

THE BRITISH REPRESSIVE MEASURES AGAINST THE BENGAL NATIVE INFANTRY: A STUDY

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Abstract:

Indian history commemorates a fiery era in various ways. Extensive literature and research have centered around India's First War of Independence—the Great Revolt of 1857. Over time, people have explored the multifaceted aspects of this Great Revolt. From a contemporary perspective, scholars have examined the historical relevance of the past, analyzing the contributions of various social classes to the uprising, their reactions to it, and the very nature of the rebellion itself. In modern times, new avenues of research have emerged focusing on the contributions of women to the 1857 Revolt, as well as the unity, leadership, and valor displayed by the sepoys. Throughout its history, a fertile, prosperous, and affluent India has witnessed the arrival of numerous foreign powers engaged in trade, governance, and exploitation within the country. In the 16th century, various European mercantile groups—including the Portuguese, French, Dutch, and British—reached coastal nations across the globe via maritime routes in pursuit of trade opportunities. It was in this manner that Vasco da Gama arrived in India in 1498, 20 May AD, seeking commercial prospects. The Portuguese were the first to establish treaties with India's Mughal emperors, subsequently setting up trading outposts in coastal regions such as Goa, Daman and Diu, and Surat. They procured commodities—such as spices, silk, rice, cotton, and opium—from India at low prices and subsequently sold them in European markets at exorbitant rates. On August 24, 1608 AD, the English first arrived at the ports of Gujarat and

Surat to engage in trade. Captain William Hawkins sought permission from the Mughal Emperor Jahangir to conduct commercial activities; however, Jahangir issued a direct refusal.

Keywords: Bengal Native Infantry, British Repressive, 1857 Revolt

Introduction:

Following the death of the Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb¹ in 1707 AD, a fierce succession struggle erupted over who would ascend the throne of the Mughal Empire. Although his son, Bahadur Shah I², eventually assumed the throne, the empire soon began a rapid decline due to his administrative incompetence. Seizing this opportunity, the Dutch and the English began to expand their influence and commercial operations. On June 23, 1757, the Battle of Plassey was fought on the fields of Plassey between the last Nawab of Bengal, Siraj-ud-Daulah, and the British forces. Due to the treachery of some of the Nawab's trusted associates, the Battle of Plassey resulted in the defeat of Siraj-ud-Daulah (Bhagat 2025) the final Nawab of Bengal—and marked the beginning of Company rule. With the inception of the East India Company's empire, dark clouds of gloom gathered over the skies of both Bengal and India. For nearly two centuries, the British imperial power subjected Bengal and India to rule, exploitation, and unbridled plunder; they looted precious metals, gems, wealth, spices, and various other commodities from this land and transported them back to England (Kundan Kumar Thakur 2013, pp. 405-415). During the era of British rule, the East India Company looted a large amount of money, wealth from India over a period of 200 years Across Bengal and India (Nick Robins 2012, pp. 12-26), various communities—including common people, the peasantry, indigenous princely states, Dalits, and the Santhal tribe—rose up in rebellion against the British at different times, often centering on specific grievances. Notable examples include the Sannyasi Rebellion³, various peasant uprisings, the Santhal Rebellion, the Indigo Rebellion, and the Sepoy Mutiny. The central focus of this research lies in examining how the British East India Company ruthlessly suppressed

¹ The sixth Mughal emperor, reigning from 1658 until his death in 1707

² Eighth Mughal Emperor from 1707 to 1712

³ India's first major anti-British independence struggle

these various uprisings as they emerged, and how the leaders who participated in these rebellions were systematically singled out and executed.

Research Methodology:

This study is based primarily on secondary historical literature, Books, Journals, achieve Materials and military records concerning the Bengal Army and the Revolt of 1857. Collecting most of the data from National Library, Kolkata and State Achieves, Kolkata etc.

Formation of Bengal Native Infantry:

Following his victory at the Battle of Plassey, Robert Clive established the Bengal Native Infantry, which he christened the "Lal Paltan" (Red Battalion) (Bayley, Steuart Colvin 1907). Initially, the Bengal Native Infantry was composed of physically robust, tall-statured sepoys—primarily Biharis and Rajput Brahmins. Military officers provided them with training in military drills and tactics, outfitting them with European-style uniforms and weaponry. Clive issued directives to recruit a mixed force comprising both Hindus and Muslims. In addition to Hindus and Muslims, the Bengal Native Infantry also included Christians, Biharis, Rajput's, high-caste Brahmins, and lower-caste Hindus.

Over a prolonged period, resentment against the Company began to fester among the sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry. For a long time, they were systematically deprived of their rightful salaries, allowances, promotions, pensions, foreign service allowances, and prize money. The British also made repeated attempts to undermine their religious beliefs and customs⁴. Beyond issues of religious and racial discrimination, their pay structure was significantly lower than that of their European counterparts. Furthermore, a confluence of factors—including the Company's ill-conceived, extravagant imperialist military campaigns; the physical toll of arduous marches and diseases stemming from food shortages; the requirement to undertake overseas voyages to fight abroad; and the failure to repatriate them as promised after the conclusion of hostilities—fueled the embers of rebellion among the sepoys. While European soldiers were often given lenient punishments—or even pardoned—for grave offenses, the sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry faced severe penalties for even minor infractions. As punishment, they were subjected to

⁴ Causes of the Indian Rebellion of 1857

brutal measures, such as being blown from the mouths of cannons, hanged, or imprisoned and subjected to cruel torture. In 1857, the Bengal Native Infantry comprised 74 regiments⁵; with the exception of just 12 regiments, sepoys from all the remaining units rose in rebellion against the Company at various times. British military strength in 1857 (Heather Streets & Martial Races 2004) as following:

	EUROPEAN	NATIVE	TOTAL
BENGAL ARMY	22698	118663	141361
MADRAS ARMY	10194	49737	59931
BOMBAY ARMY	5109	31601	36710
TOTAL	38001	200001	238002

British Repression Within the Bengal Native Infantry:

The role and significance of the sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry in the expansion of trade and defense operations of the British East India Company beyond the borders of India were immense. However, the British viewed Indian sepoys with neglect and regarded them as inferior and lowly. The Company failed to address the various grievances that arose from time to time among the sepoys of the Bengal Native Infantry. The resentment that had long festered among the sepoys as a result of these grievances periodically erupted in the form of rebellions. The East India Company suppressed these uprisings with an iron hand. In particular, the manner in which the British carried out this suppression—specifically in the context of various military expeditions abroad—is discussed below.

⁵ The regiments of Bengal Native Infantry, alongside the regiments of Bengal European Infantry

Battle Of Buxar:

Towards the end of the Battle of Buxar⁶, in February 1764, French mercenary soldiers—deprived of their Company salaries, allowances, and rewards—initiated a mutiny within their battalion. Recognizing the critical necessity of maintaining solidarity between Indian and European sepoys in the aftermath of the Battle of Buxar (Kaushik Roy 1996, pp.255-273), the Company acceded to all their demands and successfully pacified them. Inspired by this success of the Barrackpore sepoys, soldiers of the Bengal Native Infantry stationed at the cantonment in the Chhapra district launched a mutiny⁷ of their own, centering on these very same demands. They surrounded a European officer, vowing not to release him—nor to rejoin their ranks—until their demands were fully met. As this spirit of dissent was absent among the European sepoys, the Company suppressed the uprising with an iron hand. Following sentencing by a British military court, twenty-four ringleaders of the mutiny were executed by being blown from the mouths of cannons, while six others were subsequently hanged. In this manner, the Company quelled the rebellion within its army.

First Anglo-Mysore War:

In 1770, the East India Company dispatched a ship laden with sepoys by sea. However, tragically, the vessel sank, and everyone on board perished. Consequently, this maritime voyage gave rise to fear and superstition in the minds of the sepoys regarding sea travel (Pratik Chakrabarti 2017). In 1781, when orders were issued to deploy the 4th, 15th, and 17th Regiments stationed at Barrackpore to fight against Haider Ali⁸ in South India, the sepoys rose in rebellion. Shortly thereafter, the sepoys were arrested; a British military court sentenced two Subedars and two sepoys from the 15th Regiment to death, and four individuals were executed by being tied to the muzzles of cannons and blown apart in the presence of all the sepoys at Barrackpore. Upon their return from South India, the regiments were disbanded, and their members were stripped of their rank and dismissed from service.

⁶ Strong fortified town within the territory of Bihar, located on the banks of the Ganges River about 130 kilometers (81 mi) west of Patna

⁷ The larger Bihar rebellion spearheaded by the local chieftain Veer Kunwar Singh

⁸ The Sultan and *de facto* ruler of the Kingdom of Mysore in southern India

Anglo-Dutch War:

In 1795, the sepoy of the 15th Bengal Native Infantry⁹ were called upon to fight against the Dutch in the Moluccas and Amboyna in South Asia (Anand A. Yang 2003, pp.179-208). Upon receiving this news, the sepoy of the 15th Regiment—then stationed in Midnapore—rose in rebellion. At that juncture, a European artillery unit, led by Captain Bradley, opened fire upon the rebels. No casualties were reported in this incident. During the bombardment, the sepoy scattered in all directions and fled. Subsequently, the Company disbanded the 15th Regiment from the Bengal Native Infantry; instead, the 29th Battalion was persuaded to undertake the mission and was dispatched to Amboyna.

Invasion of Java:

Between 1813 and 1816, Indian sepoy stationed on the island of Java launched a rebellion against the colonial authorities. To oust the Dutch and the French from Java, the East India Company dispatched a maritime expedition comprising approximately 12,000 sepoy from Calcutta and Madras (Jean Sutton 2010); under the Company's leadership, the island was successfully captured on August 26, 1811. Prior to their departure from Calcutta, the sepoy had been promised that they would be repatriated within three years; however, by 1815, the Company had taken no measures to facilitate their return home. Consequently, due to the prolonged suspension of their wages, the sepoy faced severe financial hardship. Unable to tolerate such neglect and deprivation by the Company, the sepoy secretly began engaging in anti-British activities. With financial assistance from local Javanese rulers, they devised a plot to liberate Java from British control by assassinating the European officers stationed there. By 1815, when the sepoy had completed all preparations for the uprising, the entire conspiracy was exposed on October 27. Immediately thereafter, a British military court executed 23 of the ringleaders—including Dhakul Singh and Maudin—while the remaining 50 rebels were deported to Calcutta.

⁹ known as the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, the unit was formed in 1846

First Anglo-Burmese War:

In September and October of 1824, during the First Anglo-Burmese War¹⁰, sepoys rose in rebellion over the issue of being deployed to the battlefield. The sepoys of the 26th, 47th, and 62nd Regiments of the Bengal Native Infantry were called upon to proceed to war (Manas Dutta 2016, pp. 42-62). Swearing an oath upon Tulsi leaves and holy water from the Ganges, the sepoys vowed that they would not embark on the military campaign to Burma until the Company provided them with increased pay, bonuses, allowances, and rations and subsistence costs for the duration of their active service. On November 2, 1824, the three regiments were summoned to the parade ground in preparation for the campaign to Burma. (Bertil Lintner 1994) Subsequently, artillery fire was directed at the sepoys for nearly half an hour. In this incident, approximately 200 sepoys were killed on the parade ground, and 140 were taken prisoner. Later, following trials by a British military court, about 14 individuals were hanged on the parade ground, and over a hundred sepoys were imprisoned.

The Great Revolt of 1857:

The resentment that had been brewing among the sepoys for seven long years, stemming from the Company's intolerance as well as various grievances and unfulfilled demands—finally ignited into open rebellion in 1857. The immediate catalyst was the introduction of the new Enfield rifle cartridges¹¹, which were greased with a mixture of cow and pig fat and required the sepoys to bite them open before loading them into their weapons.(Daniel M. Thompson & *Violent Trajectories* 2017) The majority of the sepoys in the Bengal Native Infantry were high-caste Hindus and Muslims; fearing that they would be defiled and lose their religious purity by having to bite these cartridges, the sepoys of the 19th Bengal Regiment at Berhampore and the 34th Bengal Regiment at Barrackpore initiated the first acts of rebellion. On April 8, 1857, Sepoy Mangal Pandey¹² of the 34th Regiment became the first martyr of this uprising; he demonstrated the courage to fire the first shot at a European officer. From Barrackpore, the flames of this

¹⁰ also known as the Indo-Burmese Wars were an armed conflict between two expanding empires, the British Empire and the Konbaung dynasty

¹¹ Pattern 1853 Enfield musket

¹² a sepoy in the 34th Regiment of the Bengal Native Infantry whose defiance in Barrackpore ignited the Indian Rebellion of 1857

rebellion spread like wildfire, engulfing places such as Delhi, Ambala, Jhansi, Meerut, Kanpur, and Lucknow.

Conclusion:

Thus, the British East India Company ruthlessly suppressed the various uprisings of the sepoys throughout this period. As a reaction to the implementation of British repressive policies, anti-British sentiment intensified among a section of the Muslim community. The repressive British measures enacted in the aftermath of the rebellion unleashed an economic, social, and political catastrophe upon people of all classes—both Hindu and Muslim—across India. The sepoys' rebellion against the British—characterized by their self-sacrifice and struggle—subsequently inspired the nation's youth, thereby paving the way for India's future struggle for independence.

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