

## Military Origins of the Sepoy Mutiny

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THE sepoy mutiny of 1857 posed the greatest challenge to the British empire in India from the Anglo-French wars of the eighteenth century to the Indian nationalist movement of the twentieth century. The causes of this bloody uprising were hotly debated by British politicians and imperial officials in the years after 1857 and have been a subject of lively controversy among historians since. Recent writers have added new dimensions to the subject by demonstrating how certain segments of the Indian civilian population, antagonized by the expansion of British power at their own expense, played an important role in the mutiny. The importance of these civil origins cannot be ignored, but the mutiny first erupted in the battalions of the Bengal Native Army, and its military origins merit primary consideration.

Too often, however, these origins are discussed in terms of events immediately preceding the mutiny, especially the indiscreet attempt of the British to furnish Indian soldiers with a new type of cartridge, greased with animal fat, and thus offensive to the religious taboos of Hindu and Muslim alike. But the greased cartridges were only the immediate cause of the mutiny; for the underlying causes one must search much deeper.

After the expulsion of the French from India, the sepoy armies furnished the sword with which the British won an empire and held this empire in subjection. These armies were reknowned for their bravery in battle and for their intense loyalty to the British raj. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, however, the sepoys had reached the zenith of their military prowess. From that time, a number of changes—in the structure of the army, the policy governing the army, and British imperial policy as a whole—gradually undermined the sepoys' loyalty, weakened their respect for British power, and destroyed discipline in the armies. A study of these changes and their effects offers a deeper insight into the outbreak of the mutiny

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of 1857 and illustrates as well the changing nature of the British empire in India.

One of the most important forces contributing to the outbreak of the mutiny was the steady decline in the sepoys' prestige. The East India Company hired Indians for its armies as early as 1686, but they were few in numbers and were not provided with European weapons and trained in European military drill. It was not until the Anglo-French wars of the mid-eighteenth century that sepoys<sup>1</sup> became an important part of the Company's army. These wars clearly manifested the advantages of Indian troops. They could be recruited easily and with much less expense than European troops; they were accustomed to the climate and much less susceptible to disease than raw recruits from Europe; if properly trained, they were able fighters; and if their customs and religion were respected they proved loyal to the British. The sepoys contributed significantly to the removal of French power from India, and by 1764 the Company had amassed over 30,000 Indian troops in its Bengal, Bombay, and Madras armies.

Indians found a number of attractions to service with the British. The pay in the Company's armies was not good, but it was regular, while that in the armies of Indian princes was usually months in arrears.<sup>2</sup> This pay could be supplemented by the spoils of war and, though the sepoy's legal share of the booty was only a fraction of that received by his English officers, he could often increase his share illicitly by eluding the British prize agents.<sup>3</sup> The Company provided sick leave and furlough for the sepoys and gave pensions to those who received disabling injuries in battle or who retired from the service in good standing.<sup>4</sup> The sepoy was protected by the British government and had precedence over other Indians in the courts—an important consideration in those days when litigation was extremely slow.<sup>5</sup>

1. The word "sepoy" is derived from the Persian word "sipāhī," which, literally translated means army man or soldier. As used by the British, the word referred only to those Indians in the service of European armies.

2. F. G. Cardew, *A Sketch of the Services of the Bengal Native Infantry* (Calcutta, 1903), 126.

3. This must have been quite common, for a British soldier, who often served as prize agent, recalled that it could not have been stopped had there been a thousand prize agents, "all with the eyes of lynxes." John Shipp, *Memoirs of the Extraordinary Military Career of John Shipp* (3rd Edition, London, 1890), 236.

4. Cardew, *op. cit.*, 126.

5. Sitaram, *From Sepoy to Subadar: Being the Life and Adventures of a Native Officer of the Bengal Army*. Trans. by Lt. Col. Northgate. (3rd Edition, Calcutta, 1911), 3.

Discipline was harsh,<sup>6</sup> even by eighteenth century standards, and life in the army was not easy. But in the early years this was more than compensated by the rewards for faithful service and for valor in battle. An able and ambitious sepoy could achieve a position of real distinction in the army. Indian *subadars* (captains) commanded battalions and companies of sepoys and it was not uncommon for these units to be dispatched independently on important missions. One Mohamed Esof rose to command the entire Madras Native Infantry and achieved a record of distinguished service long praised by Indians and British alike.<sup>7</sup> The Indian officer's position offered prestige and responsibility, as well as increased pay and allowances, and the sepoys aspired to the ranks of *subadar* and *jemadar* (lieutenant).

By the early nineteenth century, however, English officers had been placed in command of all Indian companies and battalions. As British power expanded throughout India, Indian officers were gradually shorn of all authority.

So it happened, [writes John Kaye] that the native officers, who had exercised real authority in their battalions, who had enjoyed opportunities of personal distinction, who had felt an honourable pride in their positions, were pushed aside by an incursion of English gentlemen, who took all the substantive power into their hands, and left scarcely more than a shadow of rank to the men whom they had supplanted.<sup>8</sup>

This significant change in British policy not only undermined the morale of Indian officers, but it also discouraged the educated and economically influential classes of Indians who had formerly filled the commissioned ranks from entering the army. As a result, a British journal reported in 1853 that "the soldiers of India are the most unlettered men in the country, and the officers, taken from the same class, do not, in this respect, go ahead of the privates." This change

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6. Whipping appears to have been the most common punishment and as many as five hundred lashes could be meted out to offenders. For mutineers, the British adopted the old and brutal Mughul punishment called "blowing away from guns." The guilty sepoy stood in front of the muzzle of a cannon, securely bound to the cannon's wheels. At a given order the cannon was fired and the sepoy blown to bits.

7. Sir John Malcolm, "An Historical Account of the Rise and Progress of the Bengal Native Infantry," *Quarterly Review*, XVIII (January 18, 1818), 391.

8. John W. Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India 1857-1858* (London, 1880), I, 204.

is reflected in the drastic increase in courts-martial of officers in the years between 1820 and 1850.<sup>9</sup>

The decision to replace the Indian officers with Englishmen stems from several sources. In the anomalous position of conquering a country with its own people, the British were naturally afraid to place too much authority in the hands of the Indians, especially as the number of sepoys grew far larger than the number of English troops in India.<sup>10</sup> The change in policy also reflects the increasing belief of the British in the moral depravity of the Indian people, best expressed in Lord Cornwallis's statement, "Every native of Hindustan, I verily believe, is corrupt."<sup>11</sup> First accepted in the Governor-Generalship of Cornwallis, this idea became dogma in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Based on a limited acquaintance with the Indian people and their civilization, it had profound ramifications on all aspects of British rule in India. Indians were excluded from the civil service, and held only subsidiary positions in the judicial system. It was natural that this policy should be extended to the army upon which British rule in India was based.

Nor was any substitute found to give the sepoys incentive. As early as 1799, Sir John Malcolm, who achieved a brilliant record in India as a soldier, diplomat, and civil official, complained that no sepoy in the Madras army held a position of distinction or received ample pay. Malcolm argued that increased salaries would help to insure devoted service and would be of slight expense compared with the results achieved.<sup>12</sup> But his advice fell on deaf ears. The Company's Directors were unsympathetic to the demands of English officers and men for higher salaries and their desire for economy left no room for increasing the salaries of the sepoys, especially when the army was increasing so rapidly.

Other changes served to deflate the self-respect of the sepoy in the half-century before the mutiny. Many of them were drawn from the martial tribes of Northern India; their castes had long traditions of military service and they took great pride in their ability as fighters. But in the peaceful years between 1815 and 1837, and again after the Afghan war of 1837, the Company forced sepoys to perform duties that were not only uninspiring, but were often degrading.

9. "Indian Army," *Edinburgh Review*, 97 (January 1853), 105.

10. *Ibid.*, 106.

11. Quoted in Sir Percival Spear, *The Oxford History of India* (3rd Edition, Oxford, 1958), 532.

12. Malcolm to Col. J. Webbe, October 3, 1799, in John W. Kaye, *The Life and Correspondence of Major-General Sir John Malcolm* (London, 1856), I, 7.

Many of them were employed as treasure guards, guards for the households of important civil and military officials, and servants for officers' messes.<sup>13</sup> In a land where great emphasis is placed on a man's occupation, and where that occupation often has religious significance, such changes could not help but bring about a drastic decline in the sepoys' morale.

A change in the Company's recruiting policy in the 1820's provides another explanation for the breakdown in discipline that preceded the mutiny and serves as well to explain why the impact of the mutiny was greatest in the Bengal army, less extensive in the Madras army, and hardly felt in the Bombay army. At first British recruiting policy was based solely on expediency; men available and willing to serve in the army were recruited regardless of caste or class. But in later years, when the Company could be more selective, it ordered its recruiters to select, as far as practicable, only men of higher castes, who were mistakenly considered superior fighters. This order was followed closely in Bengal, where many high-caste men were available, and to a lesser extent in Madras; but it was virtually ignored in Bombay where few higher castes resided.<sup>14</sup> As a result, the Bengal army was dominated by high-caste Hindus, mostly Brahmins, while the army of Bombay was composed of Indians of all castes and classes. Homogeneity gave the Bengal army greater unity but, as the mutiny demonstrated, this unity could be used against the British as well as for them. In addition, the high-caste soldier was, according to a contemporary, the "slave of a thousand scruples, which do not affect the mind of a low-caste man,"<sup>15</sup> and he resisted violently anything which might cause him the loss of caste. The British were forced to make many concessions to the prejudices of the Bengal sepoys, and these concessions weakened discipline considerably. Nor could discipline remain strong in an army where a low-born officer might be forced to bow before his Brahmin sepoy when off parade.<sup>16</sup>

A third force working toward the atmosphere which spawned the mutiny was the steadily deteriorating relations between the sepoys and their English officers. The battalion and company officers who replaced Indians in command from the 1770's on provided the vital link between the sepoys and the East India Company, and the loyalty and morale of a unit depended largely on the quality of its of-

13. Sir Charles Napier, *Defects, Civil and Military of the Indian Government* (London, 1857), 224-226.

14. Patrick Cadell, *History of the Bombay Army* (London, 1938), 13.

15. "Indian Army," *loc. cit.*, 107.

16. Haraprasad Chattopadhyaya, *The Sepoy Mutiny 1857: A Social Study and Analysis* (Calcutta; 1957), 69.

ficers. Sitaram, a sepoy who spent more than fifty years in the service of the British, asserted that :

If the men like him [the officer] ; if he understands them, can enter into their feelings, and has obtained their confidence, which is not to be done in any one day or one year ; and above all, if he has power, and possesses justice—they will do anything, go anywhere, and his will is law.<sup>17</sup>

Because of the manner in which they were chosen and the conditions under which they served, the East India Company's officers were never an exceptionally talented lot. Most of the officers received direct appointments from the Company Directors and these appointments, an important source of patronage for the Directors, were seldom awarded on the basis of a youth's qualifications. The Directors required only a brief interview of a prospective appointee which seems to have been little more than a formality.<sup>18</sup> Many of the successful officers gained their military training with the royal troops serving in India, then sold their commissions and transferred to the Company's army, where they gained an advance in rank.<sup>19</sup> Some officers, the brilliant Robert Clive is an example, came into the army after serving in civil capacities with the Company, although this was rare in the nineteenth century.

The nature of service in India did not attract able and ambitious young men. The pay, particularly that of the subalterns, was notoriously low and the officer had to pay for his own bungalow, food, equipment, and uniforms.<sup>20</sup> Expenses usually ran considerably higher than salaries and most young officers were burdened with heavy debts after only a short time in India.<sup>21</sup> Promotion was slow and uncertain, and the young officer stood a better chance of dying than attaining high rank. In the decade preceding the mutiny, the average

17. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 56-57.

18. The only question asked John Malcolm at his interview was what would he do if he were to meet the fierce Indian warrior, Hyder Ali. Without hesitation, the twelve-year old Malcolm is supposed to have replied, "Do Sir, I would cut out with my sword and cutt [sic] off his head." "You will do," a Director replied. Kaye, *Malcolm*, I, 7.

19. H. H. Dodwell (ed.), *The Indian Empire 1858-1918*, Volume VI of *The Cambridge History of India* (Delhi 1958), 158.

20. Thomas Munro to Mrs. Munro, December 30, 1781, in G. R. Glieg, *The Life and Correspondence of Major General Thomas Munro*, I, 54; John Nicholson to Mrs. Nicholson, October 13, 1839, in L. J. Trotter, *The Life of John Nicholson* (London, 1898), 11.

21. Henry Lawrence to Letitia Lawrence, August 2, 1823, in Michael Edwardes, *The Necessary Hell: John and Henry Lawrence and the Indian Empire* (London, 1958), 43.

age of colonels was sixty and of brigadiers, seventy.<sup>22</sup> As a result, positions of command were held by a group of superannuated officers, who, according to one who served with them, after several weeks of a campaign became a "burden to themselves, an annoyance to those under them, and a terror to everyone but the enemy."<sup>23</sup> Leave could be taken only once during the whole of an officer's career, and then not until he had served ten years in India.<sup>24</sup>

Under these conditions it was difficult to induce good men to serve in India and equally difficult to retain their services after they had been there several years. Many men of ability, deploring the conditions under which they worked, deserted the Company's army and hired themselves out to Indian princes.<sup>25</sup> Others, like John Malcolm, despairing of "obtaining military command before I was superannuated," turned their talents to civil or diplomatic positions.<sup>26</sup> There were no patriotic ties to bind officers to the Company and mutiny was not unusual among the English officers. The Directors attributed these mutinies to the avarice of their officers, refused to recognize their just grievances, and gave in to their demands only when it seemed that failure to do so would end in disaster.<sup>27</sup> They were never sympathetic to the poor conditions under which the officers served and did little to improve their morale. A small pay raise was granted in 1796, but just two years later the Directors regretted making this concession, for, they complained, it had only contributed to an "increasing spirit of luxury and dissipation" among the officers.<sup>28</sup>

It is thus clear that service in the Company's army did not attract able men. It is equally clear that there was a vast difference between the officers commanding sepoys in the last decades of the eighteenth century and those commanding them in the decades preceding the mutiny. So striking was the difference, in fact, that a veteran sepoy

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22. Frederick S. Roberts, *Forty-One Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (New York, 1901), 244.

23. W. S. Hodson to his brother, March 18, 1850, in G. H. Hodson (ed.), *Twelve Years of a Soldier's Life in India: Extracts from the Letters of Major W. S. Hodson* (London, 1859), 100.

24. Roberts, *op. cit.*, 1.

25. John Shore to Henry Dundas, June, 1794, in Holden Furber (ed.), *The Private Record of an Indian Governor-Generalship* (Cambridge, Mass., 1933), 39-40.

26. Malcolm to George Canning, 1818, Kaye, *Malcolm*, II, 374.

27. C. H. Philips, *The East India Company 1784-1834* (Manchester, 1961), 170.

28. Court of Directors to the Governor-General of Bengal, May 25, 1798, P. C. Gupta (ed.), *Fort William-India House Correspondence* (Delhi, 1959), XXIII, 90-91.

reportedly inquired whether the new officers were of a different caste from those that had preceded them.<sup>29</sup> The changes were primarily a result of the changing nature of the British empire in India and of the demands that expansion of this empire placed upon the officials of the East India Company and the British government. They go far toward explaining the outbreak of the great mutiny of 1857.

The British officers of the eighteenth century were, as a rule, familiar with India and the Indians; they were the best men of those available to the Company; they worked closely with the sepoys, respected them, and in turn won their respect and often their devotion. Before the reorganization of the armies in 1796, the officers commanding sepoy battalions were hand-picked from among officers of the Company's European battalions who had demonstrated considerable tact, ability, and judgment.<sup>30</sup> Cadets came to India at an early age—sixteen seems to have been the average—and spent as long as ten years in a European unit before assuming command of sepoys. Thus they had much time to familiarize themselves with the country and with the natives whom they were to lead.<sup>31</sup> No doubt some of them squandered their time, but others such as Malcolm and Sir Thomas Munro, applied themselves diligently to Oriental studies and became scholars in their own right. By the time they were transferred to the sepoy army, they were familiar with the Indians' languages, customs, and religious practices. They realized the importance of religion to both Hindu and Muslim and respected their peculiar practices, even if occasionally, it worked against the best interests of discipline.<sup>32</sup>

Before the ill-conceived reorganization of 1796, positions at the head of sepoy units were the most prestigious in the army, offered extra pay and allowances, and were eagerly sought by English officers. Finally, these officers were complete masters of their commands. They had exclusive authority to promote and demote, to reward and punish. The Indians respected this power and if it was combined with justice, admired and often loved their officers.<sup>33</sup>

Other factors served to develop a rapport between officer and sepoy that was usually lacking in the nineteenth century. Before 1800 there were few Englishmen in India and the transplantation of English culture and society to India had scarcely begun. The officer had few

29. Col. Hodgson's paper to Lord Dalhousie, 1851, quoted in *The Illustrated London News*, 31 (August 8, 1857), 135.

30. Kaye, *Sepoy War*, I, 256-257.

31. Cadell, *op. cit.*, 111-112.

32. Shore to Dundas, June, 1794, Furber, *op. cit.*, 42.

33. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 54.



diversions and often spent his spare time with his men. The officers attended the Indians' *nautches* (dances), games, and sports, and often took the sepoy along on hunts. Sitaram's favorite captain enjoyed nothing better than participating in sports along with the men. Officers seem to have had sepoys in their quarters frequently, discussed problems with them freely, and treated them kindly with no airs of racial superiority.<sup>34</sup> Some English officers married Indian women and it was not unusual for these wives to wield considerable influence as intermediaries between officer and men.<sup>35</sup>

Most of these officers had great respect for the military skill of the sepoys. The most loved and respected of all British officers, Sir Eyre Coote, gave up his share of the plunder of Wandewash so that it might be divided among his men as the "only acknowledgment he could at present make the army for the services they had done their country."<sup>36</sup> Young Arthur Wellesley, a royal officer who commanded sepoys on numerous occasions, asserted that "There is no man who has, or who ought to have, a higher opinion of the sepoys than I have. I have tried them on many serious occasions, and they have never failed me, and always conducted themselves well."<sup>37</sup> It was Wellesley's belief that if the British lost their "character for truth and good faith, we shall have but little to stand upon in this country," and in his dealings with the Indians he faithfully adhered to these exacting standards.<sup>38</sup> Such officers got the most from their men and the sepoys spoke with glowing pride of their service with officers like Wellesley, Malcolm, Munro, and Lake.

Capable military and civil officials, such as Lord Cornwallis, recognized the importance of this close relationship, were at least partially aware of why it existed, and were anxious to insure that it continued. In 1790, Cornwallis advised Henry Dundas, President of the Board of Control in London, that it was:

indeed absolutely necessary for the public good, that the officers who are destined to serve in those corps should come out at an early period of life and devote themselves exclusively to the Indian service; a perfect knowledge of the language, and a minute attention to the customs and religious prejudices of the se-

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34. *Ibid.*, 15.

35. Dodwell, *op. cit.*, VI, 162.

36. A. Mervyn Davies, *Clive of Plassey: A Biography* (New York, 1939), 299-300.

37. Quoted in Edward Thompson, *The Making of the Native Princes* (London, 1944), 86.

38. Philip Guedalla, *Wellington* (New York, 1931), 110.

poys being qualifications for that line which cannot be dispensed with.<sup>39</sup>

Cornwallis's successor as Governor-General, John Shore, advised Dundas similarly, "lest authority, acting from ignorance and prejudice, should loosen the tie of subordination."<sup>40</sup>

But even as Cornwallis and Shore wrote, forces were beginning to break down the old system, resulting in the emergence of a new breed of officers less capable of exercising the delicate judgment required in the handling of sepoy units and incapable of winning their respect. One of the most important aspects of the old system—the practice of requiring cadets to serve long apprenticeships before assuming responsible positions with sepoy units—was applied less and less in the nineteenth century. As the sepoy armies grew ever larger, the great demand for officers made it necessary to place more and more responsibility on the weak shoulders of young and inexperienced subalterns. After 1812, moreover, cadets received two or three years of their training at the Company's military academy in Addiscombe, England, instead of in India as previously. At Addiscombe, the cadet gained little more than an introduction to Hindustani, military drill, and professional subjects, and he was inadequately prepared to assume a responsible position with the sepoys.<sup>41</sup>

The astronomical increase in sepoy troops brought problems of which the Directors were not always aware and which, in any event, they were probably incapable of handling. From 1794 to 1817, the strength of the Bengal army alone tripled (from 20,000 to 60,000 sepoys), while the number of European officers increased only from 1,200 to 1,500. The ratio of officers to sepoys, one to sixteen in 1794, increased to one to forty by 1817 and one to ninety-three by 1844.<sup>42</sup> The work load of individual officers increased greatly under this burden and close contact between officers and men was much more rare than before.

A steady drain of experienced officers from the army complicated this problem. The provisions of 1796 led to earlier retirement of the officers.<sup>43</sup> As British expansion proceeded apace, hundreds of new civil and political positions and new staff offices with the army were

39. Cornwallis to Dundas, April 4, 1790, Charles Ross (ed.), *The Correspondence of Charles, First Marquis Cornwallis* (London, 1859), II, 19.

40. Shore to Dundas, June, 1794, Furber, *op. cit.*, 43.

41. For an amusing and instructive contemporary description of life at Addiscombe, see Edwardes, *op. cit.*, 40-42.

42. Furber, *op. cit.*, 11; Malcolm, *loc. cit.*, 406; "Indian Army," *loc. cit.*, 107.

43. Kaye, *Sepoy War*, I, 216.

opened to experienced men. These positions offering higher salaries, opportunities for more rapid advancement, and less risky working conditions, lured many able officers from sepoy units.<sup>44</sup>

The Company was hard-pressed to find replacements for these officers. It became necessary to make frequent changes among battalion and company commanders, changes that had a most harmful effect on the morale and discipline of the sepoys. Sitaram recalled that he had four different commanding officers within one year and that these changes had produced much uneasiness and discontent among the men. "Among us," he noted, "there is a great dislike to new ways; one *Saheb* upsets what the other has done, and we do not know what to do, because what we have been taught one day is wrong the next! It takes us a long time to learn the ways of a *Saheb*, and when the men are accustomed to him, it is not good to have him removed."<sup>45</sup>

Unable to meet the need for officers from the limited number of experienced men available, the Company was forced to place young and inexperienced subalterns in positions of authority. These men knew little about India and the customs of the sepoys and they lacked that mature and sensitive judgment so necessary in the handling of these men. Most of them lacked facility in the Indian languages. For a time the Company required a language examination of all cadets, but the desperate need for officers seems to have reduced this examination to a formality. Before 1814, officers who had demonstrated fluency in Hindustani were rewarded with a cash bonus, but the Directors' all-consuming desire for economy led to its termination.<sup>46</sup> The few officers possessing facility with the languages became diplomats or were assigned to armies of Indian princes conquered by the British. These positions offered more money and prestige and were readily accepted by the officers.<sup>47</sup>

The inability of officers to communicate with their men contributed significantly to the breakdown of discipline in the army. Sir Charles Napier, who despite his impetuosity was a capable general and was revered by the sepoys, noted that more than one Indian had been court martialled for "insolence" when this had resulted from his frustration in trying unsuccessfully to make himself understood to his officer. Sir Charles wryly added that the officers' ignorance of the language made it possible for the sepoys to be "really insolent without

44. Napier, *op. cit.*, 247.

45. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 56-57; "Indian Army," *loc. cit.*, 111.

46. Sir Thomas Munro, Minute of November 7, 1823, Glieg, *op. cit.*, II, 364-365.

47. John Nicholson to Alexander Nicholson, August, 1840, Trotter, *op. cit.*, 22.

discovery." 48 "Men who could scarcely call for a glass of water in the language of the country," wrote Kaye, "or define the difference between a Hindoo [*sic*] and a Mahomedan [*sic*], found themselves invested with responsibilities which ought to have devolved only on men of large local experience and approved judgment and temper." 49 Sir Thomas Munro recommended in 1823 that officers be provided with tutors and books at the Company's expense or the bonus be reinstated to give them incentive to learn the languages, but his advice was not followed.<sup>50</sup>

At the same time, as the civil and military establishment of the British in India sprouted into a vast bureaucracy, power was taken from company and battalion commanders and placed in the hands of higher authorities. Promulgated with the well-intentioned object of preventing careless officers from abusing the immense power they commanded, this order served nonetheless to weaken the respect of the sepoys for their officers. "Absolute power is what we worship," recalled Sitaram. But, he continued, under the new order, the "commanding officer has to ask half a dozen other officers before he can punish a sepoy, and the punishment takes months before it can arrive, and when the punishment is inflicted, one-half the men have forgotten all about the case, and the effect is quite lost."<sup>51</sup>

The decline of the close relationship that had formerly existed between officer and sepoy had other roots. The second, third, and fourth decades of the nineteenth century brought sweeping changes in Indian society. The "Anglicists" (those who would have governed India with English principles and institutions) won a long and bitter struggle over the "Orientalists" (those who would have retained Indian institutions) and zealous reformers began to bring the blessings of the "superior English society" to the Indians. English became the official language; education and law were Westernized. The number of English men and women in India increased greatly and gradually an English society was transplanted to the centers of British power.

The changing nature of English society in India had profound effects on the sepoy-officer relationship. English books replaced the study of native classics and languages; polo, balls, and hunts were reserved exclusively for Englishmen; the availability of English women made marriages between English officers and Indians rare.

48. Napier, *op. cit.*, 255.

49. Kaye, *Sepoy War*, I, 216.

50. Munro, Minute of November 7, 1823, Glieg, *op. cit.*, II, 365.

51. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 55.

Officers ceased to attend the native *nautches*, Sitaram recalled, because the "Christian priests" said it was sinful.<sup>52</sup> The sepoy, formerly a frequent and welcome visitor in the officer's quarters, now received little attention. A Muslim sepoy in the Bengal army recalled that "When any sepoy goes to see or speak to them at their Bungalows they get much displeased."<sup>53</sup> In many instances, the officers did not speak to their men unless obliged and the sepoy was forbidden from making remonstrance to his officer unless he was in full dress and accompanied by a non-commissioned officer. *Subadars* and *jemadars*, according to Napier, were treated with a "lightness and contumely which, exclusive of its vulgarity, is undeserved."<sup>54</sup> The superiority complex of Victorian Englishmen, and their utter contempt for everything Indian is also reflected in the worsening relationship between officers and sepoys. Even the beardless subaltern, fresh from Addiscombe, often looked down with contempt upon the grey-haired *subadar*, who had seen action in many gruelling campaigns, and he casually referred to all Indians as "niggers."<sup>55</sup>

Another striking and significant characteristic of the new breed of English officers was their missionary zeal. In 1798, the Directors had been "astonished and shocked" at reports that the solemnity of the Sabbath "had been broke in upon by horse-racing, whilst divine worship, for which the Sabbath is especially enjoined to be set apart, is never performed at any of those stations, although chaplains are allotted to them."<sup>56</sup> But the rising tide of Victorian evangelicalism swept into India, and in later years the officers not only were strict attendants at divine service, but some of them took leading roles in these services and others made concerted efforts to convert their Indian troops to Christianity. The wife of a high-ranking officer recalled that her husband "made friends [with the Indians], and then recommended the gospel to them."<sup>57</sup> A more blatant example is that of a Colonel S. G. Wheeler, who, when questioned about his missionary activities, replied:

I have been in the habit of speaking to the natives of all classes, sepoys and others, making no distinction, since there is no respect of persons with God . . . . I have done this from a con-

52. *Ibid.*

53. Surendra Nath Sen, *Eighteen Fifty-Seven* (New Delhi, 1958), 24.

54. Napier, *op. cit.*, 249.

55. Sen, *op. cit.*, 23.

56. Court of Directors to the Governor-General of Bengal, May 25, 1798, Gupta, *op. cit.*, 888.

57. Colin Mackenzie, *Storms and Sunshine of a Soldier's Life 1825-1881* (Edinburgh, 1884), II, 73.

viction that every converted Christian is expected, rather commanded by the scriptures, to make known the glad tidings of salvation to his fellow lost creatures.<sup>58</sup>

Nothing could have been better calculated to cast hysteria into the sepoy ranks, especially those of the Brahmin-dominated Bengal army. These efforts at conversion heightened the already strong fear among many sepoys that the British planned to convert them to Christianity by force if necessary.<sup>59</sup>

Thus by the 1850's the steadily deteriorating relationship between officers and sepoys had alienated many of the troops and created an atmosphere conducive to mutiny. In 1851, a British colonel warned the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, that a "wide chasm separates the European officer from his native comrade, a gulf in which the dearest interests of this army may be entombed unless a radical change of relations between the parties is introduced."<sup>60</sup>

The sepoy's increasing tendency toward mutiny reflects the changes that have been cited. Before 1800, only one example of mutiny, and that a small one, has been recorded. Between 1800 and 1857 there are abundant examples of the sepoys' growing disloyalty to their British masters. The first outbreak occurred in 1806 at Vellore in Madras. There, a young and inexperienced staff officer issued a set of regulations which aimed at improving the appearance of the troops by making their dress correspond to that of the European soldiers. For over fifty years the sepoys had worn the red coat of the British soldier, but they had retained their own headgear and *dhotis*, and their officers had been careful not to tamper with their earrings and facial markings which had religious significance. But the careless orders of 1806 required all Indian troops to wear the same headpiece, obliged them to shave their chins and mustaches, and to discard their earrings and facial markings. The new turbans were of leather, equally abominable to Hindu and Muslim, and the abolition of caste markings aroused suspicion among the troops that the British were

58. Quoted in Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, 39-40; see also Wheeler's letter to the Adjutant General, Presidency Division, August 15, 1857, quoted in *The Illustrated London News*, 31 (August 15, 1857), 154.

59. During the years between 1830 and 1857, the government had abolished several inhumane, but sacred, religious practices of the Hindus; laws had been passed providing that no caste distinction should be made in railway cars; while building new roads, the British had destroyed a number of the Hindu's sacred temples; provisions for common messing, which worked against old Hindu religious custom, had been made in the military jails.

60. Hodgson to Dalhousie, 1851, *The Illustrated London News*, 31 (August 8, 1857), 135.

attempting to convert them to Christianity. The sepoy at Vellore mutinied rather than obey the regulations and the British put down the mutiny only with heavy losses.<sup>61</sup>

The Vellore mutiny should have revealed to British authorities the immense danger that could result from seemingly harmless orders which failed to take native sensibilities into consideration. But many Englishmen, like Arthur Wellesley, refused to believe that the "brave fellows who went through the Maratha campaign" had broken their allegiance.<sup>62</sup> The Court of Directors blamed the mutiny on the intrigues of the hostile Indian prince, Tipu Ali, and refused to admit that the regulations had been responsible.<sup>63</sup>

Again and again diplomatic and military exigencies led British officials to force the sepoy to compromise with ancient religious practices. According to Hindu beliefs, one who crossed the Indus into foreign lands or went to sea suffered a loss of caste. To regain caste privileges was an expensive and sometimes impossible task, and the Hindu thus defiled was ostracized from his fellow men. Indians in the Company's armies had gone to sea as early as 1790, but such service had been voluntary and every effort was made to reassure and placate the sepoy.<sup>64</sup>

In the nineteenth century, British involvement with other Asian nations led to increasing demands on the sepoy for foreign service. In many instances the sepoy was threatened with dismissal from the service if they refused to go outside India.<sup>65</sup> British attempts to force the sepoy to go to Burma in 1824 and Afghanistan in 1837 precipitated several mutinies among the troops<sup>66</sup> and many deserted rather than defile themselves.<sup>67</sup>

To induce the sepoy to serve outside their homeland, British authorities reluctantly provided that troops serving in foreign lands would be rewarded with extra pay. The ameliorating effects of this order were soon dissipated by another order revoking the allowance when a "foreign" territory was annexed by Great Britain. When the Punjab was annexed in 1849, the extra allowance was abolished and

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61. Sir John Fortescue, *A History of the British Army* (London, 1911), VI, 43-47.

62. Wellesley to John Malcolm, February 23, 1807, Kaye, *Malcolm*, I, 375-376.

63. Philips, *op. cit.*, 169.

64. Lord Cornwallis advised his officers to be "scrupulously careful in conforming to the troops' strictest prejudices." Cornwallis to the Court of Directors, June, 1792, Ross, *op. cit.*, I, 544.

65. Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, 57.

66. Cardew, *op. cit.*, 150.

67. Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, I, 305.

four regiments of sepoys mutinied.<sup>68</sup> In 1844, four regiments of the Bengal army refused to take up garrison duty in Sind unless they were given extra pay. Their commander, acting on his own responsibility, promised an allowance to his troops, but the Company refused to grant the allowance and one regiment mutinied.<sup>69</sup>

Such actions, of which there are abundant examples, did much to weaken the sepoys' faith in their officers and in the government of India. In 1847, an officer rewarded several regiments of irregular troops (recruited in times of emergency for brief terms of service) by promising them they would be retained in the service as long as they desired. Several months later, however, the Directors began a program of retrenchment, ordered a substantial reduction in the size of the army, and immediately released these regiments.<sup>70</sup> The same thing occurred on a larger scale. In the nineteenth century, the Company's recruiting policy was based solely on expediency. In periods of emergency, large numbers of new troops were recruited, but when the emergency passed, the size of the army was cut back. This policy gave all troops a certain wariness for their positions and deeply embittered those discharged leaving a large discontented element anxious for revenge.<sup>71</sup>

To solve the vexing problem of manning its posts outside India, the Company ordered in 1856 that henceforth no sepoy would be enlisted unless he agreed to serve anywhere that his superiors might direct. This General Enlistment Act strengthened the sepoys' fear that the government was trying to undermine their religion. In addition, while it did not apply to sepoys already enlisted, these sepoys feared that the new order would close the avenue to respectable service to their sons who traditionally followed them into the army.<sup>72</sup>

Thus by 1857 the sepoys had lost respect for their English officers, they had little faith in the government of India, and they had been angered by British actions which seemed to portend the destruction of their religion and conversion to Christianity. In earlier years any inclinations toward mutiny had been stifled by the sepoys' healthy respect for British military power. By 1857 this also was gone.

The European troops had never been of a type to awe the sepoys. Most of them were "enlisted" by press gangs and crimping agents and the soldier's life in India did nothing to improve their character. The pay was meagre and the life expectancy of a European in India

68. Chattopadhyaya, *op. cit.*, 57.

69. *Ibid.*

70. Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, 305.

71. "Indian Army," *loc. cit.*, 107.

72. Sen, *op. cit.*, 17.



was notoriously short.<sup>73</sup> Those who were not decimated by battle or disease usually fell victim to the ravages of drink. *Arrack*, a potent Oriental drink, was cheap and plentiful and the soldiers spent most of their hard-earned pay for it. Life in India, either unbearably dull or extremely hazardous, and the rotten food served the soldier contributed to his tendency toward drunkenness.<sup>74</sup> The sepoy was all too aware of the poor quality of his European counterparts and usually looked upon them with contempt.<sup>75</sup>

Only when European troops were present in superior numbers could they command the sepoys' respect. Lord Cornwallis, who seems to have realized better than many of his successors the problems of governing India with native troops and who was ever alert against the possibility of mutiny, warned that European troops should always be kept equal in strength to sepoys.<sup>76</sup> Throughout the nineteenth century, however, the number of sepoys increased tremendously, while there was but little increase in the number of Europeans. By 1857, the proportion of sepoys to Europeans was six to one. Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General from 1848 to 1856, was well aware of this dangerous disproportion and sought to balance it, but several outmoded statutes and the reluctance of the Directors to pay the cost of additional troops thwarted his efforts.<sup>77</sup> A law of 1792 limited the number of royal troops in India to 20,000, unless the Directors agreed to an increase. Because of the expense required to support these troops the Directors refused to provide for the increase requested by Dalhousie. Another old law limited the Company's European forces to 12,000 men. Dalhousie urged that this number be doubled, but again the Directors refused to meet his request.<sup>78</sup>

To make matters worse, many of the European troops were stationed in the Punjab and only a few isolated detachments were in the areas around Bengal where the majority of the sepoys were concentrated. As a result, there was little opposition to discourage the sepoys' mutinous designs and the initial outbreaks of the mutiny met with little resistance.

The sepoys' respect for British power had been weakened in other

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73. It was estimated that between 1800 and 1857, sixty-nine out of every thousand European soldiers in India died annually. Roberts, *op. cit.*, 3.

74. Fortescue, *op. cit.*, XI, 22-23.

75. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 25.

76. Cornwallis to the Court of Directors, November 16, 1786, Ross, *op. cit.*, I, 231.

77. Minute of February 5, 1856, in Sir William Lee-Warner, *The Life of The Marquis of Dalhousie* (London, 1904), II, 279-280.

78. *Ibid.*, 259-260.

ways. Until 1815 British armies had not suffered a decisive defeat in India, and an aura of invincibility had been created about them. But defeats in wars against Nepal (1815) and Burma (1824), and the disastrous retreat from Afghanistan (1842) gave the sepoys cause to doubt the superiority of British arms.<sup>79</sup> During the Crimean war, rumors spread among the sepoys that the British army had suffered irreparable losses and that the British navy had been routed. The belief that no reinforcements could be sent to India contributed to a growing confidence among many sepoys that British power in India was declining and mutiny might be successful.<sup>80</sup> In short, by 1857 the sepoy had come to feel that "his was the strong arm that had sustained the British empire in India so long and he could overthrow it whenever he wanted."<sup>81</sup>

Widespread evidence of discontent in the army should have prepared the British for the impending trouble and prompted reforms that might have averted the mutiny or at least lessened its impact. As early as 1820, respected officers in the army had warned that something should be done. In 1827, John Malcolm admonished his friend the Duke of Wellington that the army was in a condition "which if not early attended to and corrected, may produce as serious evils as we have yet known in India."<sup>82</sup> Sir Thomas Munro and General Sir Charles Napier issued similar warnings. In 1849, Napier advised that the sepoy "is devoted to us yet, but we take no pains to preserve his attachment. It is no concern of mine; I shall be dead before what I foresee takes place, but it will take place."<sup>83</sup> Two years later the influential *Edinburgh Review* ran an article setting forth many of the weaknesses of the Indian army, proposing sound remedies for them, and warning, at the same time, that failure to take action quickly could be disastrous to the Indian empire.<sup>84</sup> In 1854, Lord Dalhousie wrote that the "discipline of the army, from top to bottom, officers and men alike, is scandalous."<sup>85</sup>

It is difficult to explain, in light of these statements, why nothing was done. The blind faith of most Englishmen in the loyalty of the sepoys probably offers the most valid explanation. The sepoys' reputation for unwavering fidelity had been gained in the years from 1760 to 1805, when they had been a vital force in the winning of the Indian

79. Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, I, 305; Cardew, *op. cit.*, 123.

80. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 52.

81. Sen, *op. cit.*, 39.

82. Malcolm to Wellington, February 26, 1827, Kaye, *Malcolm*, II, 479.

83. Quoted in *The Illustrated London News*, 31 (August 1, 1857), 122.

84. "Indian Army," *loc. cit.*, 92-111.

85. Dodwell, *op. cit.*, VI, 171.

empire. It became so deeply engrained in the English mind that the mutinies of the following years, if noted at all, were treated as isolated incidents and were not considered symptomatic of widespread discontent among the sepoys. In 1852, the Prime Minister of Great Britain, Lord Derby, made the preposterous statement in the House of Lords that the sepoys, "every variety of religion and grade alike, vie in loyalty and attachment to their conquerors, and in their service exhibit as much of interest and devotion as that small but noble army drawn from the mother country with which it is their pride and glory to be associated."<sup>86</sup> This uncritical and dangerously false picture of conditions in India was accepted by the Directors of the East India Company and officials of the British government. Those who attempted to present a different picture were scornfully referred to as "dismal croakers." Such was the complacency of British officialdom that even a few days before the outbreak of the mutiny it was difficult to get together a handful of Members of Parliament to discuss Indian affairs.<sup>87</sup>

In India, as well, most British officials were unwilling to admit the need for reform. "Reform was impracticable," John Lawrence recalled, "for the officers would not admit that any was necessary, and nobody in the army was supposed to know anything about" the discontent then prevailing.<sup>88</sup> The loyal sepoy, Sitaram, warned his commanding officer of mutinous sentiments among the sepoys in his battalion, but the colonel would not hear him out and even reprimanded him for listening to "idle talk of the *bazar*."<sup>89</sup>

Failure to heed these warnings left many units of the army seething in discontent and ripe for mutiny. The sepoy had despaired of adequate reward for his services, his hopes for advancement had vanished, and he had been alienated by the conduct of his officers and the policy of the government. He feared that his religion was being undermined and that the consolidation of British power threatened to drive long-cherished traditions and customs into extinction. Only a spark was required to set off an explosion and that spark was provided by the greased cartridges. The British quickly withdrew the cartridges when an outbreak at a garrison near Calcutta revealed the violent reaction of the sepoys. But the damage had been done.

To the sepoys the cartridges seemed to offer conclusive evidence of a vast British plot to destroy their religion. British officers were in-

86. Lee-Warner, *op. cit.*, II, 272-273.

87. *The Illustrated London News*, 31 (August 8, 1857), 130.

88. Dodwell, *op. cit.*, VI, 171.

89. Sitaram, *op. cit.*, 93.

capable of calming their fears and the small number of British troops scattered throughout the sub-continent offered them little resistance. As a result, in the summer of 1857 the sepoys rose in revolt. Only after the mutiny had taken thousands of British lives and shaken the empire to its foundations did the government enact the reforms which, if carried out earlier, might well have averted this near disaster.