

Caste and the Modern Indian Army

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Abstract

This article takes a look at the role caste has played in the functioning and ethos of the Indian Army over the colonial and post-colonial period. For the British, conventionally understood as the forerunner of the modern Indian Army, caste was one of the pivots around which Indian society revolved. By exploring this relationship between caste and the modern Indian Army present essay will argue that part of the reason for the dynamics of caste continuing to play a role in the affairs of the army is the fact that the army for all its denials does rely on religious and caste traditions to indoctrinate recruits, particularly in single class regiments such as the Sikh Regiment. The recruit in such regiments is not to merely undergo training in arms, he is also to imbibe the doctrines and the supposedly true traditions of his faith for his martial qualities are seemingly linked to his religious ethos. Thereby religious sentiments, ethos, and traditions, are consciously encouraged and propagated. Thus such traditions become very much part of the regimental heritage and matrix.

Keywords: Caste, Colonial Armies, Post-Independence Indian Army, Martial Race, Army Recruitment

The centrality of caste in the Indian context can hardly be overstated. It is though not my intention here to dwell on the origin of the caste system and its evolution over the ages. This article takes a look at the role caste has played in the functioning and ethos of the Indian Army over the colonial and post-colonial periods. For the British caste was one of the pivots around which Indian society revolved. Caste had therefore to be understood and interpreted. The colonial armies were no exception to this trend. One says colonial armies in the plural because the British Indian Army was in reality three Indian armies till 1895, namely the Bengal,

Madras and Bombay Presidency armies. While caste played a huge role in the scheme of things in all three armies, it impinged the functioning of the three armies in contrasting ways.

Caste and Its Centrality: The Pre-1857 Colonial Indian Armies

The Bengal army for instance till the Revolt of 1857 accorded a huge centrality to caste. Its infantry units except for a small number of *Ahirs* or *Yadavs* recruited predominantly upper caste Hindus from modern-day Eastern U.P and Bihar who were mostly middle peasants. Men of this ilk were considered to be by nature obedient, loyal and brave fighters Recruitment was done through serving sepoys who were encouraged to bring back potential recruits from among their relatives and friends while at home. Scouting parties were sent out to look for potential recruits only in exceptional circumstances. The consequence of such a mode of recruitment was that the Bengal army functioned like an in-house upper caste club where ties of clan, neighbourhood and high caste rhetoric took Centre stage. The sepoys claimed that they were entitled to a certain amount of leeway in matters of religion. A high caste ethos pervaded the army and the sepoys could refuse in certain instances the call of military duty if it conflicted with their religious beliefs. To cite an instance the sepoys could refuse overseas service if it involved sea travel as it was considered sacrilegious by many Hindus. A culture of conditional obedience thus evolved in the Bengal army where the high caste sepoy was ready to render obedience as long his notions of honour constituted to a large extent by his sense of religious honour were not violated.¹

The brute dominance of the High Caste sepoys in the Bengal army was punctured somewhat by the induction of Gorkhas in the 1830s and the Sikhs in the 1840s, two communities destined to play a central role in the post-1857 Colonial Armies. Nevertheless, high caste domination continued to be a cardinal feature of the Bengal Army till 1857. This was in contrast to the Bombay army where despite the presence of a large number of *Purbaiyas*, religious or caste sentiments were given short thrift if the sepoys tried to employ it as a bargaining chip to evade military duty. One probable reason for the *Purbaiyas* being unable to extract concessions from the Bombay Army in a manner akin to that of the Bengal Army was that they were not a brute majority in the Bombay Army. The Bombay army was a mixed army which recruited a large array of communities including a large number of Dalits from the *Mahar* community. The *Purbaiyas* though a significant bloc were merely one of the many communities in the Bombay army. There was thus an element of balance in the Bombay Army which could negate any attempt by the *purbaiyas* to exercise any undue influence on the functioning and ethos of the Bengal Army.²

¹ Report of the Enquiry Committee of the Barrackpore Mutiny, 1824, Military (Misc), NAI. Vol 11, 479.

² WBSA, Reply of Major General John Malcolm, Select Committee for Indian affairs, 1831-32, vol 11, Appendix B, 4127.

I will though argue that the relative lack of numbers for the Purbaiyas in the Bombay Army was not the only reason for the Purbaiyas having no leeway in the Bombay army as far as their service conditions were concerned. It was also the case that the policymakers of the Bombay Army had a different philosophy than those in charge of the Bengal Army. While they professed respect for the caste sentiments of the sepoys, they were uncompromising in their belief that caste could not be allowed to come in the way of performing military duties. All efforts of the *Purbaiyas* towards extracting some concessions in this respect were resisted firmly. Thus the pre-mutiny Bombay army was one of those rare colonial institutions where the dynamics of caste did not assume an overwhelmingly domineering role. This policy of keeping caste at bay was reasonably successful even though 5 out of 29 regiments of the Bombay army mutinied in 1857.³

While the Bombay army could be thus said to have adopted a stance of unconditional obedience on the part of the sepoy in contrast to the culture of conditional obedience existing in the Bengal army, the Madras army adopted a middle ground as far as its ethos and functioning was concerned. After an initial period of preferring high castes including Purbaiyas from the Bengal Presidency, the Madras army shifted its focus to recruiting middle and so-called lower castes apart from a large number of Muslims by the final decades of the eighteenth century. This shift in policy was prompted by the belief that middle and avowedly lower castes were less sensitive when it came to matters of caste. The policymakers of the Madras Army also seemed sanguine over the prospects of successfully dealing with the religious sentiments of the Muslim recruits.⁴

Their hopes were soon belied when a major mutiny broke out in the Vellore cantonment in 1806. The sepoys were initially up in arms over an order which called for the strict implementation of a pre-existing order banning the wearing of caste marks and whiskers on parade, a restriction which affected both Hindu and Muslim soldiers. Matters were further aggravated by the issuance of new turbans which the sepoys resented because they were uncannily similar to the headgear worn by the supposedly half-caste Portuguese drummers, whom the sepoys detested and looked down upon. The sepoys expressed their indignation by stating before the authorities that nobody would marry their daughters or share food and water with them if they adopted the new headgear. Discontent was initially expressed in the form of unruly behaviour at regimental parades, the tearing of regimental flags etc. Open outright violence was yet to occur.⁵

Finally, the sepoys broke out in open mutiny on 10th July 1806 with over 2500

³ P.J.O, Taylor, *Companion to the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996), 357.

⁴ H.H Dodwell, *Sepoy Recruitment in the Old Madras Army*, (Calcutta: Indian Historical Record Commission, 1922), 14.

⁵ Court of Enquiry into the Vellore Mutiny, 4-11 September 1806, Foreign (Secret), NAI, 10340.

sepoys being involved in the uprising. The revolt was though quelled with the sepoys suffering heavy casualties in contrast to relatively light casualties among the European troops. In the aftermath of the Vellore mutiny, discontent surfaced among the native regiments in several stations but they were all nipped in the bud. A potentially major uprising spread over the length of South India predating the Revolt of 1857 by 50 years fizzled out before it could assume ominous proportions, though the amount of civilian support for the sepoys remains a hazy aspect. Possibly the aspect of civilian support would have been better understood if the revolt at Vellore station and in its aftermath at various other army stations would have played out its role for a certain length of time. Only then could a definitive answer have been given on this score.⁶

In the aftermath of the Vellore mutiny, the sepoys had a partial victory as the order prohibiting the wearing of caste marks and whiskers on parade was rescinded. The controversial headgear was not issued. The Madras army henceforth concentrated on empowering the middle and so-called lower caste sepoys and imparting to them a distinct identity. Palanquin allowances were for instance awarded to sepoys who performed gallantly on the battlefield. This privilege of riding a palanquin was a rare honour for a so-called low caste or middle caste soldier in a society where access to a palanquin or being eligible to ride one was a marker of your elite status in society. Army service was thus empowering the lower and middle caste sepoy and conferring on him a distinct identity, a strategy which seemingly worked well as the Madras sepoy remained aloof from the strains and pulls in civilian society and remained steadfastly loyal in 1857.⁷

Caste and the Post 1857 British Indian Army

Things would though take a dramatic turn with the revolt of 1857. The Bengal army would revolt and witness a near-complete disintegration. While this is not the space for entering into a detailed discussion regarding the causes of 1857, it would suffice to say that the dynamics of caste and religion apart from factors like the Annexation of Awadh, Doctrine of Lapse, conservative reaction to the social reform laws enacted by the British were only one of the multiple factors behind the occurrence of the greatest anti-colonial struggle of the 19th century, an uprising which in its initial phase posed a fundamental challenge to the continuance of British rule in India. Caste was an integral part of the ethos and functioning of the Bengal Army and the *purbaiyasepoy* was very sensitive to any perceived slights to his caste and religious honour. Wounded on these counts he did not consider it binding to tender allegiance. It would suffice to say that the affair of the greased cartridges which had everything to do with caste and religious injunctions was the proverbial last straw on the camel's back.

⁶Depositions of Mustaa Beg and Lt. Col Forbes before the Enquiry Commission set up to investigate the Vellore Mutiny, 21st July, 1806, Foreign (Secret), 4-11 September, NAI, 11163-4, 11128-30.

⁷GOCC, Madras Presidency, 21st September, 1806, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai.

Dawn of the Martial Race Doctrine

The tide would gradually turn in favour of the British and they would ring in drastic changes in the wake of their triumph. A paradigm shift would occur with the colonial armies. For starters, the old Upper Caste heavy Bengal Army was completely dismantled though some high caste regiments were retained. Initially the British adopted a balanced recruitment strategy where different communities were to balance each other. This though was a short-lived strategy and the 1880's would see the birth of a new recruitment policy known as the Martial Race theory. The theory initially propounded by Fredrick Roberts in effect stated that only a few select communities like the *Sikhs*, *Gorkhas*, *Dogras*, *Punjabi Mussalmans*, *Pathans* and a few others in the sub-continent were to be dubbed martial and capable of fighting bravely and effectively. The reasons behind a community possessing martial qualities according to the ideologues of the Martial Race theory were manifold and the only point of agreement among the proponents of the Martial Race theory was that wheat-eating, less literate peasants from the rural areas made the best fighters. Some of the proponents of the martial race theory ascribed martial qualities to the presence of advantageous genes while others stressed ecological, environmental, historical and political factors. For instance, Roberts believed that long years of peace in the Madras Presidency had enervated the Madras Sepoy and had made him unmartial. George Macmunn another important proponent of the Martial Race theory believed that the Aryans had enslaved the original inhabitants and deprived them of the right to bear arms. Therefore, only the communities of Aryan origin were capable of being martial. Macmunn also believed that the tenets of certain religions like Sikhism made them martial. Macmunn though did not give much stress to climatic factors, unlike Roberts who believed that people from colder areas proved to be better fighters.⁸

A cursory look at the martial race discourse would seemingly make us believe that caste as a factor was absent as far as the labelling of communities as martial or non-martial was concerned. The high caste Purbaiya, the original martial class of the colonial armies was for instance given the short thrift as he was considered untrustworthy after the near total revolt of the Purbaiyas of the Bengal army in 1857. Yet the shadow of caste did loom large in an insidious manner over the new recruitment policy. Many so-called low caste communities were the first casualties of the martial race theory. The Mahars who had served in the Bombay army for a long and had played an important part in the battle of Bhima-Koregaon in 1818, an event which has contemporary reverberations were gradually phased out by the 1890's. Similarly, the *Mazhabi Sikhs* who were considered untouchable Sikhs were also weeded out of the ranks by the 1890's. So were the Bheels and certain tribes from Assam who had served loyally in 1857. It seemed that proponents of the

⁸ Field Marshal Earl Roberts of Kandahar, *Forty One Years in India, From Subaltern to Commander-In Chief*, London, Richard Bentley and Sons, 1871, 499, 530, 552. See also Major George F. Macmunn, *The Armies of India*, (Bristol: Crecy Books, 1911).

martial race theory held the belief that the lowest castes were not worthy of being martial races, their avowedly lowly origins prevented them from being martial.⁹

World War I would provide a brief hiatus in the Martial Race Theory. The unprecedented demands for manpower would force the policy-makers of the Colonial army to briefly abandon the martial race theory since recruiting only select communities would not suffice to meet the enormous demands posed by the First World War. The *Mahar regiment* for instance was reinstated in the army only to be thrown out by the British after the conclusion of the First World War. The *Mazhabis* would meet the same fate and suffer massive reductions after the end of the First World War. Similar was the case with other supposedly low caste communities who had been recruited in the face of a massive demand for fighting men. The break with the Martial Race theory had been very grudging and had never been total despite the enormous odds faced by the army recruiters.

The army would initially try to meet the challenge by intensifying recruitment from the martial communities. It was only when the strategy of tapping to the utmost the manpower resources from the avowedly martial communities failed that the colonial government reluctantly turned to the communities dubbed as non-martial for recruitment. Their bias against these supposedly non-martial communities was amply made clear by the fact that these so-called non-martial communities were often relegated to non-combat roles.

World War II would prove no exception to this trend. Again the enormity of the situation forced the army recruiters to grudgingly turn towards the non-martial communities. The *Mahars* and *Mazhabis* were again recruited. The *Mahars* now had a powerful patron in B.R Ambedkar, a member of the defence board and a *Mahar* himself. Nevertheless, deep-seated bias against the non-martial communities would ensure that the non-martial communities would not be posted in frontline areas in a manner akin to that of the First World War. Units composed of Non-Martial recruits would invariably be classified as incapable of fighting well though they were hardly given the chance of proving their mettle.

There were though certain differences in the situation after World War I. Independence was around the corner, and so was Partition and impending violence which would ultimately assume the proportions of a civil war. While it is not my intention here to discuss the mayhem which accompanied independence, it would be apt to say that the newly independent India inherited a truncated Indian Army on account of partition as a part of the personnel and assets that went to Pakistan. What though was intact was the continuing presence of low-caste recruits, who had been re-inducted during the Second World War. This brings us to the moot question. How big a role does caste play in the scheme of things for the Post-Independence Indian Army?

⁹ Steven I Wilkinson, *Army And Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy since Independence*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2015), 49-51.

Caste and the Post-Independence Indian Army

On the surface of it, caste dynamics played a minimal role in the functioning of the Post-Independence Indian Army. An order passed in January 1949 by the Commander-In-Chief General Cariappa stated to the effect that recruitment to the army would be open though to all classes of Indians irrespective of caste, creed, ethnicity, religion etc. Despite such protestations, the ethos of the martial race theory has continued to play a major role. Though regiments raised after Independence have been mixed units recruited on an all-India basis, the basic composition of the old regiments has been left untouched even though alterations and additions to the strength of such regiments have been made. The result is that a significant number of infantry regiments are still single-class or class company regiments. A single-class regiment would recruit from one single community or caste, for example, the *Sikh regiment* is composed solely of Jat Sikhs while another single-class regiment the *Sikh Light Infantry* recruits from solely *Mazhabi Sikhs*.¹⁰

A fixed class regiment will recruit from more than one community but will recruit only from certain specified classes. For instance, the Punjab regiment, a fixed class regiment will have two *Sikh* and two *Dogra Companies* typically in each of its battalions. Similarly, the Bihar regiment, another fixed-class regiment, will have two companies of Biharis and two companies of Adivasis recruited from Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. Thus class or single-class regiments stand out in contrast to the regiments raised after independence where recruitment is on an all-India basis and troops from different classes are indiscriminately mixed. In reality, the all-India recruitment often happens at a regional level to ensure differences in food, language etc are not overwhelmingly wide. Nevertheless, these regiments are different from the single class or class company regiments in the sense that these regiments recruit from a much wider pool and mix troops hailing from different communities indiscriminately. The most high profile of these new regiments recruited on an all-India basis is the Guards regiments formed in April 1949.¹¹

Now the question arises as to why the ethos of the martial race theory continues to cast its shadow over the Indian Army even though the overwhelming majority of regiments raised after Independence are mixed regiments recruited on an all-India basis with troops mixed indiscriminately. Why in the first place were steps not taken immediately after Independence to abolish the Martial Race mode of recruitment despite official pronouncement towards that end? How did all this affect the caste dynamics in the Indian Army? Did the persistence of the notion of martial classes perpetuate discrimination against recruits from certain avowedly lower castes?

The reason behind the doggedness of the notion of martial classes may be sought

¹⁰ Wilkinson, "Army and Nation", 100.

¹¹ Wilkinson, "Army and Nation", 110.

in the attitude of the military establishment after Independence. Most of the top generals in the initial decades of independence such as Cariappa, Thimmaya, J.N Chaudhuri and at a slightly later period Manekshaw were firm in the belief that no radical change be affected in the recruitment policy of the Indian Army and the composition, ethos and traditions of the old existing regiments were not to be tampered with. A recruitment policy catering to certain specific classes who were recruited in single class regiments or the next best alternative fixed class regiments was according to them best suited to maintain the fighting qualities of the Indian Army though they on occasion took contrary stances in public stressing on the fact that the Indian Army was now an all-India service open to all classes irrespective of caste, ethnicity and religion.

The civilian establishment partly out of a desire not to rock the boat too hard acceded to the viewpoint of these high-profile generals and sought to strike a balance by insisting that all new infantry regiments be recruited on an all-India basis. They also took care to diversify the officer corps and make recruitment to the officer corps truly representative of the country's diversity though the overrepresentation of certain groups and communities in the officer corps remains a hard fact owing to deep traditions of army service in certain areas and communities in India. The civilian establishment in the initial decades and to date has also been steadfast in shooting down any proposal to form new regiments based on caste or region. This brings us back to our central question, the issue of caste and the Indian Army.

On the face of it, the partial persistence of the Martial Race theory did not in any way discriminate against the presence of lower castes in the post-independence Indian Army. Unlike past instances in the Colonial Indian Army, Indian low-caste recruits or existing regiments with predominantly low-caste recruits were not dubbed non-martial and shunted out in the post-independence Indian Army. The flip side of this was though that the army stood firm against any attempts to introduce caste-based reservations in the Indian Army. When Defence Minister Krishna Menon asked the existing Army Chief Thimmaya as to why the army was not implementing Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe reservations, Thimmaya in a letter to the Defence Minister firstly emphasized that the army was now open to all Indians irrespective of caste, creed and religion.¹² Thimmaya now came to

¹² Stephen Cohen, Assistant Professor of Political Science in Asian Studies at the University of Illinois, in his article argued that pre-modern Indian armies displayed an aristocratic bias though peasants hailing from largely lower caste backgrounds were often recruited temporarily for campaigns. Cohen argues that the colonial Indian Armies followed by and large a policy of favouring higher and dominant castes even though recruitment was on a permanent basis. Cohen is of the opinion that the post-independence Indian Army is not immune to caste based dynamics even though the rank and file and the officer corps is officially open to all irrespective of caste and creed. Yet caste continues to subtly assert its influence. See: Stephen P. Cohen, "The Untouchable Soldier: Caste, Politics, and the Indian Army", *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 3 (May, 1969), 453-468.

the moot point that any proposed break in the recruitment policy should not impair the fighting qualities and the cohesion of fighting units based largely on time-tested traditions and kinship. Krishna Menon despite his reputation of being bossy and pushy dropped the matter but the issue would not disappear quietly.

Matters would come to a head again in the 1970s when the then Defence Minister Jagjivan Ram asked the army pointedly as to why it was not catering to the existing reservation policy for Scheduled castes and tribes as far as recruitment to the army was concerned. Manekshaw fuming at what he felt was a completely unwarranted and dangerous intervention in the affairs of the army asked his Deputy Adjutant General to reply that when reservations were introduced in the 1950 there was a clause that it would not apply to the army. The underlying logic behind Manekshaw and Thimmaya's refusal to entertain proposals for reservation in the army was very clear. While time-tested regiments composed overwhelmingly of avowedly low castes were valued and there was no bar to their recruitment in mixed regiments provided they met the required criteria, any provision which seemingly lowered the bar than was the norm for entry in the army would be firmly resisted.

Yet the shadow of caste would not disappear from the army. The post-mandal phase has seen a profusion in the demands for the raising of caste-based regiments in the Indian Army. There have been demands for instance for the raising of a Yadav Regiment. Caste directly reared its ugly head in the retirement age controversy involving General V.K Singh in 2012. Rajput politicians campaigned in favour of V.K Singh. The issue brought to the surface the factionalism which existed within the officer corps of the army. And caste antagonisms might have played a small but significant part in these cleavages within the officer corps. The army might want to wish away caste but it refuses to disappear easily.

Conclusion

Part of the reason for the dynamics of caste continuing to play a role in the affairs of the army is the fact that the army for all its denials does rely on religious and caste traditions to indoctrinate recruits, particularly in single-class regiments such as the Sikh Regiment. The recruit in such regiments is not to merely undergo training in arms, he is also to imbibe the doctrines and the supposedly true traditions of his faith for his martial qualities are seemingly linked to his religious ethos. Thereby religious sentiments, ethos, and traditions, are consciously encouraged and propagated. Thus such traditions become very much part of the regimental heritage and matrix. Religion becomes a vital cog in the operational dynamics of the regiment.

In the end, I ask one last uncomfortable question, why are *Jat Sikhs* and *Mazhabi Sikhs* recruited in separate single-class regiments? Why is caste divisiveness being perpetuated in the name of tradition? There might be no black-and-white answer to these questions. Such issues belong to the grey domain. The army would justify such policy decisions in the name of operational efficiency. That is only part of the

story. While operational functionality might be touted as a factor, the fact remains that caste and religion remain very much a part of the operational matrix of the army, particularly its infantry regiments.

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