



International Journal of Research Publication and Reviews

Journal homepage: www.ijrpr.com ISSN 2582-7421

The Sepoy's Triple Burden in the East India Company's Army (1757-1857)

Avish Patel

Research Scholar (History), Department of Social Science and Humanities, Dr. Ram Manohar Lohiya National Law University, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India

ABSTRACT

This study explores the evolution of the sepoy system under the East India Company (1757–1857), with a particular focus on the triple burden that is service, stigma and subversion in the army, and its central role in consolidating British colonial power while simultaneously generating systemic instability. Emerging from the Mughal *sipahi* tradition, sepoys were gradually institutionalized into the Bengal, Madras, and Bombay Armies, with the Bengal Army developing into a caste-conscious force largely dominated by Brahmins and Rajputs.

The paper argues that the Company's military apparatus rested on a paradox. On one hand, colonial policies emphasized discipline, caste accommodations, and selective economic incentives to secure sepoy loyalty; on the other, structural inequalities, racial hierarchies, stagnant wages, and cultural insensitivity fuelled dissatisfaction and unrest. Through a close examination of key flashpoints, including the Battle of Plassey (1757), Battle of Buxar (1765), Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816), and the Barrackpore Mutiny (1824), the research highlights the sepoy's complex dual identity as both an instrument of colonial enforcement and a source of resistance within the Company's military structure.

Rejecting the reductionist "slave soldier" narrative, this study positions sepoys as pragmatic historical actors who negotiated military service within a framework of colonial exploitation, caste identity, and emerging political consciousness. By reassessing recruitment patterns, military discipline, and socio-economic conditions, the paper demonstrates that the sepoys were not passive victims but active participants in shaping the dynamics of colonial power and instability in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India.

KEYWORDS: Sepoys, East India Company, Bengal army, Caste, Colonial India

INTRODUCTION

The term Sepoys is an anglicised version of the Persian word *Sipahi*, meaning foot soldier or infantryman.¹ The origin of Sepoys predates the company's rule as under the Mughal rule, the infantry was commonly referred to as *Sipahi*. The company just inherited the prevailing military composition into its own ranks and divided their army regionally as Bengal Army, Bombay Army and Madras Army. The evolution of the sepoy from Mughal times to the British colonial period reflects significant shifts in military organization and colonial strategies.

The Sepoys under the company rule were permanent employees unlike Mughals Empire where soldiers were paid in *Jagirs* and often worked as part time warriors.² The actual size of the Mughal army is not known but few scholars have attempted to give us their hypothesis. Francois Bernier who travelled during the reign of Aurangzeb estimates that there were Twenty lakh, forty thousand Cavalry, fifteen thousand Infantry.³ It is been estimated that the Mughals focused more on their horses and less on their foot soldiers.⁴

The infantry during the Mughals were not ignored but due to their central Asian origin they focused more on developing their cavalry which they imported from Iran and Arabia. The decline of the Mughal Empire in the 18th century created a power vacuum that European colonial powers sought to fill.

The development of modern infantry in India was developed not by the English but by the French governor general Joseph Francois Dupleix to fight local wars in southern India. After the decline of French influence in South India, the formation of the East India Company's standing army began with the

¹ Kallie Szczepanski, "Overview of the Sepoy," ThoughtCo, last modified February 28, 2019, accessed January 8, 2025, <https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-a-sepoy-195403>.

² Randolph G. S. Cooper, *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 45.

³ William Irvine, *The Army of the Indian Moghuls: Its Organization and Administration* (London: Luzac & Co., 1903), 6.

⁴ Dirk Kolff, *Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 24–25.

establishment of the Madras Army, initially known as the Coast Army. This process was carried out under the command of British General Stringer Lawrence, often called as the "Father of the Indian Army".⁵

The British East India Company established three main presidency armies: the Bengal Army, the Bombay Army, and the Madras Army. Each operated semi-independently, recruiting and training its own sepoy regiments. These armies became the backbone of British military power in India. By the mid-19th century, sepoys constituted the majority of the Company's forces, playing crucial roles in expanding and consolidating British control over the subcontinent.⁶

The sepoy system had lasting impacts on the Indian military tradition. Even after the British Crown took direct control of India following the Revolt of 1857, sepoys remained integral to the colonial army. The term "sepoy" continues to be used in modern Indian, Pakistani, and Nepalese armies to denote the rank of a private soldier.

This historical trajectory from Mughal infantry to colonial sepoy regiments illustrates the adaptation and transformation of military practices in response to changing political and technological landscapes.

RECRUITMENT

Kabhi Sukh aur Kabhi dukh, Angrez ka naukhar

(Sometimes pleasure, sometimes pain, in the service of the English)

This was the marching song of the Bombay infantry which operated in the western coast of India.

Nationalist historians have termed this as a source of anguish because the Britain have conquered India using our own armies substantially made up of their own countrymen.⁷

But it would be wrong to assume that these sepoys were traitor or British sympathisers as there was little or no concept of nationalism in its truest sense. The enlistees were mostly unemployed or were generally in debt and had no issue regarding their service as army men to the British.

By the middle of the 18th century the Company began to enlist well trained Topasses and sepoys equipped like European army but their numbers were very few and they had to be depended on the Royal Army sent by the Crown in protection of the English settlements but that too was very expensive for the company. These early English soldiers were ignorant of the Indian cultures and languages and many of them perished from diseases like Cholera and Tuberculosis.⁸

Before the 1740s the company managed to stay out of war with the native princes, as first they had no strong fortification of their settlements and second their rivalry with other European company made them play the game of deterrence meaning they acknowledged their territory and their right to trade.⁹

The creation of the indigenous body of army was raised by Robert Clive after the recapture of Calcutta in January 1757, it was known as 1st Regiment of Bengal Native Infantry long known as *Lal Paltan*.¹⁰ The word *Paltan* is a poor mixture of the French word Platoon meaning a small body of army composed of twenty to fifty soldiers.

The company preferred to recruit agricultural labourers, rural area's males and ex-soldiers of the native states. The company officials were of the view that the agricultural classes made the best soldiers.¹¹ This view is rather half logical because the British had no option but to recruit men from conquered areas like Bengal, Bihar and eastern Awadh and it is common for agricultural labourers do be in great debt and a desperation for employment.

The British policies concerning the recruitment of the sepoys in pre 1857 was also based on superiority of the races, though the actual concept of the 'Martial Races' given by Robert Orne emerged after the 1857 revolt. They believed that the wheat eating people are more martial than the rice eating people of the rice belt and recruited the north wheat eating people from the '*Purbiyas*' meaning people from modern day Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Western Bihar.

⁵ Claude Markovits, "Armed Cosmopolitans? Indian Sepoys and Their Travels in the Service of the East India Company (1762–1815)," in *Cosmopolitismes en Asie du Sud*, ed. Corinne Lefèvre, Ines G. Županov, and Jorge Flores (Paris: Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2015), 207–22, <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.editionsehess.23167>.

⁶ Stephen Peter Rosen, *Societies and Military Power: India and Its Armies* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996).

⁷ G. J. Bryant, "Indigenous Mercenaries in the Service of European Imperialists: The Case of the Sepoys in the Early British Indian Army, 1750–1800," *War in History* 7, no. 2 (2000): 125–45, <https://doi.org/10.1177/096834450000700102>.

⁸ Narender Yadav, "Evolution of the British Indian Army: An Overview," *Journal of the United Service Institution of India* 154, no. 638 (October–December 2024).

⁹ *Ibid.*,

¹⁰ A. H. Bingley, *Brahmans* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1897), 8.

¹¹ Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 37

In 1820, one tenth of the personnels in the Bengal army were Muslims and low castes and around 80% of the sepoys were Brahmins and Rajputs from regions like Awadh, Bihar and Rohilkhand.¹²

The Bombay army in 1820 comprised twelve thousand four hundred seventy-six Hindustanis, ten thousand and fifteen Konkani's and one thousand nine hundred ten Deccani's.¹³

Unfortunately, data regarding the composition and recruitment of the Madras Army is currently unavailable and remains a subject for future research.

The recruitment was done as per merit basis and Dr Kaushik Roy in his monumental work has observed that a sepoy joined the army at the age of sixteen, became a Naik at the age of thirty-six, a Havildar at the age of forty-five and finally a Jamadar at the age of sixty.¹⁴ However, this scheme was not fully applied as strictly because many promotions were made as per personnel favours and nepotism also.

The EIC didn't recruit the sepoys directly nor there was any physical exam as it did with the civil servants, it was the sepoys who encouraged their fellow village mates or caste mates to join the army for better salaries and living conditions. The war stories travelled in the villages and many young men observed working in the army as an honour which is also seen in the independent army.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CASTE BACKGROUND

As many scholars have argued that the base of the British Indian army has been filled by dominant castes like Brahmins, Rajputs, and Pashtuns. The Brahmins joined the army as they were the first to educate their children in the western lifestyle and the British policies made sure that their caste principles were not violated. Warren Hastings took special care in ensuring that the British Indian army followed the caste norms as strictly as possible. It gave them the liberty to cook their own food, use their own utensils and also wear their sacred thread, as argued by Durga Das Bannerji.¹⁵

The Rajputs joined the army as part of their longstanding tradition as a warrior caste within Hindu society. A relevant example of this trend can be seen in their declining prominence under the appeasement policies of various Muslim rulers, who increasingly recruited other martial groups, such as the Marathas, Kurmis, Ahirs, Deccanis, and Afghans into military service. However, British recruitment policies gradually transformed the Bengal Army into a caste-conscious force, leading to the "Brahminization of the Army". This process was actively encouraged by the colonial state, which sought to rapidly raise a large and reliable military force to secure its expanding commercial and political interests in the Indian subcontinent. By favouring upper-caste Hindus and Muslims, made them believed that they were enlisting troops with a strong sense of discipline, loyalty, and martial tradition, though this policy would later contribute to deep divisions and unrest within the ranks.

However, the caste consciousness was only limited to the Bengal army as Bombay and Madras army was more heterogeneous than the Bengal army and there are many instances where the sepoys of these army crossed the sea for military campaigns.

The recruitment of the sepoys from the countryside made the shortage of labourer in these areas, and the zamindars faced economic loss from agricultural output as labourers couldn't be found for work or those willing to work demanded better wages just like their companions getting from the army. The military service took family labour away and hindered agricultural production, and most peasants preferred to send only one member of the family for military service¹⁶

The biggest obstacle the company faced in raising their army came not from the native princes but from the big Zamindars, who made recruitment difficult for the tenants to join the army by socially boycotting them in their villages or by reducing them into beggars.

TRAINING AND DISCIPLINE

The initial success for the British Indian Army was its coordination in the battlefield. This coordination was achieved by their rigorous training and discipline.

However, the early mixed company forces were derisory in military terms. They were given no tactical field training, and the civilian governors did not even have general court martial powers to discipline them properly. Such forces, both European and Indian, would have been incapable of regular field operations in the European manner, but this was precisely what was to be required of them when, after the end of the war of the Austrian succession in 1748, the company took on its French rivals and their Indian allies in the Carnatic region of India.¹⁷

¹² Kaushik Roy, *War, Culture and Society in Early Modern South Asia, 1740–1849* (London: Routledge, 2011), 49-50.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 78

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 77-78

¹⁵ Durga Das Banerjee, *The Indian Struggle* (Bombay: Allied Publishers, 1946), 92–93.

¹⁶ Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company*, 57.

¹⁷ Bryant, "Indigenous Mercenaries," 5.

Initial training of sepoy was heavily influenced by French military models, as many EIC officers had earlier served in the Carnatic Wars against the French. However, by the late 18th century, the British drill manual and regimental discipline became dominant. The 1764 regulations formalized a European structure of infantry drill, musketry, marching, and parade discipline.¹⁸

Training was adapted to Indian conditions, incorporating aspects of indigenous martial arts, climate conditions, and dietary requirements. However, British officers ensured that European drills were strictly followed to instil uniformity and centralized command.

From the late 18th century, the Brown Bess musket became standard issue and the Sepoys were trained in, Loading and firing in rapid succession (Three rounds per minute), Cleaning and maintaining weapons, Using bayonets effectively in close combat, Firing in line and rank formations.¹⁹

Discipline in the EIC army was modelled after European standards, emphasizing obedience, precision, and unwavering performance under pressure. Sepoys underwent intense daily drills in formations, musketry, and bayonet usage, designed not only to prepare them for battlefield manoeuvres but also to inculcate mechanical obedience. Officers believed that constant repetition of movement under strict supervision would mould the Indian soldier into a figure of reliability and predictability. Every aspect of a sepoy's life from the way he marched in the fields and the care he took of his weapon, was regulated by codes and expectations.²⁰

Deviations from this strict order were met with swift punishment. Flogging, confinement, demotion, or public humiliation were often used to correct lapses in behaviour and maintain cohesion within the ranks.

This severe disciplinary regime, however, was not enforced merely for the sake of control; it was perceived as a necessary counterbalance to the Company's anxieties about governing a large army of non-Europeans. British officers, many of whom held orientalist or racialized views about their Indian subordinates, considered discipline to be a civilizing force. In their eyes, it transformed Indian peasants, considered prone to factionalism, caste division, and emotional instability into loyal instruments of colonial power

PAY AND ALLOWANCES

The British Indian Army between 1757 and 1857 was a complex institution shaped by the needs of colonial expansion, military efficiency, and economic pragmatism. A critical element of this structure was the system of pay for its personnel. While the British East India Company sought to maintain a disciplined and loyal army through regular wages, the disparity in payment between Indian and British soldiers, and the stagnation of pay over time, contributed to increasing dissatisfaction, ultimately becoming one of the underlying causes of the Revolt of 1857.²¹

The pay differed from rank to rank and also by racial differences. The highest post for an Indian was the *Subadar* and he was paid sixteen rupees, *Jamadar* received sixteen rupees, *Havildar* received ten rupees, *Naick* received eight rupees, Sepoy received six rupees, Flag Man received six rupees, Tom Tom fellow received six rupees, Trumpet fellow received six rupees and *Vakeel* received six rupees.²²

Apart from their salary, they also received special *Bhatta* for their services in field and it included the Sergeant receiving twenty rupees per month, *Subadar* got eight per month, *Jamadar* got 4 rupees per day, *Havildar* got two rupees per day and *Naick* got two rupees per day.²³

Beyond base pay, sepoy was eligible for a campaign allowance known as *bhatta*, which was a crucial incentive for service in field operations and this allowance varied by both rank and campaign type. However, over time, these allowances became a point of contention. The withdrawal or reduction of *bhatta*, especially during peacetime or in frontier postings, was viewed by sepoy as a breach of implicit contractual obligations, contributing significantly to resentment and unrest within the ranks.

LIVING CONDITIONS

The living Conditions of the sepoy were very much different from their commanders who were known as *Sahibs*, these *sahibs* lived in bungalows in the cantonment area and the sepoy lived in their Regiment quarters.²⁴ These quarters in the Bengal army were organised on caste basis and their chef was also upper castes because it was forbidden for an upper caste Hindu to eat from a lower caste Hindu. This was not the case in the Bombay and Madras army as it was more liberal and their commanding officers didn't allow this segregation as seen in the Bengal army.

The sepoy was not allowed to keep their families but some of them kept women in their quarters and the *Sahibs* never forbade this because all women were put down as relations²⁵

¹⁸ John Williams, *An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Native Infantry: From Its First Formation in 1757 to 1796* (London: John Murray, 1817), 227.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 230.

²⁰ Amiya Barat, *The Bengal Native Infantry: Its Organisation and Discipline, 1796–1852* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), 45–46.

²¹ "Sepoys were unhappy with the pay inequality compared to British soldiers... Neither had sepoy wages been raised for over 50 years, meaning that in real terms their pay had lost half of its value since 1800." World History Encyclopedia, accessed Mar 16, 2025.

²² India Office Records, Country Correspondence, Military Department, 1757, British Library, London, 15.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ The English in India, description of sepoy and sahib quarters, accessed April 8, 2025, Victorian Web, <https://victorianweb.org/victorian/history/empire/1857/bm4.html>.

²⁵ Sita Ram Pande, *From Sepoy to Subedar: Being the Life and Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a Native Officer of the Bengal Army*, Written and

The quarters were housed in long barrack style buildings which could accommodate dozens of sepoys in one hall. Privacy was minimal and they were encouraged for communal sleeping to forge unity among them.

Each sepoy was allotted a *Charpai* or Charpoy for sleeping, a wooden box for belongings and a trunk used for storing their uniform.²⁶

Most of them used their spare time in religious prayer, storytelling and playing *Kabaddi*, it was considered as a traditional leisure game among the warriors. The English commanders also took part in it.²⁷

FOUNDATION OF THE BENGAL ARMY

The first English factory in Bengal was established by the East India Company on the banks of the Hooghly River in 1651. This factory was initially a trading post for the company's goods, particularly textiles and spices. The EIC's presence in Hooghly marked a significant step in their expansion and eventual dominance in India and in 1690, British agent Job Charnock on behalf of the Company received permission from Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb in Delhi to establish a factory in Bengal, in the place called Calcutta.²⁸

The Bengal sepoy army of the East India Company had a very humble Beginning. From the few native levies which were raised in 1757, the army developed into a body of men trained and disciplined on the European model, over fifty thousand strong.²⁹ They shouldered and executed a task, undreamt of at the army's foundation, the conquest for the East India Company of all North India. In effect, "an army was Built up from the people of India themselves, which in the end brought its own country under the sway of its foreign masters."³⁰

However, it was not the largest army in the Indian subcontinent but it was the most modernized and organized force after the downfall of the Marathas in 1751.³¹

The army was divided into many regiments such as four Infantry Regiments, ten Cavalry Regiments, seven Garrison Battalions (raised between 1848–1857 for internal security), around twenty-nine Irregular Infantry and Irregular Cavalry units. The Bengal Native Artillery was largely European-officered and after 1824, sepoys were gradually removed from artillery service due to fear of mutiny.³²

The Bengal Native Army was not only the largest but also the most caste-conscious and socially stratified force among the East India Company's three Presidency Armies. It was predominantly composed of high-caste recruits, drawn largely from the "Purbias". These communities were attracted to military service not only due to economic incentives but also as a means of preserving and elevating their social status through a process sociologists' term as Sanskritization.

Military service in the Bengal Army was seen as a path to reinforce caste identity, as the army allowed strict observance of religious and caste-based customs, including separate kitchens, water bearers (*paniwala*), and dietary regulations. Such institutional accommodations were crucial in drawing upper-caste recruits who viewed military employment as a respectable occupation aligned with their cultural ideals. The prestige associated with serving in a regiment under European command, combined with the promise of stable income and land pensions upon retirement, further incentivized enlistment among these groups.

The army's officers, largely British, encouraged recruitment from these high-caste groups to ensure what they perceived as greater loyalty, discipline, and martial ability. However, this rigid caste composition and the army's over-reliance on a specific regional and social profile would eventually contribute to its vulnerability, particularly in moments of crisis such as the Mutiny of 1857, when widespread religious and cultural insecurities sparked rebellion among these very soldiers.

BATTLE OF PLASSEY: SEPOY'S DILEMMA

The Battle of Plassey (23 June 1757), marked the beginning of the British East India Company's transformation from a commercial enterprise to a territorial power, and its military reorganization in the aftermath significantly impacted the role of Indian sepoys. Prior to Plassey, Indian soldiers were employed by various Indian rulers and European companies in a largely mercenary and decentralized fashion. However, the Company's victory over Siraj-ud-Daula demonstrated the strategic necessity of maintaining a disciplined standing army composed of Indian troops under European officers. As a result, the East India Company began to formally structure its sepoy forces into regiments, particularly within the Bengal Presidency, emphasizing

Related by Himself (London: James Grant, 1873), 58.

²⁶ Amiya Barat, *The Bengal Native Infantry: Its Organisation and Discipline, 1796–1852* (Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962), 48.

²⁷ Ibid., 121.

²⁸ I. B. Watson, "Charnock, Job (c. 1630–1693)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; online ed., Jan. 2008), accessed August 29, 2008, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/5146>.

²⁹ Amiya Sen, *The Structure and Organisation of the Bengal Native Infantry with Special Reference to Problems of Discipline (1796–1852)* (PhD diss., University of Delhi, 1977), 12.

³⁰ E. W. Sheppard, *A Short History of the British Army* (London: Constable & Co., 1926), 264.

³¹ "The Third Maratha War Gave the British Control of Almost All of the Country," *The Hindu*, June 2, 2016, archived October 18, 2020, <https://www.thehindu.com>.

³² T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), 91–93.

discipline, loyalty, and caste homogeneity. Recruitment after 1757 increasingly focused on upper-caste Hindus and Muslims. The British believed these groups were more dependable due to their martial traditions and social cohesion.

Military service offered these groups not just economic rewards, such as regular pay and the promise of land grants, but also opportunities for upward social mobility. Through the maintenance of strict caste practices within the regimental system, such as segregated cooking and respect for religious rituals, the sepoys were able to preserve their social identities. However, this reliance on caste-based recruitment and the increasing institutional rigidity of the army would later prove to be a structural weakness. As Philip Mason aptly remarked in his classic study of the Indian Army, "*Plassey began the great experiment of using an Indian Army to conquer India. The sepoy, once a mercenary, was now to become a regular soldier in a standing army – the instrument by which British power would extend over the subcontinent*" The sepoy's transformation after Plassey thus marked not only a shift in the military apparatus of colonial India but also the integration of Indian manpower into the architecture of British imperialism, a trend that would define the next century of Company and later Crown rule.³³

As argued earlier, there existed no clear or unified concept of nationalism in pre-British India, particularly during the 18th and early 19th centuries when loyalty was primarily shaped by regional, religious, caste-based, or economic affiliations rather than national consciousness. However, the sepoy's position in the service of the British East India Company increasingly became morally and emotionally conflicted. This "sepoy's dilemma", of being ordered to fight against fellow countrymen, kin, or co-religionists, was rooted not in nationalist sentiment, but in a profound ethical and social tension. Sepoys swore allegiance to the Company and fought for "their salt" (namak), a metaphor for loyalty tied to livelihood and obligation. Yet, over time, as the Company's campaigns expanded deeper into Indian society and interfered with religious and social customs, sepoy often found themselves questioning the legitimacy of their orders. This moral conflict was notably visible in incidents such as the Barrackpore mutiny of 1824 and ultimately culminated in the widespread rebellion of 1857. As historian Rudrangshu Mukherjee observes in his analysis of sepoy consciousness, "*The sepoy did not revolt out of nationalist motives, but because their moral universe was shattered, they were being asked to act against their own people, their own values*".³⁴ This inner conflict, which was neither fully personal nor entirely political, exemplifies the sepoy's unique position, caught between obedience to authority and fidelity to familiar cultural bonds. Over time, such dilemmas eroded the sepoy's trust in the colonial command structure, setting the stage for acts of resistance that were spontaneous, yet deeply rooted in moral and social dislocation, rather than coherent political ideology.

BATTLE OF BUXAR: DEFINING MOMENTS OF SEPOYS' ALLEGIANCE

The Battle of Buxar (1764) decisively established British East India Company's supremacy in Bengal, Bihar, and Awadh, profoundly reshaping India's military and political environment. Indian historians such as Bipan Chandra emphasize in *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (1966)³⁵ that the Company's victory triggered a major reorganization of military recruitment, relying increasingly on sepoy regiments to consolidate colonial power. Chandra points out that while the sepoy were critical in expanding and maintaining British control, their socio-economic conditions deteriorated as the Company imposed stringent financial controls, leading to irregular pay and inadequate supplies. Similarly, R.C. Majumdar, in his comprehensive *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857* (1957)³⁶, highlights how the aftermath of Buxar entrenched a rigid military hierarchy that alienated Indian soldiers through racial discrimination and limited promotion prospects. Majumdar notes that these systemic issues sowed seeds of resentment, eventually erupting into revolts such as the Barrackpore uprising and the 1857 rebellion. Another eminent historian, Romila Thapar, in *The Past as Present* (2014)³⁷, examines the cultural alienation faced by sepoy who were caught between their traditional loyalties and the demands of a colonial army, resulting in a fractured identity and deep mistrust of British intentions. According to Thapar, the post-Buxar military policies failed to acknowledge indigenous sentiments, which intensified tensions within the ranks. Furthermore, Sumit Sarkar in *Modern India* (1983)³⁸ discusses how economic exploitation combined with cultural and racial prejudices made sepoy vulnerable to both internal dissent and external manipulation, contributing to the gradual erosion of the Company's military reliability. Together, these Indian scholars provide a nuanced understanding of how the Battle of Buxar's aftermath shaped sepoy's complex and often contradictory position, as essential agents of British imperialism yet simultaneously marginalized and exploited within the colonial military structure.

ANGLO NEPALESE WAR: RESHAPING OF THE BENGAL ARMY

The Anglo-Nepalese War, also known as the Gorkha War (1814–1816) emerged from a conflict between the territorial ambitions of the British and the expansionist designs of the Gorkhali Empire under Prime Minister Bhimsen Thapa, the war exposed the limits of British military capabilities in hilly terrain, tested the loyalty and endurance of the sepoy forces, and ultimately transformed recruitment policies that redefined the future of colonial Indian armies. The Bengal Army, was confronted with a formidable adversary in the form of the rugged, disciplined, and fiercely autonomous Gorkha soldiers. This war challenged not only British strategic doctrines but also the martial assumptions on which the Bengal Army was organized.

Though the Company eventually secured a political victory through the Treaty of Sagauli in 1816, the war itself was far from a straightforward triumph. The Bengal Army suffered multiple defeats in the early campaigns under General Gillespie and others. Many British officers, such as Major-General Rollo Gillespie and Colonel John Sullivan Wood, struggled with unfamiliar terrain and underestimated the tactical acumen of the Nepalese forces. The

³³ Philip Mason, *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men* (London: Macmillan, 1974), 37.

³⁴ Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt, 1857–1858* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), 45.

³⁵ Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India* (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966), 112–115.

³⁶ R. C. Majumdar, *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857* (Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1957), 45–50.

³⁷ Romila Thapar, *The Past as Present: Forging Contemporary Identities Through History* (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2014), 98–103.

³⁸ Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885–1947* (New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), 22–27.

sepoys, especially from the Bengal regiments, endured immense physical hardship, including navigating dense forests, facing freezing temperatures, and conducting siege warfare in mountainous regions for which they were ill-prepared. Historian Partha Sarathi Gupta notes that the logistical strains and poor planning reflected broader flaws in British military administration in India at that time, particularly the inadequacy of supply chains and poor medical infrastructure during extended campaigns in frontier regions.³⁹ The Bengal Army's limitations became starkly evident, not merely in combat performance but also in terms of morale and cohesion, as many units suffered from desertion, fatigue, and endemic diseases.

One of the most enduring consequences of the war was the re-evaluation of martial recruitment policies. Despite the Bengal Army's ultimate role in the eventual occupation of territories like Kumaon and Garhwal, it was the performance of the Nepalese soldiers themselves, often fighting against overwhelming odds, that most impressed the British. Their bravery and loyalty under Bhimsen Thapa made a lasting impression. Consequently, one of the most significant and lasting decisions of the post-war period was the recruitment of Gurkhas into the East India Company's service. The Bengal Army, which had previously relied on Brahmin and Rajput sepoys from the Gangetic plains, began incorporating Gurkha soldiers, who were deemed more robust, less politically volatile, and ethnically distinct from the sepoy masses involved in earlier mutinies. Historian David Omissi has pointed out that this marked the beginning of what would later be called the "martial race" theory, an attempt by the British to classify and favour certain ethnic groups in India based on perceived soldierly qualities, a policy that gained greater prominence after the 1857 revolt.⁴⁰

Moreover, the war catalysed a structural and psychological transformation within the Bengal Army. The defeat of respected commanders and the high casualty rate among the Bengal sepoys forced the Company to reevaluate its tactical doctrines, emphasizing greater use of light infantry and hill warfare training. It also led to increased European officer presence in frontier units and a more centralized command system to prevent the repetition of the administrative lapses that had plagued earlier expeditions. Historian Nayanjot Lahiri argues that the Anglo-Nepalese War laid the groundwork for future British frontier policy and military restructuring, especially in emphasizing intelligence networks, political agents, and the militarization of border diplomacy.⁴¹ The Bengal Army's subsequent stationing in recently annexed hill districts also marked the beginning of a more permanent British military presence in the Himalayan region, altering regional geopolitics.

In essence, the Anglo-Nepalese War revealed the brittleness of the Bengal Army under unfamiliar operational conditions but also acted as a transformative moment for the East India Company's military policy. It precipitated both tactical and ethnic reconfigurations in recruitment and deployment. While it underscored the need for reforms in the Bengal Army's organization, it also introduced a new martial ideal, one that valorised the Gurkha soldier over the traditional high-caste sepoy. This shift, as shown in archival studies by scholars such as Rajesh Kochhar and Chitra Joshi, laid the groundwork for the future structure of the British Indian Army and reflected the Company's evolving perceptions of loyalty, martiality, and colonial control.^{42,43}

BARRACKPORE MUTINY: THE FIRST TREMORS OF SEPOY DISCONTENT

The Barrackpore Mutiny of 1824, though often overshadowed by the Revolt of 1857, stands as a critical prelude in understanding the evolving consciousness and resistance within the Bengal Army. The mutiny occurred when sepoys of the 47th Bengal Native Infantry (BNI) refused to board boats for deployment to Burma during the First Anglo-Burmese War, fearing that crossing the sea (*Kala Pani*) would violate their caste norms and religious taboos. Their resistance was not merely spiritual but also rooted in broader grievances such as poor pay, lack of adequate allowances, coercive discipline, and the colonial disregard for Indian cultural sensitivities. The sepoys demanded that they not be forced across the sea and instead be given an alternative deployment or remain within Indian borders. When their pleas were ignored, the mutiny erupted on 2 November 1824, only to be brutally suppressed by British authorities, with the ringleaders executed and the 47th BNI disbanded. The British interpreted the incident as isolated insubordination, but for the sepoys, it was a defining moment, revealing both the limits of their loyalty and the emerging conflict between imperial command and indigenous identity. Crucially, the Barrackpore incident set the psychological precedent for 1857 by establishing the sepoy's right to question unjust commands. The shared memory of the 1824 suppression lingered within the ranks and became part of the oral traditions of sepoy culture. Tapti Roy, in her analysis of military dissent, links the 1824 mutiny to the "cumulative build-up of sepoy grievance that reached its violent climax three decades later."⁴⁴ Gautam Bhadra adds that "the sepoy in Barrackpore challenged not just orders, but a regime of cultural humiliation."⁴⁵ Moreover, Sabyasachi Bhattacharya argues that the mutiny "demonstrated a collective defiance embedded in caste ethics, economic despair, and nascent nationalism."⁴⁶ This formative resistance influenced younger sepoys who would later participate in the 1857 uprising, carrying forward the oral memory of betrayal and punishment at Barrackpore. Thus, the Barrackpore Mutiny was not just a failed military revolt but a foundational expression of sepoy unrest that illuminated the deep fissures in the British Indian military structure, eventually erupting on a national scale in 1857.

CONCLUSION

Hence, the sepoy, a native soldier employed by the British East India Company and later the Crown, occupied a paradoxical position in colonial India's military edifice. Instrumental to the consolidation and expansion of British authority from 1757 to 1857, sepoys constituted the backbone of the imperial

³⁹ Partha Sarathi Gupta, *Imperialism and the British Army in India* (Oxford University Press, 1976), 42–45.

⁴⁰ David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (Macmillan, 1994), 12–18.

⁴¹ Nayanjot Lahiri, *The Annexation of the Hills: War and Administration in Early Colonial India* in *Studies in History*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (1994), 1–30.

⁴² Rajesh Kochhar, *Science as a Tool in British India* in *Indian Journal of History of Science*, Vol. 30, No. 3 (1995), 233–243.

⁴³ Chitra Joshi, *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories* (Permanent Black, 2003), 84–86.

⁴⁴ Tapti Roy, *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857* (Oxford University Press, 1994), 71.

⁴⁵ Gautam Bhadra, essay in *Subaltern Studies Volume IV* (Oxford University Press, 1985), 113–118.

⁴⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Financial Foundations of the British Raj* (Orient Longman, 2005), 62–70.

military machine, yet were simultaneously viewed through a lens of racialized suspicion and strategic marginalization by their British superiors. This contradiction of being both indispensable and distrusted forms the heart of the sepoy experience.

The dominant historiography of the British Indian Army has often marginalized the sepoy's role, focusing more on the perspectives of British officers and the structural apparatus of colonial control. Where sepoys do appear in the literature, they are frequently cast as passive instruments or, more sensationally, as victims of systematic subjugation, a reading that flourished particularly after the Revolt of 1857, which was popularly viewed as a collective native response to a century of military and cultural degradation. While the 1857 uprising did reflect genuine grievances among the sepoys, particularly those in the Bengal Army, it is historically reductive to retroactively project these grievances across the entire century of service. In contrast to the slave hypothesis, the notion that sepoys were coerced into service and brutally treated without autonomy, a more nuanced reading of primary and secondary sources reveals a complex system in which sepoys operated not as slaves but as regular employees, governed by codified contracts, receiving salaries, allowances, promotions, and pensions, and often enjoying social status superior to that of soldiers serving in the indigenous armies of Indian princely states.

The institutionalization of the sepoy system in Bengal, Madras, and Bombay presidencies began in the mid-eighteenth century. Following the decisive Battle of Plassey in 1757, the British recognized the necessity of maintaining a large native force to secure their expanding territorial and commercial interests. These men, though culturally distinct from their British officers, were integrated into a military regime that, despite its colonial nature, offered stability, remuneration, and upward mobility unavailable in many other sectors of native society. Indeed, historians such as Dirk Kolff and David Omissi have argued that sepoys were not coerced labourers but professional soldiers who enlisted voluntarily, often motivated by economic aspirations, familial traditions of soldiering, and the prestige associated with military service.^{47,48}

Pay structures and benefits afforded to sepoys further complicate the slave hypothesis. In contrast to soldiers in many princely state armies, sepoys in Company service received regular monthly salaries, clothing allowances, rations, and medical care. Their families were often allotted pensions in the event of their death in service, and long-serving sepoys were eligible for land grants or retirement benefits. The concept of the "batta", a field allowance given to soldiers on campaign, became a central feature of sepoy remuneration and a point of contention during the buildup to the 1857 revolt. The withdrawal of the batta in peacetime was interpreted not as an act of arbitrary cruelty but as a contractual violation, underscoring the sepoy's self-understanding not as a slave but as a salaried professional entitled to compensation under clearly defined regulations.

Moreover, the British encouraged the development of regimental identity and pride among sepoys. Uniforms were standardized, drills formalized, and ceremonial rituals such as parades, medals, and honours introduced, practices intended to instil discipline but which also fostered a sense of collective belonging. British officers, many of whom lived in close proximity with their men and took pride in their regiments, frequently commented on the loyalty, courage, and martial spirit of the sepoys. E.W. Sheppard, in *A Short History of the British Army*, noted the critical importance of native troops in maintaining imperial stability, emphasizing that without sepoy support, British control in India would have been logistically and politically unfeasible.⁴⁹ That British officers could simultaneously admire and mistrust their sepoys reflects the racial anxieties underpinning the colonial project rather than a literal relationship of master to slave.

The socio-economic conditions of sepoys also merit careful attention. Recruitment into the Company's army offered rural peasants, artisans, and lower nobility access to a steady income and avenues for status enhancement. In many cases, sepoys were able to remit money to their families, invest in land, and support their local communities. Their military service often translated into social prestige in village society. In contrast, the armies of regional Indian kingdoms, such as those of the Nawabs of Awadh, the Marathas, or the Nizam of Hyderabad, lacked the regularity of pay, standardized training, and institutional backing that characterized the Company's forces. This disparity reinforced the appeal of Company service for aspiring soldiers and gave rise to a form of military patronage that was colonial in structure but indigenous in recruitment and self-conception.

However, racialized hierarchies remained entrenched in the structure of the colonial army. Commissioned ranks were reserved exclusively for Europeans, and despite the possibility of rising to positions such as subedar or jemadar, native officers remained subordinate in pay and command authority. This racial ceiling created tensions, particularly among senior Indian officers who, despite decades of service, were denied parity with their British counterparts. The term "native" itself became a marker of inferiority in the British lexicon, a tool of othering that persisted even as the sepoy was lauded for his loyalty and bravery. Such contradictions illustrate the cultural tensions at the heart of colonial military structures, a system dependent on native manpower but unwilling to concede full equality or trust.

The 1857 Revolt brought these contradictions to the surface. While the spark was ignited by the infamous cartridge issue, the deeper causes included discontent over promotions, pay, religious interference, and perceptions of cultural disrespect. Yet, it is critical to note that the rebellion was not universal. The sepoys of the Madras and Bombay armies remained largely loyal, and even within the Bengal Army, many regiments chose not to mutiny. This suggests that the sepoy's disaffection was not rooted in systemic slavery but in a breach of what was perceived as a mutually understood contract between ruler and soldier.

In rejecting the hypothesis of the sepoy as a slave, it is essential not to romanticize colonial service or ignore its exploitative dimensions. The sepoy operated within a colonial system that used him for its expansionist aims and denied him ultimate equality. Yet, he was not without agency. He navigated this system with pragmatism, using it to secure material benefits, social standing, and at times political expression.

⁴⁷ Kolff, Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy, 45.

⁴⁸ David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (London: Macmillan, 1994), 80.

⁴⁹ E. W. Sheppard, *A Short History of the British Army* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1950), 111.

It is important to recover and reevaluate the sepoy's legacy, which has been long hidden in colonial and nationalist narratives. The sepoy was frequently seen by nationalists with conflicting feelings, either as a symbol of dormant resistance (as in 1857) or as a collaborator with foreign rule. He was the British equivalent of the "faithful soldier," exalted in imperial propaganda but never really treated equally. It is only through a critical historiography that moves beyond these binaries that we can appreciate the sepoy as a historical actor in his own right, a figure shaped by empire but not defined solely by it.⁵⁰

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I express my deepest gratitude to my mother and elder brother for their unwavering support, encouragement, and understanding throughout the course of this research. Their constant motivation has been my greatest source of strength.

I am also thankful for the availability of open-access digital resources and online archives that have made scholarly material accessible to young researchers like me. The free exchange of academic knowledge on the internet has played an invaluable role in shaping this work.

Lastly, I extend my appreciation to all historians and scholars whose research on the East India Company's army and colonial military structures has provided the intellectual foundation for this study.

REFERENCES

- Alavi, Seema. *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770–1830*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Barat, Amiya. *The Bengal Native Infantry: Its Organisation and Discipline, 1796–1852*. Calcutta: K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1962.
- Bhadra, Gautam. "Four Rebels of Eighteen Fifty-Seven." In *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, edited by Ranajit Guha, 229–75. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985.
- Bhattacharya, Sabyasachi. *The Financial Foundations of the British Raj*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2005.
- Bryant, G. J. "Indigenous Mercenaries in the Service of European Imperialists: The Case of the Sepoys in the Early British Indian Army, 1750–1800." *War in History* 7, no. 2 (2000): 125–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/096834450000700102>.
- Chandra, Bipan. *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism in India*. New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1966.
- Cooper, Randolph G. S. *The Anglo-Maratha Campaigns and the Contest for India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016.
- Heathcote, T. A. *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995.
- Irvine, William. *The Army of the Indian Moghuls: Its Organization and Administration*. London: Luzac & Co., 1903.
- Joshi, Chitra. *Lost Worlds: Indian Labour and Its Forgotten Histories*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003.
- Kolff, Dirk. *Naukar, Rajput, and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450–1850*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990.
- Lahiri, Nayanjot. "The Annexation of the Hills: War and Administration in Early Colonial India." *Studies in History* 10, no. 1 (1994): 1–30.
- Majumdar, R. C. *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*. Calcutta: Firma KLM, 1957.
- Mason, Philip. *A Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, Its Officers and Men*. London: Macmillan, 1974.
- Mukherjee, Rudrangshu. *Awadh in Revolt, 1857–1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*. New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001.
- Omissi, David. *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940*. London: Macmillan, 1994.
- Roy, Kaushik. *War, Culture and Society in Early Modern South Asia, 1740–1849*. London: Routledge, 2011.
- Roy, Tapti. *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Sarkar, Sumit. *Modern India, 1885–1947*. New Delhi: Macmillan, 1983.

⁵⁰ Gautam Bhadra, "Four Rebels of Eighteen Fifty-Seven," in *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, ed. Ranajit Guha (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985), 229.