

Lord Lytton

Edward Robert Lytton Bulwer-Lytton, 1st Earl of Lytton, known commonly as Lord Lytton was an English politician who served as Viceroy of India from 1876 to 1880.

He is commonly regarded as a ruthless viceroy due to his handling of the Great Indian Famine of 1876-1878 and the Second Anglo-Afghan War.

The article will give details about Lord Lytton within the context of the Civil Services Examination.

Background of Lord Lytton

Lytton was born on 8 November 1831 to Edward Bulwer-Lytton and Rosina Doyle Wheeler. His mother being an ardent advocate of women rights put her odds with his conservative father.

After being taught at home for a while, he was educated in schools in Twickenham and Brighton and then Harrow, and at the University of Bonn.

Lord Lytton entered the Diplomatic Service in 1849, being appointed as an attaché to his uncle, Sir Henry Bulwer. His salaried diplomatic career began in 1852 when he was posted to Florence. He served in various other European cities such as St Petersburg, Vienna, and Paris before being appointed British Consul General at Belgrade in 1860.

In 1865, he served in Lisbon, where he concluded a major commercial treaty with Portugal, and subsequently in Madrid. By 1874, Lytton was appointed British Minister Plenipotentiary at Lisbon where he remained until being appointed Governor-General and Viceroy of India in 1876.

Tenure as Viceroy of India

Lytton's tenure as viceroy was marked by ruthlessness in both domestic and foreign affairs. At the time India was reeling from famine caused by crop failure from 1876. His response was to convene a durbar in which he proclaimed Queen Victoria as 'Empress of India. The lack of response from his administration contributed between 6.1 million and 10.3 million deaths.

Historians allude that his belief in Social Darwinism is what contributed to his poor attitude towards Indian peasants suffering from the Famine.

In 1878, he implemented the Vernacular Press Act, which enabled the Viceroy to confiscate the press and paper of any Indian Vernacular newspaper that published content that the Government deemed to be "seditious", in response to which there was a public protest in Calcutta that was led by the Indian Association and Surendranath Banerjee.

Lytton's son-in-law, Sir Edwin Lutyens, planned and designed New Delhi.

He also abolished the tax on foreign cotton coming to India, benefitting British traders at the cost of causing severe hardships for the local economy

Britain was deeply concerned throughout the 1870s about Russian attempts to increase its influence in Afghanistan, which provided a Central Asian buffer state between the Russian Empire and the British Empire in India.

Lord Lytton made friendly overtures to the Amir of Afghanistan, Sher Ali Khan. It was believed that Sher Ali Khan had pro-Russian leaning and no effort was spared to change his mind. In September 1878, Sir Neville Bowles Chamberlain was sent as an emissary to Afghanistan but he was refused entry. Having considered and exhausted all diplomatic options, Lytton ordered an invasion of Afghanistan, sparking the Second Anglo-Afghan War. Britain won all the battles and ultimately the Treaty of Gandamak put a more British receptive Amir as the ruler of Afghanistan.

But the huge cost of war and the heavy losses of the British Army. it was enough to lead to the defeat of the Conservative Party in London of which Lytton was a part of.

The war was seen at the time as an ignominious but barely acceptable end to "the Great Game", closing a long chapter of conflict with the Russian Empire without even a proxy engagement. The Pyrrhic victory of British arms in India was a source of shame which played a small but critical role in the nascent scramble for Africa; in this way, Lytton and his war helped shape the contours of the 20th century in dramatic and unexpected ways. Lytton resigned at the same time as the Conservative government.

Later Life of Lord Lytton

Lytton was Ambassador to France from 1887 to 1891. During the second half of the 1880s, before his appointment as Ambassador in 1887, Lytton served as Secretary to the Ambassador to Paris, Lord Lyons. He succeeded Lyons, as Ambassador, subsequent to the resignation of Lyons in 1887.

Lord Lytton died in Paris on 24 November 1891, where he was given the rare honour of a state funeral. His body was then brought back for interment in the private family mausoleum in Knebworth Park.