautious of interfering with the native Government, and of awakening the jealousy of foreign nations, we ought now to redouble our prudence. There is, however, a middle way, where moderation must guide and continue us, where we may walk with safety, advantage, and consistence, without danger of too much confinement or too much liberty. Exteriors should be regarded as essentials. Every order should scrupulously wear the sanction of native Government. Our dependence on its indulgencies, our obedience to its commands, our delicacy to its ministers, should appear most conspicuous in all transactions, either of business or ceremony." The English had sucked the orange dry, leaving only the skin and the pulp behind on the table in order to delude the other foreign guests in Bengal into the idea that the English had not as yet devoured anything worth-eating. Whatever may be the defects of the Diwani, so far as English interests in India were concerned, it offered the necessary security. Quietly and steadily, the Company grew from strength to strength and in the end it was recognised as the sole authority in the country. It must be acknowledged that the Company's officers toiled hard and obtained a knowledge of the conditions of the Land Revenue Assessment and Collection. The Senior Revenue Officers at Headquarters in Calcutta were all trained in the districts in the practical side of the work. Not a single subject of fiscal legislation nor a detail in the agricultural economy of each district escaped enquiry. We get an insight into the tenure of the landholders, tenure of the cultivators, price of all sorts of country produce, the rent of various qualities of land, mineral products of the districts, condition of the artisans and manufacturers, native currency and system of exchange, the

9 Quoted in Introduction to the V Report, op. cit., p. XII.
10 Introduction to the V Report, op. cit., p. clviii.
native system of police, state of the district jail, cesses, tolls, dues, etc.

"In a word, the whole fabric of the rural life of Bengal, with its joys, sorrows and manifold oppressions, is dissected and laid bare." 11

(b) The Amini Report is a document of first-class importance. It is a comprehensive collection of materials for the settlement of the land revenue in Bengal. The Report, published in 1778, gives an account of the method of assessment of revenue in Bengal in the time of the Moghals. It gives a background to the system of revenue administration which prevailed before the establishment of British Power in Bengal. In the words of Ramsbotham, it is "an enduring monument of the work done by British Officers of the Company whose services were never acknowledged by the 'Hon'ble Employees' and on whom the limelight of public recognition never fell." 12

(c) The appointment of Supervisors followed when it was felt that the Company had to take up the responsibility of governing its growing possessions in the country. The district of Burdwan had been taken under the direct control of the Company. The collection of revenue had been done in a satisfactory manner by the Officers of the Company. Verelst put into execution a plan for establishing English "Supervisors" in each of the more important districts belonging to the Diwani portion. In 1769, Supervisors were appointed from among the covenanted servants of the Company to every district or province in the new territory. They had to prevent oppression and to keep an eye upon the working of the courts of justice. They were instructed to display "those national principles of honour, faith, rectitude and humility, which should ever characterise the name of an Englishman." 13 Though it was well meant, the experiment did not prove successful. The Supervisors lacked administrative experience and the task assigned to them was stupendous and varied. Accounts were often purposely made confused and intricate. Necessary information was withheld. It led to secreting relevant documents, intrigues and chicanery. In these circumstances, Warren Hastings had to reform the abuses and the office of the Collector came into existence. "Mr. Verelst's idea, adopted and developed by his successors remains to this day, the framework of district administration in India, and the comments of Mr. Hastings are not justified....by his own subsequent achievement in revenue administration. The questions which the supervisors and the first collectors were called upon to decide were the problems that baffled Hastings, Shore and Cornwallis;

11 Annals of Rural Bengal, p. 10.
12 Studies in the Land Revenue History of Bengal, 1769-87, pp. 96-7.
that produced such opposite view as those expressed by Shore and Grant in the Fifth Report; and which tested the ability for more than a century of the ablest members of that famous and capable Corps d’élite, the Indian Civil Service, both under the Company and the Crown.”

IV. CONCLUSION

Our brief survey has shown how the East India Company realised its responsibility of devising a suitable system of administration in the country. No attempt was made to superimpose a Western type of administration, disregarding the tradition of the country. An earnest desire was exhibited to understand men and things. Though mistakes were committed, high motives were upheld. Not that all the officials of the Company were honest and pure, but the system tended to produce men of integrity, whose chief desire was to uphold national honour, more than anything else,