

THE WARS AND THE FINANCES OF THE INDIAN GOVERNMENT.

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IN an article recently published in this Magazine the writer, after reviewing the critical condition of things in India—her growing financial embarrassments, the degradation of her Law Courts presided over by Government Servants as Judges, her Legislature stripped of the Constitutional privilege of free deliberation, and the disastrous line of action pursued by her Government in the matter of foreign wars—submitted the following remark regarding the question as to how India is to be extricated from her perilous situation:—"The first step which her history suggests is that the arbitrary power wielded by the Indian Secretary of State should be checked at once, and his legitimate authority be strictly defined; that the Minister himself should be made practically amenable to an independent Court of Justice, and be subject to a personal prosecution for every act exceeding the limit of his authority."

This proposition, the principle of which is not likely to be questioned, may, however, in view of the difficulty of carrying it into effect, be looked upon as a truism possessing little practical utility. The difficulty of the task is certainly very considerable, seeing that Parliament

is the only Constitutional authority to which the Indian Secretary of State is responsible, and that his responsibility to that body is virtually neutralised by the support he has acquired in the British Legislature through the sacrifice of Indian interests conceded to the Constituencies by whom Parliament itself is ruled. On the other hand the danger of the situation in India is great, and may any day become overwhelming, as no effort is made to arrest the evil, and the exercise of arbitrary power not only violates the British Constitution, but raises an unsurmountable barrier to the introduction of reform. Under these circumstances it seems of little avail to discuss measures of economy and administrative improvements, so long as the laws are disregarded by the Executive and the resources of India are wasted in unprofitable wars by the arbitrary powers assumed by her Government.

The straits of the Indian Exchequer, the interference of the Executive with the decisions of the Law Courts, the official pressure under which the majority of the Indian Legislature are made to vote in obedience to the orders of the Secretary of State and regardless of their conscience and convictions—these crying evils have been exposed and widely discussed of late, both in this country and in India; and it may therefore not be necessary to enlarge on them in this instance. But the action of the Government in the matter of trans-frontier wars does not appear to have received the attention which it loudly claims. The incidents and issues of those wars are imperfectly known to the public, in consequence of despatches of commanding officers and other important papers on the subject being sedulously withheld by the Government of India. The following statement may, therefore, cause surprise to a great many readers.

During the last seventeen years, no less than twenty British expeditions invaded the borderlands of Afghanistan

for the purpose of subjugating their inhabitants, but without having accomplished that purpose in a single instance. Thousands of fanatical tribesmen, who resisted the yoke, were shot down by our superior fire-arms; numberless villages were burnt or blown up; crops were destroyed; cattle captured, and the inhabitants of those villages were left to perish of hunger and exposure; but nowhere was British authority accepted, and it was exercised only in the limited spaces occupied by our troops, ceasing immediately on the departure of our soldiers.

While these unprovoked and (politically as well as morally) unjustifiable attacks on our neighbours have engendered resentment and distrust towards the British, the heavy cost of the expeditions, by inordinately increasing the military expenditure of the Indian Government, has led to the imposition of oppressive taxes and the illegal proceedings of fiscal officers in India—evils resulting directly from the aggressive foreign policy of the Indian Government. That policy manifestly aims at conquest and territorial aggrandisement; but its supporters allege that it is based on the apprehension that Russia is intent on invading India through Afghanistan, and that the best way to guard against the danger is to maintain British garrisons in Afghanistan, ready to meet our foe in that difficult region, although far from our reserves and in the midst of a fanatical population intensely hostile to our presence in their territory. This policy was tried in 1838-42, when it proved appallingly disastrous, and was thereupon completely abandoned; but in 1875 it was revived under the name of the "forward" or the "scientific frontier" policy, in the expectation that our improved weapons and our many scientific contrivances would enable us to compass the subjugation of Afghanistan, an enterprise in which we had so grievously failed some thirty years before. The war of 1878-80, undertaken in that expect-

tation, proved however equally disastrous and humiliating. Meanwhile the revival of the policy in question had been strongly condemned by every military authority, including Lord Napier of Magdala, who had held for sixteen years appointments in India involving direct responsibility for the security of the Indian frontier, and Lord Roberts, who, with the experience acquired in the last Afghan war, stated in his despatch dated May 29th, 1880: "The longer and more difficult the line of communication is, the more numerous and greater the obstacles which Russia would have to overcome; and far from shortening one mile of the road, I would let the web of difficulties extend to the very mouth of the Khyber."

Thus, both actual result and military authority have long exposed the utter unsoundness of the above-mentioned policy; and that the Government should still adhere to it seems unaccountable, unless it be due to the fact that, while the abandonment of a policy that has proved so disastrous would imply the avowal of a very grave error, its prosecution entails no obligation to justify it in Parliament, so long as the necessary war supplies can be drawn from the Indian treasury.

The latest trans-frontier operations of the Indian Government are the war in Waziristan and the invasion of Chitral. The former undertaken in October appears to have come to an end, as no active operations seem to be carried on there at present, although the object of the war—the subjugation of the country—remains unaccomplished. The Chitral expedition, organised in March for the vindication of an alleged right of Suzerainty, is now in active operation, and its issue is in the womb of futurity. The one thing certain in the matter is that a war in which twenty thousand British troops are engaged, must involve very considerable expenditure, which cannot fail seriously to aggravate the existing difficulties of the Indian Exchequer.

In order to apprehend, however, the Constitutional bearing of the action of the Indian Government in thus carrying on trans-frontier wars, it should be remembered that when Parliament intrusted the control of the Indian administration to a Principal Secretary of State, it enacted provisions for maintaining the supremacy of the law throughout our Indian possessions, for ensuring the free discussion of all legislative projects in the Council of the Viceroy, and for restricting the application of the Indian revenue exclusively to the wants of the country. One of the latter provisions is embodied in Section LV. of the 21st and 22nd Vict., c. 106, which runs as follows:—
“ Except for preventing or repelling actual invasion of Her
“ Majesty’s Indian possessions, or under sudden and urgent
“ necessity, the revenues of India shall not, without the
“ consent of both Houses of Parliament, be applicable to
“ defray the expenses of any military operation carried on
“ beyond the external frontiers of such possessions by Her
“ Majesty’s forces charged upon such revenues.”

Now it is evident that the intention of Parliament, recorded in such unmistakeable language, has been deliberately frustrated by the Indian Government using Indian revenue in trans-frontier wars, while no sudden or actual danger menaced the Indian frontier. The object of those wars has simply been to extend the Indian frontier into the territories of our neighbours—in other words, conquest and territorial aggrandisement.

If the Indian Secretary of State is to continue spending the revenues of India in carrying on transfrontier wars, in disregard of the Statutes which define his legitimate power and his obligations, can any doubt be entertained as to the financial result of such a course? The resources of India, severely strained during a long period of warfare, are already unequal to the wants of her Government, and loans have to be raised annually for covering the deficiency and

discharging the interest on the public debt. A similar condition of things has, in every State where it obtained, been the forerunner of bankruptcy; and is there any ground for expecting a different result from it in India?

On the other hand, the wars which have caused this financial breakdown have entirely failed to accomplish their object—namely, the submission of our tribal neighbours. This disappointing issue is certainly not due to any short coming on the part of our troops, for their valour and endurance have justly called forth the admiration of their countrymen. The failure must be ascribed to the action of those who initiated, and persisted in, those wars, in ignorance of the character of the Afghans and of the peculiar features of their land. The history of Napoleon's disastrous Spanish campaigns furnishes, in some respects, a parallel instance—namely, in the fanaticism of the inhabitants, the unfavourable nature of the ground, the difficulty of transport and supply, and the irrational persistence in the enterprise after it had shown itself to be practically impossible.

An officer, who served in the Afghan Campaign of 1879, described the impediments which a British Army encounters in that country in the following clear and convincing terms:—"The enormous difficulty of carrying out a successful campaign in Afghanistan is due to two causes; and as these would operate as effectually to check the advance of an invader from Central Asia, it will be worth while to state them in detail. The first cause is the absence of any combined resistance. Attacking the Afghan tribes is like making sword-thrusts into the water. You meet with no resistance, but you also do no injury. The tribes harass the communications of an invading army; they cut off straggling parties; they plunder baggage; they give the troops no rest; but they carefully avoid a decisive action. The invading force moves wherever

it pleases; but it never holds more of the country than the ground on which it is actually encamped. Each separate tribe is, as it were, an independent centre of life, which requires a separate and special operation for its extinction. The consequence is that the only way in which we could hope to enforce our authority throughout Afghanistan would be by a simultaneous occupation of the entire country; and seeing that the country is as large as France, very sparsely populated, and quite incapable of feeding a large army, such an occupation is simply impossible. The other great difficulty is that there is hardly any forage in Afghanistan, and consequently the transport train of an invading army cannot fail to be crippled after a few weeks of active service. The moment that such a catastrophe is consummated, an army in the field becomes as cumbersome and useless as a swan on a turnpike road. This latter difficulty it was which compelled the Government to make the treaty of Gandamak."

Since the above statement was published in 1881, neither the configuration of the land in Afghanistan nor the character of its inhabitants has changed, and there seems no reasonable ground, therefore, for expecting that the present war in Waziristan, if it be continued, or the Chitral expedition, or any further operations which may be undertaken for executing the "forward frontier" policy, will result in issues more successful than those of the expeditions already employed for the promotion of that policy. It is urgent, therefore, if British prestige is to be maintained in the East, and the finances of India are to be retrieved, that the illegal exercise of power which has involved the nation in such inglorious and unprofitable wars, should be stopped as speedily as possible. The situation certainly is full of dangers, and the remedy which naturally suggests itself is the trial and, if necessary, the punishment of those whose errors and shortcomings have caused the mischief. But

impeachment has become obsolete, and the House of Commons, whose supineness has condoned and encouraged illegal and arbitrary power in the administration of India, will doubtless decline to issue the necessary indictment, except under the pressure of strong public opinion calling for the needed reform. Such opinion has not been manifested as yet. In this critical situation we can only hope that British statesmen possessed of patriotism and ability to cope successfully with the conjuncture, will come forward before things have drifted much further in their present perilous course, and a serious catastrophe becomes inevitable.

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