

Lard, Landlords, and Mutiny

By FRANK GREENSIDES

It is a calm, clear day of January, 1857, at the Dum-Dum Arsenal of the Bengal army in India. A low-caste lascar employed there has just demanded the use of his water vessel from a high-caste sepoy. The latter refuses in disgust. The lascar then taunts him with being already defiled by cartridges which, he declared, are greased with the fat of the sacred cow.

Those whose memory runs back to World War days may remember talk about dum-dum bullets. These took their name from the Bengal arsenal. A dum-dum bullet is made of soft lead, and has no steel jacket; the result is that when it strikes, instead of drilling a clean hole, it mushrooms and tears a frightful, irregular wound. This happy effect can be enhanced if, before the bullet is loaded into the rifle, the soft tip is cut off in such a way as to leave a somewhat flattened, jagged point; the teeth are tools admirably suited to the purpose. Cigar smokers will understand the technique. It was the custom at the Dum-Dum Arsenal to bite off the tips of the cartridges. A soft-nosed bullet so treated has great stopping power.

The rumor that animal fat was being used to grease their cartridges spread like wildfire through the army. Somewhere in its progress it acquired a new detail: the grease was said to contain lard, the fat of pigs. To the Mohammedan

troops, this was an unbearable insult. It was the spark that touched off one of the bloodiest and most ferocious of conflagrations, known in history as the Indian Mutiny.

The history of the causes of the Mutiny is, in the main, the history of the Province of Oudh from 1767 up to the time of the outbreak. Oudh is a small principality to the immediate northwest of Bengal, and at present part of the United Provinces of Northern India. Its capital is Lucknow, a city which played a prominent role during the Mutiny. The population is now about 45 millions. The main industries are agriculture and jute production. Today, as in the days of the Mutiny, this little province has to pay enormous tariff tolls on its produce; it is completely land-locked by interior tariff walls, one of the chief curses of India.

In one commentary on the subject the sentence appears, "The British Government ought not to have been altogether unprepared for the Mutiny." In considering the history of Oudh this observation should be kept in mind.

Before the Mogul Empire, land in India was held, not by private own-

ers, but by cultivators occupying it under the village corporation, and land revenue was collected from the head-man as representing the community. The State or monarch enjoyed a share in this rent. Under the Mohammedans new methods were introduced. The State claimed a sixth of the gross produce of the soil as its share, and entrusted collections to revenue farmers known as zamindars, each of whom agreed to pay a definite amount from the district assigned to him.

Very significantly, by the time the British took over, the zamindars had become landowners and the cultivators tenants, or ryots. This system was continued under the British. (How close a parallel can we draw to this in North America?) In the year 1767 some of the prominent landowners of Britain bought up blocks of stock in the East India Company. At the same time Charles Townshend, chancellor of the British exchequer, compounded with the Company for an annual payment of 400,000 pounds, on the understanding that parliament would give the Company a free hand.

This annual tribute could come from only one source, the already overburdened ryot, and it necessarily diminished his capacity to meet the exactions of the zamindar. The rivalry for plunder which ensued is probably unique in history, not because it is unusual for a native pop-



ulation to be exploited, but because of the utter, merciless rapacity of the Company's representatives. "In the one hand a gun, in the other a bottomless sack; so we see the East India Company in India."

Oudh served as an excellent buffer state between Bengal and the warlike Maratha tribes. An eminent statesman of the time, Francis by name, denounced the Rohilla War which ensued with these tribes as "the conquest of all the little states about us, who were our friends, who were our barriers." The nawab-wazir of Oudh, Asaf-ud-daula, was forced to cede the city of Benares to the Company and to make increased payments in return for military assistance given him against the Marathas; thus his charges were increased while his revenue sources were diminished. By 1775 the state was so weakened by the excessive demands made upon it that the landholders refused to pay the revenue until coerced by actual force.

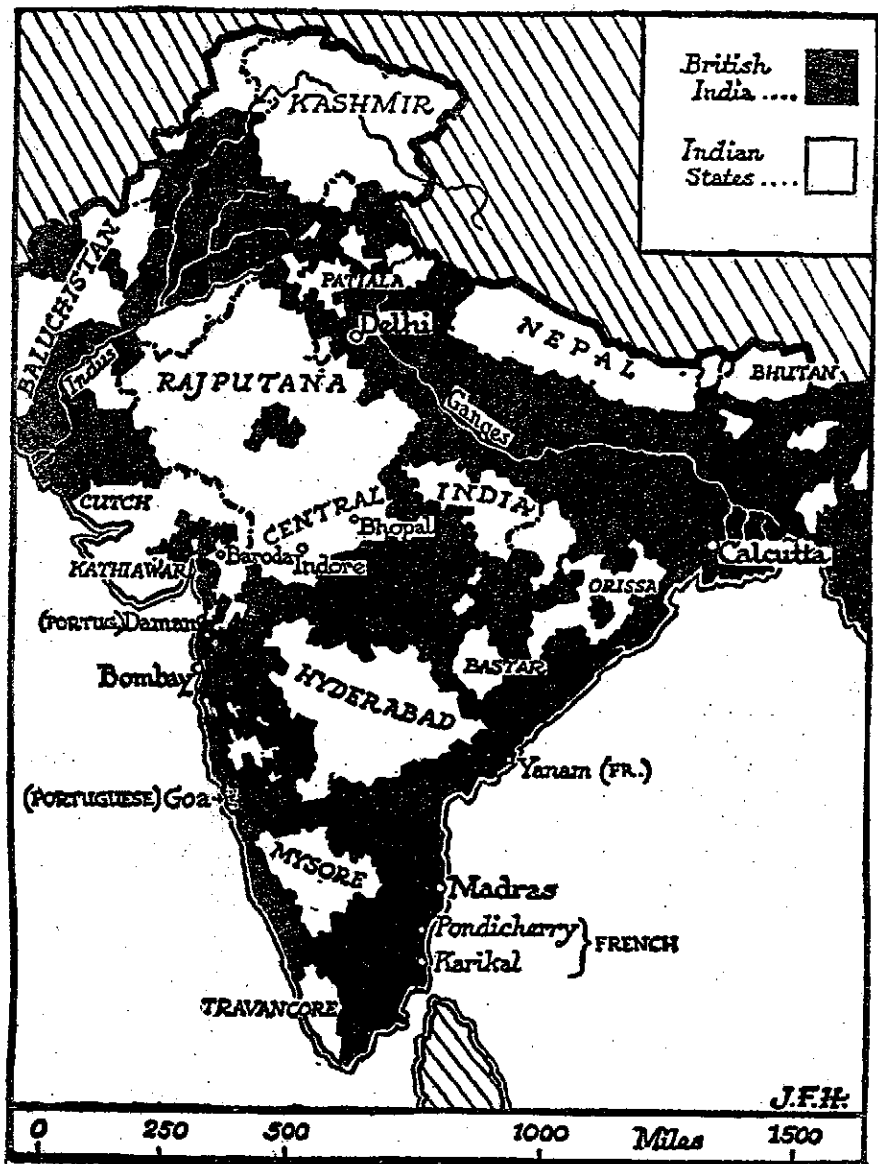
Thus, through double landlordism, was hastened the decay of the Indian States. Many of the Indian princes made ready bargains with the invader, hoping thus to turn the power of the Company to their own advantage. It was at this time that the governor, Warren Hastings of infamous memory, contended that India's capacity for paying tribute was unlimited. Concerning Hastings the Irishman Burke said in Parliament, "(He) makes the corrupt practices of mankind the principles of his government; he collects together the vicious examples of all the robbers and plunderers of Asia, forms the mass of their abuses into a code, and calls it the duty of a British governor."

In 1781 many of the Begums (chiefs) of Oudh were imprisoned and held to ransom until they promised to pay a large sum of money. They agreed and were released. There was still no possible source for the tribute except from the already despoiled ryots. These had been pushed to the margin of subsistence and beyond, and the tribute was not forthcoming. Accordingly, districts were assigned to the administration of "creditors" which

meant that revenues would be managed in the worst possible way by men who had no interest beyond their own immediate advancement.

The result was that the Nawab of Oudh was immediately threatened by a rising of his unpaid troops and by his turbulent landholders. He called in the British troops. Thus Company relations "with the nawab were perpetuated over a wide field." Things went from bad to worse, especially in the taxation departments, and the Province of Oudh was finally annexed to the British possessions in the year 1856.

Of course, foreign dominion meant nothing to a people with no national consciousness. But the province of Oudh was a country of great "talukdars" who corresponded in theoretical position with the great zamindars of Bengal, but were much stronger, for they commanded the services of an ignorant, turbulent, and warlike peasantry. One of these talukdars, Nana Sahib by name, had just been deprived by the East India Company of a princely pension which the Company had settled upon his foster-father. Nana Sahib, a high caste Brahmin, dreamed of re-



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storing the Brahmin rule over India. Other talukdari estates had been materially cut down, and he knew that resentment was increasing, approaching the bursting point. A muttering against the white man's rule, growing like distant thunder, might have warned any but the most heedless, the most predacious.

The sepoy of the Bengal army, largely recruited from Oudh, were directly affected by the annexation. They were drawn from the high-caste, priestly, Brahmin, landowning class. The annexation reduced them and their families to the common level. Their "sacred cow" had been prostituted by the British bull. They were the army in which the revolt took deepest root; it was they who most strongly opposed the British. The remaining two sepoy armies of India played but an insignificant part in the Mutiny.

When the time was ripe and a plausible pretext offered, the blow was struck. On May 9, 1857, a Company court-martial condemned 85 soldiers to 10 years hard labor for refusing to bite off the tips of their cartridges. The men were publicly degraded, chained, and taken to prison. Three regiments mutinied, broke open the jail, and began a systematic slaughter of every Englishman in sight. The British retorted in kind. Much has been said of the barbarities and atrocities practised by the mutineers, leaving the impression that the East India Company instructed its soldiers to use only humane methods; in this connection it does no harm to recall to what extent Christian charity has restrained police, soldiery, and company thugs in labor disputes in the United States. How many of us recall Bruno Mussolini's poetic metaphor in which he describes the sight of a bomb bursting in the midst of a crowd of men—like the unfolding of a red, red rosebud?

The mutiny was put down, and the rule of the Company gave place to that of the British Crown. In one sense this was a change for the better, for the ryot, instead of being pressed beyond the limit of his endurance, was pressed barely to that limit. Administration has been more skillful; there has been no more rev-

olution, although there have been many attempts to oppose the British in other ways. It may be that when the Western world has fulfilled its destiny of suicide, India will throw off foreign rule; but more probably they will change masters. Either Japan will step in and assume control, or India will return to the overlordship of native landlords. There is no immediate prospect of any change which will benefit the low-caste Hindu and untouchable.

Buddha believed neither in caste nor in class distinctions. He taught that all men were brothers, entitled equally to share in the bounty of Nature. He is sometimes honored from the lips of Hindus, if not from their hearts. Through the ebb and flow of war and breathing spells between wars (not to be miscalled peace) the eyes of his wooden image smile gently upon the little ways of men who could be gods—if they so willed it!