

THE INDIAN ARMY

Charles Lord Cornwallis (1738–1805)
to Prince Frederick, Duke of York (1763–1827)

Calcutta, 10 November 1786

In the pursuit of military knowledge in which I left your Royal Highness, under the great authorities of Potsdam and Brunswick, I can hardly hope that a letter dated Calcutta will meet with a favourable reception. But as I formerly took the liberty of telling your Royal Highness that every part of the British army had an equal claim to your care and patronage, and that we could not allow you to belong to any particular corps, so I must now consider you as the person who is one day to have the direction of the whole force of Britain, and looking to that period, I will not be afraid to say that even our Indian army must not be below your notice and inquiry. The intense heat and the unhealthiness of the climate are much against all military discipline; yet I was astonished at the good appearance of the part of the King's troops which I saw on the coast of Coromandel; the 71st Regiment would be esteemed a good one in any part of Europe. I was assured that some of the others were by no means inferior. The East India Company's artillery are very fine, but their European infantry, on whom the defence of these valuable possessions may one day depend, are in a most wretched state.

The Sepoys, or native black troops, are fine men, and would not in size disgrace the Prussian ranks; I have heard undeniable proofs of their courage and patience in bearing hunger and fatigue, but from the little I have hitherto seen of them, I have no favourable idea of their discipline.

Your Royal Highness well knows that all troops are good or bad, according to the merit and exertion of their officers. In the Company's service many of these are deserving and well-informed, and perhaps they have been more in the practice of judging and acting for themselves than officers who have served in a less extensive field. But the mainspring has been always wanting—they have had no head to look up to; the promotion of rank has always gone by seniority; and the lucrative commands have been given to those who have had interest. Consequently there has been no spur to merit.

The Company's officers have no regiments or governments to look forward to: few constitutions can stand this climate many years. If they cannot save some money, they must go home without rank or pay, condemned to disease and beggary. Under these circumstances the most rigid General must relax a little, and suffer practices that are in some degree repugnant to the nice feelings of a soldier. In regard to the general state of our affairs in India, the power given to the Governor-General, however it may now be misplaced, is the only chance of saving this country. Mr. Fox's plan would have ruined all. The state of our finances is alarming, the difficulties are infinite; I feel that the whole may go to ruin in my hands, but I do not despair. I will not fail in my duty; I shall probably commit many errors, but I trust to the candid judgment of my King and country, which I have already so honourably experienced.

Charles Ross, ed. *Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis* (London: 1859), I:235–236.