

Charges against Warren Hastings

There are many charges which are brought against Warren Hastings, the chief among them are (1) The Rohilla War, (2) The murder of Nand Kumar, (3) The affairs of Raja Chait Singh, and (4) The case of the Begums of Oudh. When he returned to England he was impeached on the above four grounds, but later on he was honourably acquitted of all the charges. But still "the Rohilla War, the trial of Nand Kumar, the case of Raja Chait Singh and the case of the Begums of Oudh remain as some of the dirty spots on the name of Warren Hastings. The Rohilla War has already been discussed above, so here we shall examine the last three charges against Warren Hastings.

1. The Trial of Nand Kumar—Nand Kumar was an influential Brahmin of Bengal. He was angry with Warren Hastings because the latter had dismissed Raza Khan, the Deputy Nawab of Bengal, under whom he held a high post. He had come to know of the serious differences between the Governor-General and his Council and tried to exploit the situation against the Governor-General. In 1776, he accused Warren Hastings of having received bribes to the tune of several lakhs of rupees among which were 3.5 lakhs of

rupees which he received from Munni Begum, widow of Mir Jafar, for appointing her as the guardian of her minor son. The hostile Council, especially Philip Francis, wanted the charges to be read in the presence of the Governor-General. When Warren Hastings came to know of this thing he flew into rage and refused to be tried by his own Council. The matter was still pending when Nand Kumar was charged of forgery by one Seth Mohan Prashad, a Calcutta Merchant, and put behind the bars. He was tried by the Chief Justice (Sir Elijah Impey) of the Supreme Court and was found guilty of forgery and sentenced to death.

Nand Kumar's execution has been universally condemned. It has been regarded 'a judicial murder' pure and simple. First, because Governor-General in conspiracy with Impey, his old classfellow, sought revenge from a person who tried to expose him publicly. Secondly, "*it is very doubtful whether the Supreme Court had any jurisdiction over natives.*" (P. E. Roberts). Thirdly, Nand Kumar was not even given the chance to appeal to the King-in-Council. This was a denial of justice to a person who was being strangled by the court of justice itself. Fourthly, to hang a man merely on the charge of forgery was highly unjustified. No body in India had ever heard of a man being hanged for forgery. Nand Kumar was executed for "*a charge which did not prevent Clive from becoming the Lord of Plassey.*" (Dr. Ishwari Prashad). Thus the trial and later on execution of Nand Kumar remains a dirty spot on Warren Hastings. But, right or wrong, this incident greatly enhanced the power of Warren Hastings and nobody dared to bring an accusation against him.

2. The Affairs of Raja Chait Singh—Chait Singh was the Raja of Benaras and a vassal of the Nawab of Oudh. In 1775, Benaras was transferred to the Company by the Nawab of Oudh and hence Raja Chait Singh came under the authority of the Company. He used to pay an annual tribute of 23.5 lakhs of rupees which he continued to pay to his new master i.e., the Company. Pressed hard by the Mysore and Maratha Wars, Warren Hastings demanded an additional tribute of Rs. 5 lakhs from him over and above the fixed tribute of 23.5 lakhs a years. The Raja paid the enhanced demand. Next year a similar demand was made and was complied with some hesitation. In 1780, Warren Hastings asked the Raja to provide 2,000 horses to the English which the later failed to comply with. At this Hastings flew into rage, charged Chait Singh of insubordination and levied a fine of Rs. 50 lakhs. Then he himself went to Benaras to realise that payment. He put the Raja under arrest, an act which infuriated his troops, who rebelled and killed some English soldiers. Hastings himself had to fly to Chunar to save his life, from where with reinforced force he returned to Benaras and put down the rebellion. The Raja was removed and a new one was placed on the throne, who was required to pay double the tribute.

This is another example of the high-handedness of Warren Hastings.

The Raja was not bound to pay the enhanced tribute and to provide the English a contingent of 2,000 horses. To fine him Rs. 50 lakhs and later on arresting him for not paying that sum was highly unjustified. It was tyranny pure and simple and for this act Warren Hastings is severely condemned. Moreover, his purpose of exacting Rs. 50 lakhs completely failed when Chait Singh's treasury fell into the hands of the rebelling troops and nothing came into the hands of Warren Hastings.

3. The Case of the Begums of Oudh—The case of the Begums of Oudh is yet another example in which Warren Hastings crossed the sense of decency and justice to meet his ends. When in 1775 Shuja-ud-Daulah, the Nawab Wazir of Oudh died, his son Asaf-ud-Daulah agreed to maintain English troops in his state and to pay for them. Soon he found himself under heavy debt because for many years he could not pay the annual expenses of the English troops. As Warren Hastings wanted money very badly he asked Asaf-ud-Daulah to clear all his arrears. The Nawab Wazir showed his inability to pay all the debts but promised that if he was allowed to take all the family jewels and riches from his mother and grand-mother, who were known as the Begums of Oudh, he would settle all the accounts. Warren Hastings agreed to this proposal and at once sent British troops to help the Nawab Wazir to take possession of all the riches. Consequently, the palace of the Begums was surrounded, the servants were tortured in every way and ultimately the money was secured and all the debts of the English were paid off.

There is no doubt that Warren Hastings needed money very badly but the method he adopted in getting money from the Begums of Oudh was certainly mean and dishonest. Even Sir Alfred Lyall agrees that "*the employment of personal severities under the superintendence of British officers in order to extract money from women and eunuchs is an ignoble kind of undertaking.*" His conduct in putting pressure on women and later on forcing them to part with their riches, which rightly belonged to them, was highly unjustified, unworthy and indefeasible.

In 1785, Warren Hastings returned to his country where he was impeached on the above four grounds. The trial continued for seven long years (1788-95) and Warren Hastings had to spend the last of his penny to defend himself. In the end, he was however, acquitted on all the charges and pensioned off, because, after all, he had rendered a great service to his country and saved her honour at one of the most critical times.