



## British Indian army, revolt of 1857 and Punjab: shifting the recruitment grounds

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### Abstract

The East India Company (EIC) came to the Indian subcontinent for commercial purposes. Slowly but steadily, it made strong their footprints in the region and acquired the political hegemony. In which, army played significant role in sustaining & expanding the British interests. In his study, Streets (2004: 26) had pointed out that after the 1857 revolt, the British brought a lot of structural changes in its framework and changed the recruitment grounds of its armed forces in the Indian subcontinent. In such a typical case, Punjab had emerged as an extremely fertile ground. In addition, the geographical location of Punjab allied with other certain compulsions obligated the British to go for recruitment from this region. As a result, Punjab benefitted enormously from the recruitment in the British Indian Army. In this backdrop, the present paper is attempted to map the building of British Indian Army in general and Punjab's role in particularly.

**Keywords:** British Indian army, EIC, Punjab's role

### Introduction

Since the historical times, army played significant role in sustaining the Empires/Kingdoms. Similarly, it had given pivotal direction in the expansion of imperialism in Asia, Africa and elsewhere. In this case of point, British came to the Indian subcontinent as a trader. But within a short span of time, they cemented their commercial affairs with political hegemony in the region. In which, army had engaged substantially in the creation of British Empire in the region. Gupta & Deshpande (2002, p. 27) <sup>[1]</sup> had pointed out that Indian Army was the guardian of the imperial order in India and played a significant role in sustaining and holding the British Indian Empire. Particularly, British recruited its forces from the indigenous troops. Further, these soldiers helped to exercise colonial authority. Thus, the British Indian army relied on local people whole heartedly. So, it had built a special relationship between colonial empire and India. After 1857 revolt, British govt brought major structural changes in its building. In which, the only certain native communities/classes were preferred to enlist in the army, possess the high spirit for the military services. These so-called 'Martial Races' included the Punjabi Sikhs, Muslims and Nepalese Gurkhas from the northern and frontier provinces of India, who had provided the backbone of the Imperial military (Streets: 2004, p. 26) <sup>[2]</sup>. These races had played an instrumental role in defending and extending the colonial authority.

### Coming of the European: Role of Military in Empire Building

South Asia had been remained a major trading destination for many European countries in the Ancient and Medieval Era. Famous geographers, Stamp (9 March 1898 - 8 August 1966), called the South Asia as the Indian subcontinent because of its separation from the rest of the Asian landmass (Malhotra: 2012 p. 1) <sup>[3]</sup>. Fundamentally, it is located at the southern extremity of the Eurasian continent (the core of South Asia). Due to its geographical proximity, it had faced

many invasions through the land route and passes such as the Khyber and Bolan. However, these passes were indeed difficult but not impossible to cross for the invaders. Kaplan (2010, p. 6-7) <sup>[5]</sup> had pointed out that the numerous invaders included the Aryans, Mongols, Huns, Mughals, and Turks had reached and looted the rich South Asian subcontinent. As a result, most of the invading groups became the part of subcontinent. Moreover, they contributed a lot in spreading the shared culture and plurality here. This route also attracted explorers and traders into the subcontinent from ancient times onwards, contributing to the rich cultural fabric of the subcontinent.

The richness of the subcontinent attracted the Europeans like all other erstwhile invaders. In such way, the modern times had also attracted to many European invaders. For instances, many European companies came to the region in the 16<sup>th</sup> centuries. In his study, Naravane (2006, p. 15) <sup>[6]</sup> had cited that the Portuguese traders were the first to reach in the region. After that the British, the French and the Dutch came to the Indian subcontinent. Initially, the Europeans arrived in the Indian subcontinent for trade purpose

Out of all the European powers, the British had become the most successful in establishing their superiority over the subcontinent. Talbot (2011, p. 3) <sup>[16]</sup> had revealed that it had brought the region under the colonial rule. Therefore, it had resulted numerous changes and transformations in the its culture and ways of living in the subcontinent. Colonialism had been unleashed sweeping changes in the fields of education, economy, society, judiciary, civil administration, communication, law and order in South Asia.

A considerable amount of literature has cited that the British rule had brought new systems of military mobilization and defence in South Asia. In another way, British Indian army was the strong arm of the British Raj. Because, the British Indian Empire had enjoyed its holding in the region due to its British army and technologies. Initially, the primary purpose of the modern military was to quell internal

disturbances and to counter external aggression in the Indian subcontinent. The Major Stringer Lawrence (6 March 1697 - 10 January 1775), has considered as a father of the British Indian Army. In 1748, he formed Madras as first military units of the East India Company (EIC) and further he had divided the British Indian army into three presidencies - Bengal, Madras, and Bombay, cited by Soherwordi (2010, p. 152) <sup>[14]</sup>. After the recruitment, the British had arranged training and prepared a disciplined and professional army in tune with British lines. Within short span of time, Indian soldiers turned into a professional, united and autonomous fighting force of the British Indian Army (Singh & Kaur, 2014). The British military equipment's and military infrastructure added to this in the building one of the strongest armies in the Empire.

Primarily, the British came as a traders in the Indian subcontinent. But slowly and steadily, they had acquired supreme power in the region. For the given, British Empire expanded its footprints and military had played an instrumental role in this direction. For becoming one of the more professional armed forces, the British Indian Army had gone through in some structural changes (Sandhu, 2011). In this reference, such regions/areas had remained closely associated with British Indian Army. In such a typical case, Punjab had been figured prominently in the British Indian Army's strength. Fundamentally, British came in contact with Punjab during the British rule. Moreover, British also realized the bravery of Punjabi's people in the Anglo-Afghan Wars (1845-46 & 1848-49) and Anglo-Sikh Wars (1845-46 & 1848-49). Further, these wars had brought significant changes in the relationships between Punjab and the British. On the one hand, Punjabis became the savior of the British Raj during the revolt of 1857. As a result, it had fetched the turning point in the military history of colonial Punjab.

### **Revolt of 1857: Shifting the Recruitment Grounds of the British Indian Army**

Soon after its annexation in 1849 AD, the Punjab obsessed with 'Russophobia' and became the part of the greatgame. In addition, an impending invasion from the expanding Russian empire made the situation more critical and vulnerable. In the context of such, the British fabricated strong military infrastructure in the Punjab during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Because, it was the prime concern for the British govt to annex and guard its Afghan border. As Ian Talbot (1988) has pointed out that Punjab have assumed importance due to its geographical proximity to the Afghan border. Therefore, the geo-strategic location and the fear of Russian attack made Punjab important place for the British govt. On the other hand, it emerged as a one of the fertile recruitment ground for the British govt (Talbot, 2011) <sup>[16]</sup>.

In other way, revolt of 1857 had shifted the recruitment ground of the British Indian Army from Bengal to Punjab and North West Frontier Province (NWFP) of the subcontinent. David (2016) and Unsinger (2004) pointed that the British also kicked the colonial theory of divide and rule on the basis of the so-called 'Martial Races.' In which, such classes and communities were preferred to recruit in the British Indian army. Moreover, these classes were classified as a better and brave soldier and more suitable for army service. As a result, most of the British army was started to recruit from the North and North West of India region. In these new paradigms, the Gurkhas from Nepal,

the Punjabis, and the Pathans were classified as 'Martial Races' and preferred to enlist in the army which led to increasing the number of Punjabis in the British Indian army (Soherwordi, 2010) <sup>[14]</sup>.

On the other side, Punjab played significant role in suppressing the 1857 revolt. Due to this, the British were grateful to the Punjabis. As a result, they brought major changes in its recruitment (Singh, 2018) <sup>[34]</sup>. Moreover, the 'Martial Races' were superlatively suited for the harsh campaigning conditions of the frontier itself (Khawaja, 2012) <sup>[10]</sup>. Besides this, the North was possessed the hardy men, experienced in warfare, who had joined almost every invader, from 12<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> century, who came to India through the North-West Frontier. Due to such a case, they were seen as best suited to guard the frontier region and resist the Russian attack through the North West. Thus, the bold determination and loyalty of the Punjabi soldiers spiked the importance of the region in the eyes of British officials (Verma, 2004) <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **Punjab-Sword Arm of the Empire: Geopolitical/Geographical Obligations**

Punjab had been remained the gateway to rich Gangetic plain since the ancient times. In addition, it was a landlocked region in the North Western corner of the Indian sub-continent. In his study, Talbot (1988, p. 11-13) mentioned that the region had suffered from the successive invasions, made along the Northern Grand Trunk Road from Kabul to Delhi via Punjab.

On the other hand, impending attack from the Russia had threaten more badly to the British Empire in the Indian subcontinent. Therefore, location of Punjab had become more important. Yong (2002) <sup>[19]</sup> also revealed that it was obsessed with the fuel of 'Great Game' and Russian expansion through Central Asia were alarming to the British. In such context, prime concern for the British in India had become to save and secure the colonial empire in the region. For the given, the British had mushroomed heavy line of military infrastructure in the Punjab during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As a result, it had helped to annex and guard its Afghan border to thwart the Russia's eastward expansion through Central Asia. Talbot (2007, p. 3-7) <sup>[18]</sup> pointed out that the geostrategic location and the fear of Russian attack made Punjab most significant recruitment ground for the British Indian army.

In his study, Yong (2005) <sup>[12]</sup> had cited that the revolt of 1857 proved as a watershed event in the Indian military in general and Punjab military in particular. It brought drastic changes in the recruitment policies of the British Empire. Particularly, it punished the rebels and rewarded the loyalty so-called from the Bengal and East India to the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) and Punjab as mentioned by Soherwordi (2010, p. 6) <sup>[14]</sup>. Due to this, it has been popularly known as *De-Bengalisation* and the *Punjabisation* of the British Indian Army (Omissi 2016) <sup>[13]</sup>. Keeping in mind, the British officials repositioned the various communities and classes as "Loyal/Traitorous" and "Martial/Effeminate" in India post-1857 mutiny. Kohli (2016, p. 49) <sup>[20]</sup> had cited that certain classes and communities in India were warrior races "Martial Races and it was well believed and accepted by the British Army's senior officers." In his study, Rand & Wagner (2012, p. 243) <sup>[22]</sup> had cited such classes and communities were believed to be brave soldiers and more suitable for the

fighting in the hill areas. Due to such changes, the British Indian army largely started to draw from the (Nepal), the Punjabis (Punjab), and the Pathans (NWFP).

Lieutenant-General Sir George MacMunn (1933, p. 2) <sup>[23]</sup> had done an entitled work “The Martial Races of India”, in which he had strikingly sketched the picture of martial races:

To understand what is meant by the martial races of India is to understand from the inside the real story of India. We do not speak of the martial races of Britain as distinct from the non-martial, nor of Germany, nor of France. But in India we speak of the martial races as a thing apart and because the mass of the people has neither martial aptitude nor physical courage. The courage that we should talk colloquially as guts.

Numerous studies had repeatedly mentioned the stories of Punjab recruitment in the British Indian army. In his study, Constable (2001, p. 1-2) <sup>[24]</sup> had cited that the self-sufficiency, physical and moral resilience, orderliness and hard work, fighting tenacity, and above all, a sense of courage and loyalty the characteristics attributed to this martial race. In this reference, Major-General George MacMunn (1933) <sup>[23]</sup> had written about the Sikhs: “As a fighting man, his slow wit and dogged courage give him many of the characteristics of the British soldier at his best.” After the 1857 revolt, the British government after taking over the reins of the East India Company (EIC) and changed

the shape of three wings of the British Indian army. In the changing circumstances, the composition of the British Indian Army altered dramatically in the Indian subcontinent. Now, they had given more stress to build a disciplined, professional and loyal, trained army (Soherwordi: 2010, p. 4-6) <sup>[14]</sup>.

In his work, Chandra (2009, p. 164-165) <sup>[26]</sup> pointed out that the British had started to recruit its half of the army from the Punjab during the period 1875-1914. During the revolt of 1857, Punjab had been remained loyal towards the British govt. Not only loyal, it had rendered key services in the suppressing Indian jolt. On the other hand, the British had raised more regiments from the Punjab. By June 1858, out of the 80,000 native troops in the Bengal Army and Punjab had contributed 75,000 soldiers for the purpose. By 1875, one-third of the British Indian army recruitment was coming from the Punjab (Singh, 2018) <sup>[34]</sup>.

With the opening of World War I, Punjab's presence in the British Indian army rose speedily. Moreover, it had lagged behind the other provinces of India in the building of British Indian Army. In his work, Holland (2005) <sup>[27]</sup> pointed out that British government sent the Punjabi soldiers in several war fronts overseas to fight against the enemies. With the outbreak of the World War I, thousands of Punjab soldiers sent for fighting to the various theaters of war like Belgium, France, Italy, Holland, and Greece and shed their blood for the British Empire (Singh, 2021) <sup>[21]</sup>. For this, we are inserting a detailed description of the war contribution in a below given table.

**Table 1:** Combatant and non-combatant personnel dispatched overseas 1914-18

	Combatants		Non-Combatants	Total
	Indian Officers and Warrant Officers	Indian Other Ranks		
To France	1,911	82,974	47,611	132,496
To East Africa	826	33,633	12,477	46,906
To Mesopotamia	7,812	287,753	293,152	588,717
To Egypt	1,889	94,596	19,674	116,159
To Gallipoli	90	3,003	1,335	4,428
To Salonika	31	3,643	1,264	4,938
To Aden	343	15,655	4,245	20,243
To Persian Gulf	615	17,537	11,305	29,457
Total	13,517	5,38,794	3,91,063	9,43,344

**Source:** India's Contribution to the Great War, p. 96-97.

During the World War I, the Punjab played very significant role. Fundamentally, it remained the major supplier of manpower for the construction of British army. With the short span of time, it had become the “Home Front” for the British war efforts, as said by Tan Tai Yong. For speed up the enlistment, the British Government in India had adopted many measures. Specially, Michael O' Dwyer (Lieutenant Governor of Punjab, 1913-1919) toured the whole Punjab and motivate the people to send their sons for honor of their colonial masters. In such efforts, he remained much successful in enlisting more and more men in the Indian Army. Moreover, special schemes had been formulated to attract the young men to join the Indian army. In addition, British govt had constituted recruitment board for fulfill the requirements of the War. As a result, the Government recruited total of 4,46,976 men (349,688 combatants and 97,288 non-combatants) for the British Indian army from the Punjab. Thus, Punjab had sent bulk of the Indian combatants for the war services. Particularly, the

Rawalpindi, Jhelum and Attock districts of Punjab had supplied manpower most intensely (Yong, 2000) <sup>[19]</sup>. The Punjabi soldiers fought in France, Gallipoli, Salonika, Egypt, Somaliland, East and West Africa, Aden, Mesopotamia, Persia, China, the Punjabi soldiers fought gallantry and played no small part in the victory (Leigh, 1922) <sup>[32]</sup>.

### Concluding Remarks

Thus, Punjab had enjoyed very special military relationship after its annexation. Moreover, the revolt of 1857 played significant role in shifting the recruitment grounds of the British Indian army. After that, it had become the chief recruitment center. Thus, Punjab proved a major source of strength to the British Empire. In addition, the Punjab had rendered its ‘valuable services’ to the British, during both on the home front and in the battlefields. In this regard, Duke of Connaught had cited that, “The achievements of the Punjab were remarkable. Even before the War, its name was

familiar in the military annals of the Empire.” They did their splendid services in Northwest Frontiers of India and in Mesopotamia, France, China, Abyssinia, Egypt and Sudan (Kant, 2014) <sup>[33]</sup>. The governor of Punjab, Michael O’ Dwyer had mentioned in *India As I Knew It 1885-1925* (1925) that, “The Punjab with its hardy and martial rural population of peasant proprietors had been rightly regarded as the ‘Shield and Spearhead’ and the ‘Sword hand’ of India. These soldiers fought in the trenches with courage and bravery. During these campaigns, numerous soldiers lost their lives and suffered from heavy bombardment. Ironically, even the people of Punjab don’t know the gallantry achievements of their forefathers. Thus, the role of Punjabis in the building of British Indian army in general and in World Wars particularly had remained the watershed event in the military history of colonial Punjab. Paradoxically, saga of the great contribution of Punjab had been remained missing from the pages of history.

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