

Political Turbulences and the Rebelliousness of the Madras Presidency Army: An Introspection of the Great Uprising of 1857 in Colonial South India

Indian Historical Review
43(1) 1–21
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SAGE Publications
sagepub.in/home.nav
DOI: 10.1177/0376983616628368
<http://ihr.sagepub.com>


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Abstract

This article necessarily explores the dissensions and differences arising from the British domination over the Tamil-speaking regions of the erstwhile Madras Presidency before and during the Great Uprising of 1857. It seeks to explore the role played by the Madras Army during this period. The narrative of events vindicates the fact that the situation in Tamil districts was by no means tranquil and there were instances of resistance, if not rebelliousness, on the part of the native inhabitants to the Company's government. The discontent in the lower ranks of the Company's army was also very much evident, which has seldom received attention in the mainstream South Asian historiography. The reasons behind these occasional bouts of discontent were not simply related to financial and pecuniary reasons. In this context, it becomes imperative to unearth the possible hidden links, if any, between the rebellious incidents of north India and the brewing discontent within the Madras Army. The most important issue that needs to be taken into consideration primarily relates to the different types of responses that were noticed among the indigenous social groups.

Keywords

Madras Presidency, Madras Army, Great Uprising, Paraiyar, Poligar, sepoy, Tamil Nadu

The revolt of 1857 proved to be the most dramatic moment in the entire period of British rule in India. The revolt of 1857 in India was much more than a 'Sepoy Mutiny'. In fact, the revolt symbolised a major challenge to the foundations of the imperial order in south Asia. Though it initially began with the sepoys of the Bengal Army, it soon

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received the support of various sections of the civilian population of northern, central and some parts of south India.² In other words, the expanse and the wide societal participation clearly belied much of the colonial characterisation of the revolt as a Sepoy Mutiny.

I would argue that the disturbances in the Madras Presidency Army were not simply because of pay, promotion and furlough but due to various other reasons that affected the society at large. In fact, what is generally bypassed in the mainstream history writing is the native sepoys' links with the society at large. This sort of rigid compartmentalisation between the civilian and the military very often is responsible for the lacunae among a section of historians to look into the responses of the native sepoys from the point of view of the emotional world of the subject population. The sense of disaffection was comparatively less visible in the early years of the Company's domination in south India, which itself was based on the exploits of the native infantry. The encomiums showered on the short-statured Madrassi sepoy by the English military officials proves that there had been an element of camaraderie, despite the racial differences, which became perhaps the most important factor behind the successes of the British in the overseas. However, this mood of adulation remained a somewhat temporary episode in the history of the Madras Presidency Army. The apparent mood of mutual sharing was replaced by one of distrust, as the boundaries of the Company's territories expanded. The omnipotent presence of the British in the subcontinent and the imageries of the Empire, certainly gave rise to the feelings of racial superiority and unbridled military prowess, which were later to be incorporated in the civilising mission of the colonial powers. It would be argued that the disaffections in the Madras Presidency Army during the revolt of 1857–58 should be analysed in the background of the Poligari and the Vellore uprisings, since they bring into focus the ways through which general societal discontents merged with the more specific professional demands and those of retribution faced by the native sepoys. In fact, this history of localised rebellions retains a particular place of interest because the gap between the civilian and the military collapses and these developments obviously became a part of the anti-British polemics of the early nineteenth century.

I

Revolt of the Poligars in the Madras Presidency

While explaining the turbulence in Tamil Nadu, we need to see whether there existed any such disturbance before the Great Revolt of 1857. In Tamil Nadu, like in the other parts of India, the earliest expressions of opposition to British rule took the form of localised rebellions and uprisings. Prominent among them was the revolt of the Palayakkarars (Poligars) against the East India Company in 1799.³ This uprising continued until 1801. The Poligari system had evolved with the extension of Vijayanagar

² Basu, *The Great Rebellion of 1857 in India*, pp. 161–78; Rajendran, *Rethinking 1857*, pp. 180–209.

³ The Poligars of Tamil Nadu, as in other regions of south India, appeared on the political scene neither suddenly nor spontaneously. They came into existence gradually as a result of the interplay of historical circumstances and political considerations. They had a long history of rebellion. The Poligars went down fighting against alien imperialism. In fact, a combination of adverse developments rendered their fall inevitable.

rule into the Tamil-speaking areas of south India. Each Poligar was the holder of a territory or 'palayam' (usually comprising a few villages) granted to him in return for military service and tribute. They regarded themselves as independent, sovereign authorities within their respective palayams and this brought them into conflict with the East India Company when the latter attempted to impinge on their authority. The notable Poligars who raised the banner of revolt in the deep south of Tamil country were Puli Thevar, Veerapandiya Kattabomman and the Marudu Brothers of Sivaganga. The issue of taxation, more specifically who would be collecting it—the traditional rulers or the rapacious group of new collectors from overseas—lay at the root of the uprising. A report submitted to the Board of Revenue spelt out the political necessity of bringing the Poligars under subjugation. Herein, it observed, 'The immediate reduction of their (poligar) power and their increase of inadequate tribute are objects of equal importance to the preservation of the people, the prosperity of the country and the permanent safety of our Government' [emphasis added]. In all, two major Poligari wars were fought. The second Poligari war of 1800–01 is often referred to as the 'South Indian Rebellion' considering the vast area it engulfed. The suppression of the Poligars gave the East India Company effective control over the Tamil country. The Company was determined to punish the rebellious Poligars and decided to suppress the organised resistance of the other chieftains in and around the districts under the sway of Kattabomman and his allies. Subsequently, Panjalamkurichi, Yezhayirampennai, Nagalapuram, Kollarpatti, Kadalgudi and Kulattor were brought under the domination of the Company.⁴

In fact, detailed investigations were instituted into the economic resources of the various palayams between 1801 and 1803. By May 1803, the introduction of the zamindari system was completed and the Poligars were transformed into a class of zamindars.⁵ In the changed scenario, the chieftains were required to disband their armed establishments and to pay an enhanced amount to the government under a permanent assessment. However, the chieftains were permitted to retain a fixed number of peons carrying spears in order to enable them to maintain those official ceremonies to which they had been accustomed for long. All the forts of the Poligars were destroyed and periodical inspections were conducted in order to prevent re-fortifications, as had been the case in 1801.⁶ The inhabitants were forced to surrender the firearms, but compensation was granted contrary to the developments which had followed the defeat of Tipu Sultan. The jungles in the Poligar territories were cleared in order to deny opportunities of regrouping of the wandering rebel bands, which were considered as an imminent threat to the Company's administration in south India. The military constructed roads to link strategic areas and postal communications were also extended to Kalayarkoil,

They were let down by their sovereign—the Nawab of the Carnatic. Initially, they relied upon foreign support of the French, the Dutch and the Mysoreans for their survival. However, the ascendancy of the English eclipsed these powers and the Poligars could gain no assistance from any quarter. The lack of proper training in organised warfare was responsible for their defeat, leading to the military supremacy of the East Indian Company in south India (Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*, p. 117).

⁴ Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*, p. 101.

⁵ TNA, 'Revenue Despatches to England', pp. 454–56, 528–48.

⁶ TNA, 'Military Despatches to England', pp. 454–56.

Tirupatore, Piranmalai and Sankaranainarkoil. More troops were stationed in the centres of disaffection ostensibly to restrain the inhabitants from indulging in rebellious activities.⁷ The Poligari system that flourished for two and a half centuries came to a violent end in the midst of the prompt strategy on the part of the Company to implement the zamindari settlement.⁸

The discontent with British rule did not end with the suppression of the Poligari uprisings. In 1806, Indian sepoys in the British army stationed at Vellore staged an uprising that has come to be seen as the precursor of the Great Revolt of 1857. Tipu Sultan's sons were imprisoned in the Vellore Fort after the Battle of Seringapatam (1799) in which Tipu Sultan was killed and the independent sovereign status of Mysore ended. After the mutineers captured the Vellore Fort, they declared Tipu's son Fateh Hyder as the king. This was a development, which had reverberations in the Gangetic Plains during the revolt of 1857, when the scions of the erstwhile ruling groups were proclaimed as legitimate rulers by the rebel armies.

II

Sepoy Discontent and Rebellious Attitudes before 1857 in the Madras Presidency

The Vellore Mutiny of 1805–06 has sometimes been described as 'the First War of Indian Independence', having a profound impact on the minds of the sepoys. It is believed that the memory of this revolt lasted long, and in the long run lent the spark to the revolt of 1857. On 10 July 1806, 2:30 a.m., Sergeant Cosgrave of the 69th Regiment, who was on guard duties inside the fort at Vellore, heard the trampling of feet. He was astonished and yelled out to the sentry. The reply was a volley of musketry from the sepoys. Several men of the 69th Regiment were mowed down and there were simultaneous attacks on all the European guards and the white officers. Colonel Fancourt, who commanded the garrison, was among those killed. His deputy, Major Coates, made a futile effort to enter the fort. He sent an officer to Arcot with a letter to Colonel Gillespie, commanding a regiment of British Dragoons, with a request for immediate assistance. The Vellore Fort was in the hands of sepoys and the tiger-striped flag of Tipu was hoisted enthusiastically on the ramparts amidst cries of Din! Din! The 23rd Regiment of the Native Infantry had mutinied. Mutinies had taken place in the Company's armies earlier, but the mutiny in Vellore was different. This was the first large-scale mutiny in which the bayonets of sepoys for the first time dripped with the blood of English officers and European troops.

The attachment between English officers and Indian sepoys had been waning in the last years of the eighteenth century. The reorganisation of 1796 had diminished

⁷ TNA, 'Revenue Consultations', p. 2881 cited in Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*, p. 113.

⁸ Rajayyan has discussed the emergence of the Poligars in south India and their overall presence in the society, economy and polity. He thoroughly described the Poligar uprising and the suppression of their movement by the colonial British government. The fourth chapter of the book has a description about their relations with the then Company's government in India (Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*, p. 119).

the importance of the Indian officers. They nursed grievances that they could no longer attain a higher rank than a Subedar and even that rank now commanded much less respect than before. An English subaltern—a young fledgling—was appointed to each company, and he took precedence over experienced, elderly and battle-scarred Subedars and Jemadars. There was an influx of young and inexperienced English officers into the sepoy battalions. They had little knowledge about India and the Indian customs and they inspired little confidence in the minds of the veteran and seasoned soldiers of the Company's armies who had given ample proof of their valour in their long service career. The older and senior English officers, taking advantage of the profitable terms of recruitment offered under the reorganisation scheme, took leave, handing over charge to men, who could scarcely call for a glass of water in the native language of the country. Even European non-commissioned officers had become supercilious and showed scant respect to senior and elderly Indian officers who had several years of service behind them. While the sepoys had to salute British officers, British soldiers did not salute Indian officers. Embittered and disillusioned, Indian sepoys ironically had a feeling that the 'Sahib log', who now came to India, were of a different caste from those of the earlier days. Above all, sepoys were poorly paid and nourished a sense of logical discrimination. It was commonly felt that the mistresses and concubines of the 'Sahib log' were better paid and better treated than the Indian officers.

As the racial pride of the English increased, they grew less considerate, more arrogant and took the black sepoys for granted. The British Empire had been well established. However, the sepoys who had used their bayonets and spilt their blood in placing the Empire on sound footings were now ignored and relegated to lesser positions.

There were political influences too which were swelling up. Those Indian rulers and potentates who had lost their thrones were smarting under the humiliation and were biding their time to wreak vengeance. They found in some sepoys an instrument which could be used to their advantage, especially when they could appeal to their religious sensibilities, heighten their sense of grievances and sensitise them about their group and regional loyalties. Fakirs and mendicants roamed around invoking the wrath of god, mixing politics with religion, deliberately planting rumours and making prophecies tailored to the occasion. Strange graffiti appeared on the walls, placards were posted in cities and *Kutputli* (puppet) shows rousing hatred and contempt for the English were held on busy streets and in crowded bazaars.⁹

Religion played an important part in all this. There were fears, which were fanned by incensed groups that the English were out to forcibly convert the sepoys to Christianity. Both Hindus and Muslims shared this fear of proselytisation. This was the most potent weapon in the armoury of those who masterminded mutinies in the sepoy battalions and regiments. The dubious activities of some of the Christian missionaries helped to heighten their fears.

It must be remembered that a century of intense fighting had just ended. The wars with the Marathas, Hyder Ali and Tipu had left a large part of the troops tired and exhausted. There was a grievance that the sepoys were taken to distant places, far away from their homes where they were left to die, while their families were not looked after

⁹ Maclean, *Manual of the Madras Administration*, p. 24.

in the absence of the sepoy and that there were hardly adequate compensations for the hazards of service.¹⁰

There were secret meetings in the sepoy barracks at Vellore, where oaths of secrecy were administered, plots were hatched and pacts concluded. But English officers were oblivious to the change in the wind and anticipated no trouble. Their splendid lifestyles and their residences in big bungalows with high ceilings, long verandas, large arches, big rooms, wide lawns and a string of servants' quarters ensconced them in a world separated from the sepoys. About a month earlier, they had been warned of trouble, but apart from making some preliminary inquiries, they took no further action. On the night of 9 July 1805, the European officer on duty did not even go on his inspection rounds but left the work to Jemadar Shaik Coosim who was one of the principal conspirators.

The spark which ignited the fire at Vellore was provided by an order of the commander-in-chief (C-in-C) of the Madras Army issued on 14 November 1805, which introduced a new type of 'turban' in the form of a 'stiff round hat', with a flat top, a leather cockade and a 'standing feather'. The sepoys grumbled that it 'bore an offensive resemblance to the hat, or cap, worn by the East India drummers' and wearing a 'topi' or being known as a 'topi-wallah' was tantamount to being a Christian. The leather was said to be the hide 'of the unclear hog or the sacred cow'. Hence, both Muslim and Hindu sepoys had genuine grounds to complain.

Early in 1806, new regulations for the Madras Army were prepared. In fact, paragraph 10 of the 11th section of the regulations said,¹¹

It is ordered by the Regulation that a native soldier shall not mark his face to denote his caste, or wear ear-rings when dressed in his uniform; and it is further directed that all parades, and upon all duties, every soldier of the battalion shall be clean-shaven on the chin. It is directed also that uniformity shall, as far as it is practicable, be preserved in regard to the quantity and shape of the hair on the upper lip.

These proved to be explosive instructions. Both Hindu and Muslim sepoys seethed in anger; the Hindus did not want to give up their caste mark and the Muslims did not want to part with their earrings which were worn as a talisman dedicated to some saint or had been received with affection from their parents or grandparents. Shaving off the beard was equally resented; a beard was the mark of masculinity.¹²

In May 1806, the 2nd Battalion of the 4th Regiment, then at Vellore, voiced strong sentiments of protest, which led to the arrest of twenty-one ring leaders, ten Muslims and eleven Hindus, being arrested and sent to Madras for trial. Two of them, one Muslim and one Hindu, were administered 900 lashes each and discharged from service. The remaining nineteen were pardoned when they apologised and promised to behave well in future. Though the C-in-C of the Madras Army had been warned that 'the objections to the turban were almost universal and that it was commonly believed that the next attempt would be to force the *Sepoys* to become Christians' but he did not relent or

¹⁰ Frey, 'The *Sepoy* Speaks', p. 3.

¹¹ Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, pp. 56–71.

¹² Frey, 'The *Sepoy* Speaks', p. 4.

rescued his orders. It was believed that the regulations had to be obeyed scrupulously. The sepoys retaliated through mutiny.

On 10 July, at 6 a.m., Colonel Gillespie got the message of Major Coates. He hurried to Vellore where he found that the two outer gates of the fort had been taken over by the rebels. The inner third gate was opened by a few men of the 69th Regiment who were led down to the ramparts by their comrades. The fourth and last gate presented some difficulty. In the absence of ladders, a rope was slung down and Colonel Gillespie was pulled up to the ramparts where he took control of the surviving European troops. At 10 a.m., additional British cavalry and guns arrived from Arcot, the inner gate of the Vellore Fort was blown open and within 15 min, the mutiny had collapsed. Several punishments were inflicted by the British; no mercy was shown on their opponents. The sabres of the Dragoons flashed with anger, spilling the blood of hundreds of Indians. Many escaped by scaling the walls of the fort. Others surrendered and cried for mercy, but in vain. The main leaders of the mutiny were tried and rigorously punished.

The orders regarding the turban and dress, which had caused so much anger and bloodshed, were cancelled on 17 July 1806. On 24 September, the general order stated that thereafter 'all unauthorised alterations in dress or interference with the native soldiery in regard to their national observations, was strictly prohibited'.¹³ The sons of Tipu, who were staying at Vellore, were suspected of fomenting trouble, and hence, after the mutiny were deported to Calcutta.

The ripples of discontent and disturbance spread to Hyderabad, Nandidoorg, Bangalore, Bellary, Pallamcottah and Wallajabad. In most places, there were strong objections to the wearing of the turban, based on the fear of conversion to Christianity. Hindu and Muslim sepoys made common cause. Finally, on 3 December 1806, a proclamation was issued and its Hindustani, Tamil and Telugu translations were distributed in all Indian battalions in the Madras Army. The proclamation believed that sepoys would mend their ways and look to the facilities and privileges provided to them 'greater than what the troops of any other part of the world enjoyed'. However, if there was an inclination to confront the authority, the British government was 'not less prepared to punish the guilty than to protect and distinguish those who are deserving of its favour'.¹⁴ The mutinies of 1806 had affected the relations between the European officers and the sepoys. While the sepoys, subject to political, religious and social impulses and influences, were beginning to distrust English officers, the latter perceived a conspiracy all around them and saw murderous designs in the eyes of every dark-faced subordinate. Mutual distrust polluted the atmosphere.

There were a series of other mutinies 3 years later, in 1809. But this time, it was the European officers of the Madras Army who revolted at various places, such as Hyderabad, Masulipatnam, Ellore, Berhampur and Seringapatam. Virtually, the entire officer corps of the Madras Army was affected. The main causes of the discontent arose from the higher allowances which had been allowed to the Bengal officers, higher appointments given to Royal Army officers, stoppage of certain allowances and 'the harsh and arbitrary measures of the, Governor-in-Council'. The differences between the

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Kaye, *A History of Sepoy War in India*, pp. 98–112.

Governor, Sir George Barlow, and the C-in-C, Madras Army, Lt Gen. Sir J.F. Cradock, and his successor, Lt Gen. Macdowall added fuel to the fire.¹⁵

In February 1807, General Cradock had asked his Quarter Master General, Lt Col John Munro to report on the tent contract system which had been in vogue since 1802 and had authorised a fixed allowance to regimental officers for purchasing tent and camp equipment. Munro recommended the abolition of the system and the governor of Madras and the governor-general-in-council accepted the recommendations. The system was to be abolished with effect from 1 July 1808. When this became known to the officers of the Madras Army, they were infuriated and the C-in-C, General Macdowall, yielding to strong pressure, put Munro under arrest on 20 January 1809. He was tried by a court martial. Munro appealed to the governor-general-in-council on the ground that whatever recommendations he had made had been accepted by the government and hence he could not be punished for a decision which had been taken later by it. The Governor of Madras upheld this and Macdowall was forced to release Munro. Nevertheless, Macdowall issued a general order reprimanding Munro, and this was certainly in defiance of the wishes of the government. However, Macdowall did not live to face the consequences. He left Madras and the ship he sailed by was lost on the high seas. The mutiny fizzled out when the Governor General, Lord Minto, reached Madras and lent his support to Barlow. Minto wrote to Barlow: 'The subordination of military bodies to the State is a proposition too well established and too universally understood, to have been plain and distinctively questioned in any quarter'.

Soon after, the Company's military officers mutinied. Masulipatnam, then under Hyderabad, Seringapatam and other garrisons, witnessed the spark of dissent of the sepoys. The forts were seized and there were allegations at Masulipatnam and in Seringapatam that some of the British officers were reported to have been involved with their Indian counterparts. A planned unified march to Madras by the garrison at Masulipatnam and Hyderabad was averted by the persuasiveness of two respected Madras army officers, then on political assignments. Colonel Barry Close, British Resident at Poona, hastened to Hyderabad and stalled the plans of the Company's officers to march to Madras and he 'allegedly organized the opposition of *sepoys* troops against their own officers'. The other was Lt Col John Malcolm, who despite being sympathetic to the mutinous officers, immediately upon his return from a diplomatic mission to Persia, favoured bravery to defuse the situation at Masulipatnam. At most Madras army stations, seditious toasts were drunk. Barlow now decided to use Indian troops against the mutinous officers.¹⁶

Both these mutinies in the Madras Army at Vellore in 1806 and the European officers at several stations in 1809 were naturally seen as dangerous by some of the Directors in London. Having earlier shifted the blame for the 1806 Vellore Mutiny from evangelicism, 'to the inherently bad policies of the previous Madras government', Grant and majority of the Directors conveyed full support to Barlow on the action taken by him

¹⁵ It was observed that the issue between the government of Sir George Barlow and the European officers of the Madras Army was essentially a simple one. It was the question whether the authority of the civil government was to be supreme and its orders would hold good until reversed on appeal or whether the civil government was to be liable to be overridden and overthrown by the military force (Cardew, *The White Mutiny*, p. 79).

¹⁶ Menezes, *Fidelity and Honour*, p. 104.

in quelling the 1809 officer's mutiny. However, in 1810, Grant and others in his group finished their terms as Directors; a majority of anti-Barlow Directors were able to bring about his recall from Madras in 1812, and also reinstated most of the officers dismissed by him. In fact, some thereafter rose to the rank of general officer.

There was another mutiny in the 2nd Battalion of the 14th Regiment at Quilon. It was discovered on 24 May 1812, when Jemadar Iyaloo, who came to know of the plot from sepoy Venkatram of his company, reported to the higher authorities. A parade was held the next morning and Jemadar Shaikh Hossain and sepoy Salabar Khan, the ringleaders, were arrested. They were tried and shot from a gun at a general parade on 28 May. According to inquiries made by the British Resident, there was a tie-up with the local raja who was working to obtain the throne of Travancore. Jemadar Iyaloo and sepoy Venkatram were rewarded for the information they had given.¹⁷

On 28 October 1817, the rank of Subedar-Major was introduced into the Bengal Army and the definite rules for selection to this rank and the pay and allowances attached to it were published in March 1818. This rank was also instituted in the Madras Army on 2 February 1819. Similar orders were passed for the Bombay Army. About the same time, the appointment of Collar-Havildar was introduced for the non-commissioned ranks. For Indian officers of the presidential armies, the institution of the rank of Subedar-Major was a prized one, since it was a recognition of their services and also one which promised better career opportunities. However, in spite of their elevation to the higher rank, Indian officers were kept subservient. It is pertinent to draw attention to the minutes of the C-in-C of the Madras Army submitted to the government in August 1818. The C-in-C, Wilson, observed,

while recognizing the services of native officers, was fully alive to the danger of allowing them to acquire undue influence in their respective battalions, and remarked that—should any limit of the necessary numbers place the power or authority of the native officers between the soldiers, and his Commanding Officer, the whole chain will be destroyed, and the native Army will become as dangerous to ourselves, as it is now formidable to our enemies.

In the same minutes, there is a revealing reference to the change in the relationship between the European officers and the Indian officers and the sepoys. The C-in-C said:

However glorious and important were the achievements of the native troops in the early part of our military career in India, when disciplined, and led to the most arduous struggles by very inferior number of European officers, yet it is evident that the nature and the character of the troops, and of the service, the feelings of the one, and the prospects of the other, are so changed, that no reference can be had to those memorable days in any way applicable to the present era.

¹⁷ The next decade after these mutinies saw the final collapse of the Maratha power, the first and second Nepal Wars, the extermination of the Pindaris and a number of small military expeditions to various possessions of the British outside India. Troubles started with the Gorkhas in May 1814, leading to a formal declaration of war by Lord Hastings in October that year. But the first wave of British attack (1814–15) was repulsed by the brave and doughty Nepalese. The English prepared themselves for another offensive, obtaining victories at Almora (April 1815), Malaon (May 1815) and Makwanpur (February 1816). General Ochterlony had captured the province of Kumaon and advanced to Kathmandu. This was the first time that the soldiers of Indian armies had a taste of fighting in high altitudes amidst inclement weather and densely wooded mountains. Longer, *Red Coats and Olive Green*, p. 61.

A letter on 5 December 1821 from the Court of Directors of the Company created more trouble. It expressed that 'the troops of the three Presidencies were to be kept as distinct as possible, and that the recruiting for each Presidency should be confined, as far as possible, to the territories of that Presidency'. It was pointed out that more than 7,000 men (about one-third) of the Bombay Army were from the north, while 5,000 men drawn from the same classes were serving in the Madras Army. This adversely affected recruitment for the Bengal Army, thus warranting a change in the policy of recruitment. The effect of this letter was witnessed in the greater compartmentalisation of the presidential armies, which did not augur well for the army in general. Segregation led to narrower and more parochial loyalties, though, perhaps, it served the imperial purpose of keeping the sepoys of the armies separated from each other in the interests of the Empire.

The reorganisation of the presidency armies in May 1824 dealt a heavy blow to the discipline and efficiency of the armies as well as to the prestige of Indian officers and sepoys. To rectify the mistakes of 1796, the double-battalion Indian infantry regiments were separated into single-battalion regiments. New regiments were formed and renumbered according to the dates of their original raising. Though this seemed to be a satisfactory *status quo ante*, it really resulted in the tearing apart of the number of officers on a sheer mathematical consideration. In this context it was observed that all the odd or uneven numbers to the first (regiment), and the even numbers to the second (regiment) were created for proper maintenance and smooth running of the administration. Officers were pulled out of regiments without any consideration to their attachments and preferences. Such attempts to restore efficiency seldom proved to be of much consequence because in armies, much depended on the warmth of relationship, man-management and the bonds between commanders and soldiers. Indian officers and men found their regiments officered by strangers. They felt the change as something which was unwarranted.

The reorganisation did not in any way improve the conditions of Indian officers. In fact, they remained utterly indifferent to their service conditions and career prospects; no wonder a young *Risaldar* said about himself that he 'lives and rots without hope'. The high proportion of English officers to Indian ranks (twenty-three English officers to each infantry battalion and cavalry regiment) continued to be retained in single-battalion regiments. The condition of the Indian rank and file remained static and unhappy. Corporal punishment was administered for trivial offences, scant respect was shown to Indian officers and the English officers were accused of being cold, reserved and harsh.¹⁸

After the reorganisation of 1824, the Bengal Army comprised of three brigades of horse artillery (nine European and three native troops), five battalions of foot artillery (twenty companies), a corps of engineers of forty-seven officers, a corps of sappers and miners, a corps of pioneers, two regiments of European infantry, eight regiments of regular native cavalry, five regiments of irregular cavalry and sixty-eight battalions of native infantry. It also included local and provincial corps, such as the Rampur local battalion, the Cuttack legion and others. The Madras Army consisted of two brigades of horse artillery (one European and one native); three battalions of foot artillery, each of four

¹⁸ Cardew, *A Sketch of the Services of the Bengal Native Army*, p. 231.

companies, with four companies of gun-lascars attached; eight regiments of native cavalry of four squadrons each; two battalions of pioneers; two regiments of European infantry; fifty-two battalions of native infantry; and three extra and local battalions. The Bombay Army had on its rolls four troops of horse artillery, eight companies of foot artillery, a corps of engineers and pioneers, three regiments of regular cavalry, two regiments of European infantry and twenty-four battalions of native infantry.

This was the first time that a reference was made to local units and irregular cavalry. While regular cavalry units were organised and administered on the European scale, irregular cavalry regiments were raised on the '*silladar*' system, which was more or less on the patterns followed by the Indian rulers. Under this system, individual soldiers brought their own horses, clothing, equipment and arms except rifles which were supplied to them. Consequently, they received a higher rate of pay than the non-*silladar* soldiers who were housed, clothed and accounted for by the government. Wealthy and influential *silladars* were allowed to enlist servants known as *bargirs* whom they equipped and maintained. *Bargirs*, in their turn, paid a recognised portion of their salaries to *silladars*. The cheaper *silladar* system had been accepted to augment regular cavalry units which had been expanded between 1796 and 1824. After the reorganisation of 1796, the ratio of Indian cavalry to Indian infantry was 1:7.5 (eight regiments of cavalry to fifty-nine battalions of infantry). In 1824, the ratio was 1:5. But the *silladar* system did not always prove to be effective and its limitations were discerned under the stress of operations.¹⁹

A little less than 3 months before the reorganisation, in February 1824, Lord Amherst, the Governor General, declared war on the Burmese leading to the First Anglo-Burmese war. An expedition under the command of General Sir Archibald Campbell, with 11,000 men, recruited mostly from Madras (sepoys went from Madras on 16 April), was sent. The Burmese were expelled from Assam, and Rangoon was captured by Campbell on 11 May 1824. The war continued for some time and the Burmese soldiers fought gallantly, proving their valour. A treaty was concluded on 24 February 1826 bringing the operations to a close.

While the Anglo-Burmese war was in progress and the Company's troops were being sent from Calcutta to the Arakan and Burma, a serious mutiny broke out at Barrackpore. Three Indian infantry regiments, the 26th, 47th and 62nd, stationed at Barrackpore were ordered to leave on active service. The 47th Regiment had to leave first and it was disbanded. The fears of the 'Black waters' were revived in the minds of the sepoy. They wanted extra allowances or *double batta*. Marching by road introduced another problem. It necessitated the use of bullock transport and sepoy were ordered to obtain bullocks and the transport carts at their own expense. This was certainly an unfair demand and earned the ire of the sepoy. To make matters worse, bullocks were just not available in Bengal at that time—a large number of these animals had already been procured and commandeered by the English for the Rangoon expedition. In addition, sepoy had a superstitious belief that the Burmese were endowed with supernatural powers. The sepoy were convinced that they would be forced against their will to embark on ocean-going ships. In this changed atmosphere,

¹⁹ Silladar cavalry was abolished by 1921. Jeffreys and Rose, *The Indian Army, 1939–47*, p. 107; Nath, *Izzat*, p. 515.

it would have been prudent to handle the situation with sympathy and understanding. But the officers of the 47th Regiment were strangers to their men and the sepoys had little confidence in them.

On 30 October 1824, the 47th Regiment refused to leave for service overseas. On 1 November, it was ordered to take part in parade, but it declined to do so. The following day, the C-in-C of the Bengal Army, Sir Edward Paget, reached Barrackpore with two European Regiments, a detachment of horse artillery and a troop of the governor general's bodyguard. He paraded these at daybreak at right angles to the sepoy lines of the 47th Regiment. The men of the 47th Regiment were lined up in front of the lines. One hundred sepoys of the 62nd Regiment and twenty of the 26th Regiment were forced to queue up. No effort was made to placate them or understand their feelings, but a stern order was given. The sepoys had either to agree to march or lay down their arms. Not sensing any danger—the sepoys did not know that the English guns were loaded and ready to fire—they refused to give up in their usual childlike obstinacy. The C-in-C gave the signal for slaughter. Guns were opened upon the sepoys and many dropped dead on the spot. Only a few fled to safety, throwing away their arms and accoutrements to run faster. Others were taken prisoners. There was panic and consternation all around and the parade ground was littered with corpses, abandoned arms and leftover pieces of uniform. The sepoys had no intention to fight and this was evident from the fact the muskets strewn on the ground, abandoned by the fleeing or fallen sepoys, were found to be unloaded. Eleven of the prisoners were hanged and the rest sentenced to hard labour in chains, though they were pardoned 4 months later. The 47th Regiment was struck off the Army List and the Indian officers were dismissed from service. The news of the tragic events of the day, the severity of the punishment and the merciless massacre spread from place to place like a forest fire. It awed some, made others bitter and helped to fan the embers of resentment and hatred.

III

Multiple Reasons for Disaffection in the Madras Army

In fact, the narrative would delve into the multiple reasons for disaffection in the Madras Army during the Great Rising of 1857 and its earlier links to the Vellore Mutiny of 1806.²⁰ While trying to narrate the events of 1857 in Tamil Nadu, researchers often fail to incorporate the military aspect. I would be more interested in tracing the connections between the political tensions and rebellious attitudes prevailing in the presidency army of Madras in particular. The disturbances and dissatisfactions within the Madras native army in the late 1850s are often linked to the Vellore Mutiny that had taken place in the early years of the nineteenth century. John Malcolm in his book had elaborately

²⁰ Here, I could mention that prior to the Great Rising of 1857, there were risings by sepoys in July 1806 in Vellore. Indian sepoys had revolted against the East India Company's garrison. Immediately after the event, order was restored and the revolt did not go beyond the confines of the cantonment. Here, one has perhaps to keep in mind the relatively new presence of imperialism in the Madras presidency, as opposed to mid-nineteenth century northern India, where it had stabilised considerably owing to its large-scale economic and political interventions. Along with that, it needs to be clarified that the discontent in the colonial army was something that continued. Alavi, *The Sepoy and the Company*, pp. 259–63 and 294–95.

discussed about the mutiny and the British Parliament argued in this respect.²¹ From then onwards, the British tried to idealise the relations with the native as much cordial and healthy as they could. Their immediate intension was to make the relation ideal, otherwise the very foundation of dominance of the colonial government over the native Indians would have received shock in the coming years. After increasing the number of European officers in the Madras Army, the relations started to decline in the Madras Army. The young officers, unfamiliar with Indian customs and sensibilities, were quick in wresting away the privileges and responsibilities that had formerly belonged to the Indian non-commissioned and commissioned officers. The British officers, however, lacked the ability to develop the cultural sensibility and language skills needed for commanding the Indian troops. Their alienation from the Indian officers led to a greater degree of complications. In his correspondence with the Madras government, Malcolm thus observed, ‘the system on which (the army) is at present arranged is of the cold, confined, and depressive nature that it cannot...fail, if not radically amended, of some day bringing a misfortune on the state’.²²

John Malcolm’s personal impressions and assessment of the Vellore Mutiny contained significant insights. Malcolm’s fluency in Hindustani and his lively interest in south Indian culture enabled him to mingle with sepoys and other indigenous people on terms of unusual familiarity. As a young officer attached to a sepoy battalion, he had gained, in the early days of his service, a clear understanding of unedited Indian attitudes towards the Company Raj. As a marginalised, middle-class Scotsman, compelled to succeed through merit as a scholar rather than political patronage, Malcolm’s own views on British India and Company policy could be anything which were quite critical. Interestingly, he did endorse the Indian grievances vis-à-vis the Raj, even if he did not support them wholly. Here, we need to point out that many of his essential arguments found a place in the first edition of James Mill’s ‘History of British India’, which was published in 1819. Mill pointed out the idea that sepoy discontent originated in an irrational fear of Christian missionary activities. ‘There can be no reason to seek any other origin of the mutiny’, Mill wrote, ‘than the dread of religious change inspired by the military orders’. The inability on the part of the sepoys to demarcate the lines of politics and religion encouraged them to place the European military officers and the missionaries on an equal footing. In drawing up such ideas, there was perhaps an over-emphasis on the European fiction that the majority of Indians were guided by religion in their secular pursuits—helping them to construct order amidst the apparent chaos characterising the contemporary Indian polity.

In the years immediately following the Great Revolt of 1857, Sir John William Kaye produced another analysis of the Vellore Mutiny based on Malcolm’s insights. Writing in the immediate wake of the 1857 revolt, Kaye developed the ideas of caste and race, about which Malcolm had said very little.²³ The introduction of a lengthy discussion of racism and caste-consciousness into the study of the sepoy mutinies was a significant

²¹ Malcolm held the view that the decline of the Madras Army could be traced back to the Cornwallis reforms of 1796, which had increased the number of European officers in the sepoy battalions (Malcolm, *Sketch of the Political History of India*, p. 12).

²² John Malcolm to Josiah Webbe, CSG (Chief Secretary to Government), 3 October 1799, quoted in Kaye, *Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm*, pp. 95–96.

²³ Kaye, *History of the Sepoy Wars in India*, p. 67.

step, one that was to leave a lasting influence on the writing of Indian military history. Although inclined to view the sepoy as an irrational being, he nevertheless perceived the importance of threats to sepoy identity within the context of both British India's military culture and the indigenous system of belief and social status. Such ideas later found a place in the writings of Philip Mason and Ranajit Guha, the doyen of the subaltern school. In his writings, Ranajit Guha asserted that the differences in race, religion, language and custom, that separated the colonisers and the colonised, were promptly assimilated within the security concerns of the colonial state. This exercise, mired in a veil of ignorance, actually prevented the ruling classes from interpreting what has been described as a 'prose of counter-insurgency'. All these imparted to the phenomenon of isolation an unmistakably disciplinary slant in colonialist historiography and reduced it to one of fear. This fear in the true Heideggerian sense originated in a clearly specified region—'namely the civil society of the subject population and the equally specific object to which the harm is addressed that is the raj'.²⁴

IV

Historiographical Discourse of 1857 in the Southern India

The nationalist historians favoured the idea that an extensive and potentially powerful anti-British conspiracy lay behind the Vellore Mutiny. The idea that the British rule was confronted by secret foes was particularly appealing to them, as they sought to uncover links between the early colonial resistance to British rule and the twentieth-century nationalist movement. Rajayyan and Chinnian presented a nationalist interpretation of the Vellore Mutiny—which in their opinion was tinged with regional chauvinism of the modern Tamil movement.²⁵ Rajayyan's idea of a popular anti-British conspiracy seems also to have influenced historians, such as Susan Bayly, who characterised the Vellore Mutiny as 'a dramatic but short-lived "Islamic" warrior's insurgency'.²⁶ In short, Bayly describes the Vellore affair as a full-scale rebellion, a dress rehearsal of the Great Mutiny of 1857.

²⁴ Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India*, pp. 267–68; Guha, 'Not at Home in Empire', pp. 482–93; Hoover, *Men Without Hats*, p. 63; Mason, *A Matter of Honour*, pp. 236–37. Frykenberg's study ('New Light on the Vellore Mutiny') of the Vellore Mutiny draws many of the same conclusions as those of Malcolm and Kaye, though in a more modern language. Frykenberg does not, however, acknowledge the influence of either Malcolm or Kaye.

²⁵ There were two major campaigns undertaken by the British against the Poligars in the late eighteenth century. In January 1775, the sepoy of the native infantry of the 9th Battalion, who were then stationed at Tiruchirappalli, refused to march on the orders of the European officers. The council of war concluded that Makhдум Sahib, acting commandant of that battalion of sepoy, was responsible for spreading sedition among the sepoy and pronounced death sentence on him. In a span of two decades, the native sepoy of the 35th Battalion mutinied and were punished in the same manner. Basu, *The Great Rebellion of 1857 in India*, p. 165; Chinnian, *The Vellore Mutiny*, p. 24; Rajayyan, *Rise and Fall of the Poligars of Tamilnadu*.

²⁶ Susan Bayly seems to have based her narrative on the writings of Rajayyan and Chinnian, rather than relying on primary sources, such as the Vellore Mutiny Papers. Indeed, if Bayly had made use of the Vellore Papers, she would have been able to find important primary sources for her study of south India's non-Tariqa Sufis, in particular their connection with the region's Islamic military culture (Bayly, *Saints Goddesses and Kings*, pp. 224–26).

The most serious studies of the Vellore Mutiny came from Ainslie T. Embree, Maya Gupta and Pakkianathan Samuelraj. Based on the Vellore Papers, Embree opined that the Madras Army sepoy feared an attempt to destroy their religious, cultural and socio-economic status. Embree asserted that because the south Indian society was traditional, there was little distinction between customs and religion.²⁷ This view was echoed in both Maya Gupta's study of the Vellore Mutiny and her much-anticipated work on Bentinck's governorship of Madras. She concluded by saying that some sort of limited anti-British agitations were instrumental in the making of the mutiny of Vellore before the reverberant 1857 rebellion in south.²⁸ More recently, James Hoover describes by citing Pakkianathan Samuelraj's unpublished doctoral dissertation that most of the Indian authors fail to identify the proper reasons behind the mutiny of 1806 at Vellore.²⁹ In his monograph, he draws on the chronological listing of events, which may have actually instigated the sepoy to call for such kind of mutiny. According to their wider imagination, this might have meant their lost glory and dignity. Channa Wickremesekara has pointed it out as the earliest sepoy mutiny in colonial India that had religious overtones. At the same time, he also points to some of the lesser disturbances that had occurred in the Madras Army. These petty affairs had deep-seated grievances relating to the intolerable service conditions, such as low pay and excessive drill, which turned into unrest among the sepoys.³⁰ Hoover, by acknowledging Wickremesekara's work, reminded us the multidimensional meaning of the Vellore Mutiny.

In one of the recruitment handbooks, it was explicitly stated that the coast army had been instrumental in conquering India for the British. The Tamil soldiers, more popularly known as *Thambis* (younger brother), had few religious and caste prejudices, which made them suitable for expeditions beyond the sea unlike their brethren from north India.³¹ What emerges from such accounts is that the early phase of British overseas expansion was not based on the martialisation of north Indian society, but on the south Indian alternative to its military labour market—the loyal classes of Tamils. The Tamil soldiers played an important role in many of the successful expeditions, including Manila (1762), Mahe (1779), Ceylon (1782 and 1795), Amboyna and the Spice Islands (1796), Egypt (1801–02), Bourbon and Mauritius (1810) and Java (1811–12). The coast army was also involved in the expedition against the King of Kandy, which was also followed by the First Burmese War (1824–26). The British involvement in China in the early 1840s also witnessed the deployment of the 37th Madras Infantry. Undoubtedly, the Madras army that took part in the overseas expedition in maximum numbers and they were constantly being motivated for this particular purpose. Under this circumstance, a vital order was passed on 25 July 1856. It ordered that no one would be recruited in the Company's armies if he did not 'at the time of his enlistment, distinctly undertake to serve beyond the sea, whether within the territories of the

²⁷ Embree, *Charles Grant and British Rule in India*, pp. 235–38.

²⁸ Gupta, 'The Vellore Mutiny, July 1806', pp. 91–112; Gupta, *Lord William Bentinck in Madras and the Vellore Mutiny, 1803–1807*, pp. 219–34.

²⁹ Samuelraj, 'The Mutiny of Vellore and Related Agitations, 1806–1807', pp. 45–49.

³⁰ Wickremesekara, *Best Black Troops in the World*, pp. 161–64.

³¹ Mouat, *Recruitment Handbooks of the Indian Army Series, Madras Classes*, p. 6.

Company or beyond them'. Apart from these hazards involved, voyages across the seas were regarded by many of them as irreligious and unclean.³²

The Vellore Mutiny did have a profound impact upon the south Indian society and, particularly, the native sepoys were inspired for the future insurgency. Raj Sekhar Basu, in one of his much-celebrated article on 1857 and south India, described the various reasons for the disaffection in the Madras Army during the initial years of 1857.³³ In a book entitled, 'The History of the Indian Revolt and expedition to Persia China and Japan',³⁴ it has been stated that the 8th Cavalry was ordered to march from Bangalore to Madras and then embark for Calcutta. On 17 August 1857, reaching a place about 25 miles from Madras,

the men put forward a claim for the rates of pay; batta and pension which existed before 1857 ... such a moment was perplexing to the officers. They...obtained the consent of the Government to make conciliatory efforts to the men. After a further march of 13 miles ... the troopers again stopped and declared they would not...was against their countrymen.³⁵

This was clearly an act of protest, and the 8th Cavalry was promptly disarmed, leading to a great deal of excitement in Madras. Subsequently, a letter written by a highly placed British military commander from Nagpur also highlighted the protests that had been waged by the Madrassi sepoys posted in central India. The military officer wrote,

[T]he sympathies of the Madrassi sepoys were entirely with the insurrectionary movement and if they had got a tempting opportunity they would have joined it. They only want a beginning to be made and a rallying point of some sort ... we must never suppose that Madras men are different clay from those of the Bengal.³⁶

In 1858, the *Quarterly Review* displayed a tone of racial bias and reported that the sepoys of the Madras Army had not revolted simply because the Tamil races to which they belonged had no literature, no traditions or none worthy of the same, no pride of ancestry, no country in fact and no caste.³⁷

V

The Role of the Paraiyans in the Madras Army

This stereotypical image was projected in the writings of journalists such as Henry Mead. Indeed, such narratives might claim to provide details of the 'mindset' of the Indian military personnel in Madras, but they rarely delve deeper into the complexities

³² I assume here that the overseas service for the Persian War of 1856–57 was urgently sought from the native soldiers and in this connection, the General Order of 1856 was issued which declared that overseas service was compulsory; though we all know that even before this order was issued, sepoys had been sent on various overseas British expeditions such as those to Persia (1808), French Islands (1810) and Aden. Longer, *Red Coats and Olive Green*, p. 78. The Madras and Bengal Armies were further deployed in Ceylon in 1819 in dealing with civil disturbances there, and the Madras Army was deployed in Malacca in 1831–32 and in Burma in 1829–31, 1852, 1853 and from 1854 to 1857. Menezes, *Fidelity and Honour*, p. 143.

³³ Basu, 'Ideas, Memories and Meanings', p. 167.

³⁴ Dodd, *The History of the Indian Revolt*, pp. 231–39.

³⁵ Todd (1859), cited in Ananthakrishnan, *No Dravida, Only Banga, 1857 The Year That Shook India*.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ *Ibid.*

of the situation. In more recent times, questions of caste, the memories of the 'low-born' and that of Tamil valour are gaining strength. The debates over the involvement of the 'Paraiyans'—a community considered to be untouchable in the past—have been raising a storm in the intellectual circles of Madras.³⁸ Raj Sekhar Basu has pointed out that the advent of British rule in south India provided the Paraiyans and the kindred classes with opportunities of employment in the army.³⁹ The military depots, functioning in Madras and Trichinopoly, often served as recruitment centres for the Paraiyans. The British army bosses praised the Paraiyan recruits highly for their submissive nature and dutiful conduct. The high-ranking British officials expressed the opinion that opportunities to serve in the army had inculcated among the 'untouchables' a certain degree of self-respect and independence. The Paraiyans also sometimes expressed their satisfaction for being offered employment in the British army, as it provided them with the privilege to experience the civil equality enjoyed by the other British subjects.⁴⁰ The extremely docile and loyalist attitude of the Paraiyan soldiers towards their British seniors, more than often, accounted for their promotions. Until about the mid-nineteenth century, the Paraiyans were exclusively recruited for one of the regiments of the Indian army, which was more popularly known as the 'Queen's Own Sappers and Miners'.⁴¹ The idea of the modern Indian army has very rarely been associated with the Tamils. The nature of its ethnic composition had tended to give the impression that it was composed mainly of the north Indians. This impression has been so strongly established that the military history of the British Empire is too often linked to the achievement of the 'martial races' of north India who had found employment in the British Indian Army.⁴² Raj Sekhar Basu in this context ensnared our attention by mentioning the observation made by historian David Washbrook about the Indian army in the nineteenth century. Thus, Washbrook observed,

[T]he role British Indian Army played in international affairs over the course of the nineteenth century however, lifts it out in the context of the British Indian relations and places it in a broader global perspective. It was not an army intended primarily for domestic defence and police duties in India. Rather it was the army of British imperialism formal and informal, which operated worldwide, opening up markets to the products of Industrial Revolution, subordinating labour forces to the domination of capital and bringing to 'benighted' civilizations the enlightened values of Christianity and rationality. The Indian army was the iron fist in the velvet glove of Victorian expansionism. Moreover, because the British Empire was the principal agency through which the world system functioned in this era, the Indian army was in a real sense the major coercive force behind the internationalisation of industrialisation

³⁸ Basu, *Nandanar's Children*, pp. 159–62.

³⁹ Here, Basu has mentioned that the new employment opportunities brought about by overseas migration as well as by internal migration led to certain changes in the economic conditions of the Paraiyans in some of the Tamil districts of Madras Presidency (Basu, *Nandanar's Children*, p. 162).

⁴⁰ Ewart, *Calcutta Review*, p. 143.

⁴¹ After the great Rebellion of 1857, there was virtual shift in the British Government's recruitment policy. At this time, the British military superiors felt the recruitment policy needed to be based on the 'martial race' theory. It was argued that while recruiting soldiers from the various native communities, the military, social and environmental perspective needed to be taken into account. Basu, *Nandanar's Children*, pp. 160–61; Cohen, 'The Untouchable Soldiers', p. 456.

⁴² Viswanath, *The Pariah Problem*, pp. 1–10.

capitalism. Paradoxically (or not!) the marginalisation of North Indian society and in many ways the feudalization of its agrarian relations were direct corollaries of the development of capitalism on a world scale during the nineteenth century.⁴³

Such views essentially help us to shape the impression that had influenced the British mind after colonialism had established its unquestioned supremacy over the Indian subcontinent. By now, it is fairly well known that the British Empire's foundation in this region rested exclusively on the military achievements of the coastal army of south India composed mainly of the 'short-statured' Tamil soldiers. In the late eighteenth century, the vision of empire building did not look around the idea that this task had to be achieved by mobilising the dominant north Indian communities basking with military glory, but the route to success lay in the building up of a cheap, loyal and effective army based on the recruitment of Tamil soldiers.⁴⁴

Historians, such as Douglas M. Peers, have argued that by the early years of the nineteenth century, 'the army of Bengal had taken on several characteristics which distinguished it from the armies of Bombay and Madras. Most obvious of these was its homogeneity for recruitment in Bengal was almost exclusively from the higher castes'. In Madras, a more heterogeneous approach was favoured with no single religion or caste amounting to more than 50 per cent of the army's total number. Moreover, within individual regiments, efforts were made to prevent the emergence of any single dominant group. In Bombay, the British authorities went even further and deliberately encouraged the recruitment of marginal castes and cultures to create what one Bombay officer described as a 'most salutary mixture of castes'. Low castes were actively encouraged to join, and Malabar Jews were recruited as 'native' officers.

VI

Concluding Remarks

Although more research is required to put together a detailed history of the anti-colonial struggle in Tamil Nadu during 1857–58, we can be certain that there were several spontaneous attempts to challenge colonial rule which were definitely part of the larger history of the revolt. The diverse events of 1857–58 in Tamil Nadu indicate that the revolt had an all-India character and was not just confined to the Gangetic heartland and parts of central India. This is not surprising in view of the ruthless nature of colonial exploitation that was experienced by all regions of the subcontinent. It was this common experience of exploitation that gave an all-India character to the anti-colonial struggle of 1857. Even sometimes, historians seem to be confused since the role of the Madras Presidency Army and its response (positive/negative) to this great event has

⁴³ Washbrook, 'South Asia, the World System and Capitalism', pp. 479–508.

⁴⁴ Adams, *The Madras Soldiers, 1748 to 1943*, pp. 1–12; Kantha, *On Tamil Militarism*; Mead, *The Sepoy Revolt*, pp. 21–25; Peers, 'The Habitual Nobility of Being', pp. 545–46. In fact, Tamil militarism is often linked to the successes of the warring castes, such as the Maravars. However, the 'native' soldiers were also recruited from other caste groups, such as the Vellalas, Nadars and Adi Dravida. Under the active patronage of the British, the Vellalas had established their dominance, and their culture assumed a representative and hegemonic form in Tamil society.

not been properly explicated in south Asian history. It is certain that there were several spontaneous attempts to challenge colonial rule which must be seen as part of the larger history of the revolt. It is often argued that the Vellore Mutiny was a prelude to the military disaffections of 1857. I would like to argue that this historical connectivity between the Vellore uprisings in the early decades of the nineteenth century and the later day revolt has to be examined by historians. The exploration of the documents relating to discipline and conduct in the Madras Army reveals beyond doubt that temporary stop-gap measures, whether in the matters of dress, food allowances or those of pay, failed to quash the rebellious mood of the sepoys. Indeed, such an interpretation does challenge the oft-repeated view that tranquillity prevailed in south India, while the revolt wreaked havoc in the north. Such a line of analysis has much to do with both the conventional and revisionist historiography of 1857 which hardly stressed on the presidency armies other than the Bengal Presidency Army. Historians have, over a long period of time, ignored the connection of the 1857 mutiny with Madras Presidency Army. While the Bengal Presidency Army got adequate space in research, the Madras Presidency has been deliberately overlooked. I would be interested in arguing that while large parts of south India might have remained outside the epicentres of the revolt, this apparent element of somnolence should not be equated with the idea that the region remained indifferent to the struggle against the British rule involving the collage of social categories. The narrative of the developments in the Madras Presidency has revealed that throughout the early decades of the nineteenth century, there were sporadic incidents of disaffection in the army, which had much too commonalities with the mutinous incidents involving the sepoys of the Bengal provincial army. Yet, paradoxically, these elements of commonality did not merge to create a nationwide upsurge against the British domination, which has found indirect reference in the nationalist historiography. Interestingly, this disjunction and rather a short period of disaffection in the ranks of the Madrassi sepoys did question the earlier official adulation of the Madras pom-poms, who were now being seen as a new challenge to the military apparatus in south India.

Acknowledgement

I would like to extend my gratitude to Dr Raj Sekhar Basu, my supervisor, without whose constant support and encouragement this article would not have been possible, and both the ICHR Research fellowship and the fellowship from the History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India, which made this research work possible.

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