

Impact of the Sepoy Mutiny on Indian Polity and Society

 claws.in/1420/impact-of-the-sepoy-mutiny-in-indian-polity-and-society-isha-naravane.html

#1420

184

August 14, 2015

By Isha Naravane

Introduction

The events of 1857 loom large in Indian History. Some consider it the first great war of independence, others a mere mutiny and some say it was a revolt against existing conditions. Whatever be the case, the most singular consequence for India's army was how the British now viewed their armed forces in India. Whether the British ruled it as a trading company or as a nation, the use of force and military might was still necessary to occupy and subjugate the subcontinent. The Revolt of 1857 led to a re-organization of the Indian army and this article highlights some of the socio-economic and cultural impacts of this re-organization.

The soldier is also a product of his socio-economic, cultural and political landscape. The recruitment of natives for the British Indian army on a large scale, their training in modern warfare methods, the salary and rewards given to native soldiers all had an impact on the environment where the soldiers came from, on Indian rulers who fielded armies on the battlefield, and on agrarian communities who ultimately shouldered the revenue burden for maintenance of armies.

Salient Features Impacting Post-Mutiny Re-Organisation

The events of the 1857 uprising all over India are well-documented. This article will discuss those which are pertinent to large scale re-organisation of political and military systems.

Composition of the Bengal Army – the Primary Mutineers. The Bengal Army were the primary mutineers amongst the British Indian Army. The Bengal Presidency's army was the largest and was stationed all over East India, North and North-west India. The composition of the Bengal Army is a very important point. The bulk of the recruits were high-caste Hindus from Bihar, Oudh and Agra (present day Uttar Pradesh) and Hindu communities that had served Muslim rulers. There were also recruits from Punjab and from the Gurkha community. The resentments leading to the mutiny had long been festering in the higher castes of the Bengal Army particularly relating to travel overseas which led to 'loss of caste' [1] and intervention into local practices such as Sati.

However well-meaning these interventions might have been, it was taken as taken as evangelical interference which the natives thought would then ultimately lead to forcible conversion to Christianity. The last straw were the cartridges greased with pig and cow fat which alienated both the Hindu and Muslim soldiers. In Barrackpore, Mangal Pandey of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry rebelled and his execution started a chain of events which caused the 19th and the 34th Bengal Native Infantry to be disbanded and these soldiers returned home in a state of seething resentment. On 10th May 1857 in Meerut it was the 3rd Bengal Light Cavalry that refused to follow orders during parade and drill.

Civil Rebellion – Native Rulers and the Doctrine of Lapse. The British ignored local customs of adopted heirs and implemented the Doctrine of Lapse. Lands and domains of rulers not having natural heirs were annexed by the British. This complete disregard of native customs alienated the nobility who felt that the Company had interfered with a traditional system of inheritance. Rebel leaders such as Nana Sahib and Rani Laxmibai belonged to this group. Nana Sahib was the adopted heir of Peshwa Baji Rao II but the Company refused to recognise him. He thus, led the rebellion near Cawnpore (present day Kanpur). At the infamous Siege of Cawnpore he had offered safe passage up to Allahabad to the besieged British. However, many men, women and children were massacred. The ramifications of this were far-reaching.

Political, Social and Military Ramifications

Ramifications in Punjab due to Re-Organisations. Rebellions in Punjab were quickly contained as the Sikh and Pathan soldiers recruited in Punjab and North-West Frontier Province helped the British. Only a small number mutinied (example at Sialkot and Ajnala near Amritsar) who in turn were quickly defeated and killed. The Sikh and Pathan soldiers were instrumental in helping to re-capture Delhi. The Sikhs had been at odds with the Mughal dynasty for nearly 300 years and probably did not want it re-instated. From the British point of view, the Bengali soldier had been responsible for the mutiny.

Recruitment strategy from 1857 onwards shifted to the Punjab and North-West Frontier Province. The Punjab's population counted as less than 10% of British India but made up more than half of the British Indian army. The Punjabi peasantry in turn faced dire poverty due to water shortage, depleted soil fertility and loss of land. Successive wars in the Punjab between Sikhs, Afghans, Marathas and the British had aggravated the situation. The British concentrated their recruitment in the rural areas. Many policies were enacted to gain the loyalty of the peasantry. Irrigation systems were built, large tracts of land made cultivable. Land was allotted as a reward for military service and other services to the Raj. Thus it turned a lot of landless peasants into land-owners and forced landowners to send their sons into military service to retain prestige.

Ramifications for Higher Castes. The Government of India Act was enacted in 1858 and the rule of India passed from the East India Company to the Crown. Although the old bureaucracy remained there was a major shift in approach. Indians were drawn into governance at a local level. To educate Indians, universities were opened in Calcutta, Bombay and Madras Presidencies. Naturally the already better- educated higher castes were the first whose services were utilized and the first to be educated at these universities. Army recruitment was now mainly from rural peasantry so higher castes previously employed in the Bengal Presidency Armies had to look at other avenues for employment. This circumstance sowed the seed for the rise of an Indian middle class. The aim of opening these universities and educating Indians was to create a class of persons Indian in appearance but Western in thought and loyalties. This gave rise to the Indian 'white collar' middle class – a class which later played a pivotal role in the Indian National movement in the late 19th and 20th centuries.

Ramifications of Siege of Cawnpore. The loss of British lives enraged the populace of England. Until this point the matter of the governance of India had been regarded with a general indifference. Now the government could no longer ignore it. It was concluded that the Company had interfered too much with the traditional social structures and hierarchies of India and now new Government of India sought to appease Indian Royalty. Lord Canning invented rewards such as Star of India and Order of the Indian Empire to re-enforce ties of the India princes to the British. *Talukdars* (rural landlords, who made their dissatisfaction evident in the rebellion) too demanded education and were given revenue jurisdiction and magisterial powers. But the main effect of the massacres of the siege was the idea now firmly planted in the British mind that the native Indian would remain a savage on whom civilized rule must be imposed.

Conclusion

The British Raj altered the social, political and economic structure of India in a very drastic manner. The army was the main tool for the British to deal with internal and external threats, to establish British supremacy in the subcontinent and in the world. Railways, roads and other infrastructure were built mainly to facilitate movement of troops and the bureaucracy established to collect the revenue which would enable the maintenance of a large army. An in-depth study of events that seem solely military in nature will always reveal socio-economic and political ramifications with long lasting consequences – consequences whose impact is far more extensive than the military occurrence in itself.

The author is Research Intern at CLAWS. Views expressed by the author are personal.

References

References

1. The Baudhayana Sutra, one of the Hindu Dharma Shastras, says that "making voyages by sea" (II.1.2.2) is an offense which will cause pataniya, loss of caste.
<http://www.hinduismtoday.com/modules/smartsection/item.php?itemid=3065>
 2. Syed Hussain Shaheed Soherwordi, *Punjabisation in the British Indian Army 1857-1947 and The Advent of Military Rule in Pakistan*, Number 24, Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies, University of Edinburgh, 2010.
 3. Vikram Rana, *Revolt of 1857 in India: Nature and Results*,
 4. H. S. Bhatia, *Military History of British India*, Deep & Deep Publications Pvt. Ltd., 2008.
-

Research Area

[Military Affairs](#), [Military History](#)

Tags
