

## ***Lord Roberts' Forty One Years in India: An Overview***

**Dr. Sultan-i-Rome\***

Lord Roberts was one of the men from Great Britain who joined military service of the English in India. He left England for India as a cadet in 1852 where he served the army in various capacities. He was appointed Commander-in-Chief of the army in India in 1885 and was twice given extension in service. However, after a career of forty one years in India, and as he himself put it, “left the country with heartfelt regret”<sup>1</sup> for England in 1893.

Roberts wrote his book *Forty One Years in India* on the persuasion of his friends to help them in understanding “the characteristics and requirements of the numerous and widely different races”<sup>2</sup> of that country. The book has 601 pages, divided in sixty-eight chapters besides a table of contents and a preface running into twenty-two pages. The book also includes maps and photographs of various outstanding personalities. It gives account of Roberts’ experiences and observations of the various aspects of the land, people and events of the subcontinent and Afghanistan. This article seeks to give an overview of Roberts’ said book.

The book starts with a description of Robert’s departure from England for India. After a arduous and tedious voyage and journey, he reached Peshawar in November 1852, when he met his father who had not only taken part in the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-

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\* Assistant Professor of History, Government Degree College Matta, Swat.

1 Lord Roberts, *Forty One Years in India* (London: Macmillan and Co. Ltd., 1898), p.543.

2 *Ibid.*, p.vii.

1842) but had also developed friendship and intimacy with various prominent Afghans including Amir Dost Muhammad Khan, of Afghanistan.

He then discusses Anglo-Afghan relations and the uprising of the Indians in 1857 in detail and about two-thirds of the book mainly deals with these issues and provides valuable and interesting information, narratives and sometimes analytical evaluation of various other policies, steps, expeditions, events, journeys and visits, namely foundation and various aspects of the Peshawar cantonment,<sup>3</sup> expedition against the Jowaki Afridis, travelling to Kashmir and conditions of the Muslims of Kashmir under the Hindu rulers “who seized all their earnings, leaving them barely sufficient to keep body and soul together,”<sup>4</sup> importance of the various military stations of the Punjab; Nicholson’s treatment of Mehtab Singh, accounts of holding darbars by various viceroys and those of their visits, etc., alteration in the Indian Army in 1860, relations with and overtures made to various Indian chiefs and princes, praise of the charm, beauty, skill, manners and determination of the Begum of Bhopal, the Ambella Campaign (1863) — its difficulties and unexpected stiff resistance put up by the tribesmen, expedition to Abyssinia to release the English prisoners (1868), Russian advances and occupations of Central Asia, nature of relations between England and Russia, visits to Burma, annexation of Upper Burma and its problems because in Roberts words “it is extremely easy... to sit at home and talk of what should be done but very difficult to say how to do it and more difficult still to carry it out,”<sup>5</sup> Lady Roberts efforts to introduce nursing in Indian army, formation of the “Army Temperance Association” by Roberts to eradicate drunkenness of alcohol among the soldiers and his various other reforms in the Indian Army, etc., are some of the other pertinent topics discussed here.

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3 Besides other main problems with the English was security of the Peshawar Cantonment due to the enmity and attacks of the tribesmen. Personalities like Captain Frank Grantham and Colonel Mackerson, Commissioner of Peshawar, were murdered. It was due to the security problem, Roberts states, that the Peshawar Cantonment was established on a much-limited area which caused other problems, especially hygienic, for soldiers and the residents as well.

4 *Forty One Years in India*, p. 22.

5 *Ibid.*, p.516.

Discussing Anglo-Afghan relations Roberts states that some of the English opposed overtures of friendship with the Amir of Afghanistan due to their bitter feelings and relations with the Afghans. They, however, agreed to normalize relations with them. On the other hand, the Persian intervention in his country compelled the Amir to establish cordial relations with the English and seek their help. Hence Amir Dost Muhammad Khan visited Peshawar in January 1857 and concluded a treaty which proved helpful for the English during Indian uprising of 1857. The Afghans not only remained aloof from the Indians but also did not provide any help and support to them at this critical juncture, which would have added to the problems of the English.

In the internal crises and struggle for the throne in Afghanistan the English assisted Sher Ali. Amir Sher Ali Khan attended the Ambala darbar of 1869 and had a meeting with the Governor General, Lord Mayo. Although he did not get all that he wanted, the Amir, however, returned much gratified.

Roberts asserts that during the Afghan-Persian dispute over Sistan, correspondence and talks were held with the Afghans on various aspects of the relations and help. The results annoyed Sher Ali and the relations became strained. The English again made overtures for the restoration of cordial relations. The process to normalize the Anglo-Afghan relations, however, got a setback due to the failure of the negotiations and the death of the Afghan envoy. The Afghans turned towards Russia and established friendly relations with her. They provided full facilities to the Russians, whereas the English mission under Neville Chamberlaine was not honoured; instead the envoy was maltreated and the message of the English was not properly replied to. Therefore, looking for an excuse to interfere and attack, the English forwarded their conditions and an "ultimatum to Sher Ali, informing him that, unless his acceptance of the conditions was received by the Viceroy no later than the 20<sup>th</sup> November [1878], he would be treated by the English Government as a declared enemy."<sup>6</sup>

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6 *Ibid.*, p.348.

The English Government planned to annex Afghan territory, i.e., Kurram Valley, and for this purpose Forces were ordered to be ready for advance. Assistance of the local people was also sought, who, according to Roberts, would regard the English as deliverers. Responding positively, the chief of the Turis even inquired in a letter about the expected date of the advance.

As the Amir failed to comply with the whims and dictates of the English, the latter found an excuse and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880) was started. The English made advances. The Turis and Jajis helped and supported the English on assurances of future safety and well-being. Amir Sher Ali Khan disappeared and Yaqub Khan assumed power who was ready to accept all terms of the English except the annexation of the Afghan territory by the British Indian government. He, however, at last acceded to all the terms of the English under the Treaty of Gandamak, 26<sup>th</sup> May 1879, whereby Afghanistan recognized supremacy and upper hand of the English and cordial relations were restored between the two countries and first round of the war came to an end.

However, after the passage of some time, the discontented Afghan soldiers attacked the English embassy in Kabul and massacred all its inmates. Therefore, a march on Kabul was ordered. Yaqub Khan made efforts to stop the march somehow and avoid war but did not succeed. On the contrary, some Afghan officials and chiefs made overtures and promised assistance to the English. Consequently, the English attacked Kabul and in spite of the stiff resistance offered by the Afghans, occupied the city and forced Yaqub Khan to relinquish the throne.

Appointment of a new Amir was still awaited when another uprising of the Afghans took place under Muhammad Jan. It was ignited, chiefly, by an aged Mulla Mushk-i-Alam. The English were then in a desperate position at various places. Their anxiety is evident from Roberts assertion that he "...was unwillingly forced to the conclusion that not a single Afghan could be trusted, however profuse he might be in his assurances of fidelity, and that we [English] must depend entirely on our own resources for intelligence."<sup>7</sup>

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7 *Ibid.*, p.439.

Though the English received reinforcement, the Afghans too grew in number. Being “determined to sell their lives dearly”<sup>8</sup> the Afghans “fought with the greatest obstinacy.”<sup>9</sup> After some initial success, the English were compelled to retreat and take shelter in Sherpur and “the Afghans occupied the city and the Bala Hissar.”<sup>10</sup> The Afghans assaulted Sherpur to exterminate the English forces and the latter defended their position with much difficulty. Reinforcements for them were blocked by general uprisings. Nevertheless, at last the English reoccupied their old possessions.

According to Roberts, the main problem before the English after occupying Afghanistan was dealing with the situation and choosing the new Amir as sorting out a person acceptable both to the English and the Afghans was a difficult task. At last, consensus was reached on Abdur Rahman, but as the terms and conditions were being discussed with him, Afghans once again rose under Ayub Khan, defeated the English at Maiwand and laid siege to Qandahar. The authorities in India ordered relief forces for their rescue which left for Qandahar on 9<sup>th</sup> August 1880. Facing great hardships and difficulties, the relief forces reached Qandahar under the command of Roberts on 30<sup>th</sup> August. The forces of Ayub Khan were dispersed and Abdur Rahman was made Amir of Afghanistan and the English forces went back.

Later due to Russian advances towards Afghanistan, the English contacted and invited Amir Abdur Rahman to Rawalpindi, where a meeting was held in a very cordial atmosphere wherein the English promised their assistance in case of foreign aggression against Afghanistan. It was during this meeting that the Amir was informed of the Russians assault on Panjdeh.

In his detailed account of the Second Anglo-Afghan War, Roberts provides valuable and interesting information not only about the English and their policies but about the Afghans and their struggle as well as the role and career of various Afghan

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8 *Ibid.*, p.444.

9 *Ibid.*

10 *Ibid.*, p.447.

Sardars. In the end, he also complains about the manner and attitude of Amir Abdur Rahman towards the English.

While describing the uprising of 1857 in India against the English Government, Roberts gives a detailed account of its causes, events and consequences. Giving causes of the outbreak, he discusses introduction of the new cartridges and laws, which contributed to the anxiety and non-loyalty of the Indians. He admits that in spite of the denial of the English authorities, “the recent researches of Mr. Forrest in the records of the Government of India prove that the lubricating mixture used in preparing the cartridges was actually composed of the objectionable ingredients, cow’s fat and lard, and that incredible disregard of the soldiers religious prejudices was displayed in manufacture of these cartridges.”<sup>11</sup>

It is noteworthy that these secrets were disclosed and confirmed by the Indians involved in the manufacturing of these cartridges. So, the belief was established “that systematic attack was to be made on the faith and habits of the people, whether Hindu or Mohamedan.”<sup>12</sup>

Roberts admits that the uprising of 1857 was not simply a sepoys’ revolt but was a civil outbreak. Recounting the events of the outbreak, he discusses the steps which the authorities took, at different places to guard against and suppress it. For example, to foil the intentions of the Native soldiers, the authorities disarmed majority of them in Sarhad (later formed North-West Frontier Province) before their attempt to revolt and those who revolted were either caught or dispersed with the help of the loyal locals.

While discussing the various steps taken for the relief of Delhi, by the English, Roberts rejoices at reaching there though it “was still in the possession of the mutineers.”<sup>13</sup> During the siege, when reinforcements were being awaited Mrs. Tytler gave birth to a son on 21<sup>st</sup> June in the camp of the English. The infant was looked upon with a superstitious feeling<sup>14</sup> and a soldier remarked

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11 *Ibid.*, p.241.

12 *Ibid.*, p.240.

13 *Ibid.*, p.82.

14 It speaks of the presence of superstition in the English soldiers.

“Now we shall get our reinforcements; this camp was formed to avenge the blood of innocents, and the first reinforcement sent to us is a new born infant. Reinforcements did actually arrive the next day.”<sup>15</sup>

The Indians persistently pressed hard the English besiegers, but they maintained their position and foiled all such attempts with heavy losses to both sides. The English vainly attempted to enter and take the city. Their two Commanders-in-Chief died in six weeks and the third one was on the point of breaking down and was obliged to leave the camp. Both sides received reinforcements and fighting continued.

After receiving more reinforcements, the English made preparations for a decisive assault to take Delhi. Nicholson said on 6<sup>th</sup> September 1857, that “Delhi must be taken... and it is absolutely essential that it should be done at once.”<sup>16</sup> Consequently, a decisive assault was planned for 14 September. In spite of the heavy losses and casualties, during the assault on the appointed day, very little place was occupied and that too was evacuated. The high command was not unanimous whether to continue the assault or not. Nevertheless, at last, Delhi was taken and on 21<sup>st</sup> September 1857 it was again under the control of the English. It is noteworthy, as Roberts discloses, that the Banyas played a decisive role in retaking Delhi with showing the way of the Lahori gate to the English.

The fall of Delhi brought intense relief to the English everywhere especially in the Punjab. After relieving Delhi, forces were detailed, without delay, to relieve other cities, i.e., Cawnpur, Aligarh, Lucknow, Gwaliyar, Agra, and Meerut, etc. All these were also relieved but with many difficulties and heavy losses. Though Lucknow was relieved, full suppression of the freedom fighters in Awadh took one more year. Roberts especially mentions the spying of Unjur Tiwari, which contributed to the English success in Cawnpur.

Roberts narrates both the revolts, opposition, desertion and deception of the English by the Indians as well as the loyalty and

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15 Roberts, *Forty One Years in India*, p.88.

16 *Ibid.*, p.118.

services and sacrifices of the Indians for the English during the uprising and its suppression. Furthermore, shortcomings and weaknesses of the Indians and strategy of both the sides are also highlighted and while doing so he has recorded very interesting and informative details of events.

It is noteworthy that taking up arms by the Native soldiers against the English Government was not a minor affair and decision on their part. The soldiers of all the ranks had at stake all the benefits, for which they were entitled being the servants of the Government and for which they waited and served the Government for years. In Roberts words, "Some had nearly served their time for their pensions, that greatest of all attractions to the Native to enter the army, for the youngest recruit feels that, if he serves long enough, he is sure of an income sufficient to enable him to sit in the sun and do nothing for the rest of his days — a Native's idea of Supreme happiness."<sup>17</sup>

Roberts criticizes that the officials trusted Native soldiers too much; that proper precautionary measures were not taken by the authorities; that the number of the English troops was not enough to cope with the situation; and that the authorities at Meerut did not show necessary promptness in taking steps to block the way of the mutineers.

He contends that without the help of the Natives, both civilians and soldiers, it would have been impossible to suppress the uprising of 1857 and control the situation so easily and that it was due to the uprising that the English succeeded in consolidating their power in India. Construction of roads, railways and telegraph were hastened, and relations with the Native chiefs and princes were established and confidence restored. He suggests that the English should avoid doing anything which could be interpreted as disregard of various forms of the religion of the Indians. According to him, the position of the Great Britain in India was that of a continental power and, hence, for preserving and maintaining it continental means were required. He, moreover, contends that coming of the Russians close to India was inevitable. Hence, eyes should not be turned away from these facts.

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17 *Ibid.*, p.240.



Roberts also examines the question of the chances of recurrence of another uprising in India and discusses various dimensions of the policies of the English in the subcontinent and while doing so points out their weaknesses and flaws and suggests remedial measures and policies for guarding against another outbreak. He then expressed the hope that if his points were not ignored, there was “little chance of any fresh outbreak disturbing the stability of our [the English] rule in India, or neutralizing our [the English] efforts to render the country prosperous, contented and thoroughly loyal to the British Crown.”<sup>18</sup>

Besides, Roberts gives an account of his personal life, career, objectives and experiences in various capacities and positions, i.e. from subaltern to commander-in-chief. He also discusses all things minutely, analytically and to some extent objectively. He, however, has not remained thoroughly impartial. Bias is natural but he has shown prejudice. Boastful accounts, on the part of Roberts, are also found in the book.

Roberts not only has given his personal experiences and reminiscences but has extensively utilized and quoted books, memoirs and official correspondence, which make his statements more credible. Although published more than hundred years back and out of print now, the book is a valuable contribution and helps in understanding various dimensions, besides other things, of both India and Afghanistan's history.

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18 *Ibid.*, p.251.