Introduction

The considerations which are involved in every question that does or may effect...our Native army are, in my mind, of the highest importance. It cannot too often be repeated, this army is our safety and our danger...we have through the efforts of our Native army, triumphed in wars, and rebellious plots and conspiracies.

John Malcolm, 1830

The Sepoy Army was the pivot of Britain's Indian empire. Often the fate of the subcontinent was decided in gargantuan battles, like Assaye and Imphal, conducted by the Indian Army. The Indian army was a dangerous combat force as it destroyed all the contemporary military powers within South Asia. For London, the Indian Army functioned as an Imperial Fire Brigade for policing India as well as the British overseas possessions, and as an Imperial Reserve during the two World Wars. For the colonized also, the colonial army was vital, as it was one of the largest employers in India and it consumed a huge chunk of the government's revenue.

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1 Minute by J. Malcolm, Bombay, 27 Nov. 1830, Parliamentary papers (1867), p. 179.


3 In the twentieth century, the share of defence was about 30% of the government's budget. The size of the Indian Army during peace exceeded 100,000 and the annual demand of the army was about 20,000 men. T.A. Heathcote, The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces
Nevertheless, the Indian Army remains marginal in Indian historiography. The Nationalist-Marxist historiography as represented by Bipan Chandra focuses on the Gandhian national movement. Subaltern historiography accepts that the ‘popular rebellion’ in 1857 became possible only when the Bengal Army mutinied. However, the army remains the missing dimension in both frameworks.

The role of the armed forces in the construction of colonialism is not entirely missed out in the British-Imperial historiography. What I label as a ‘Technological Determinist’ approach, emphasizes the role of military hardware. In his work of synthesis, the American historian Daniel Headrick claims that their superior weapons system enabled the Europeans to defeat Africans and Asians.

Modern researches have shown that there was no technological gap as regards the military technology used by the British led armies and the forces of the indigenous powers in the subcontinent. A British historian has shown that in the post 1859 northwest frontier warfare, advanced technology did not aid the Raj against the tribal

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4 Bipan Chandra et. al. *India’s Struggle for Independence* (1988, reprint, New Delhi, 1989).

5 Two representatives of this school are Rudrangshu Mukherjee’s *Awadh in Revolt, 1857-1858: A Study of Popular Resistance* (New Delhi, 1984) and Tapti Roy’s *The Politics of a Popular Uprising: Bundelkhand in 1857* (New Delhi, 1994).

guerrillas. Even in the first half of the 19th century, the Raj enjoyed no technical edge over its opponents. The Maratha field artillery was technically at the same level with the cannons deployed by the Company.

That different military establishments, despite possessing same level of technology, had different sorts of military cultures, which in turn generated asymmetric military effectiveness, is the operative assumption of a approach which I term as the 'Strategic Culture' approach. Dirk Kolff asserts that the chief factor was the Maratha political culture which in turn shaped the nature of warfare. He seems to make a case that the Asian culture of warfare did not grasp the logic of the Western form of warfare—the quest for decisive battles for complete annihilation of the enemy. This line of argument is pushed forward by Jos Gommans who claims that the Western concept of total military victory was absent among the Asians.

What Kolff and Gommans forget is that decisive battles for total destruction of the enemy were practised in India in the pre British times. The First Battle of Panipat is a case in point.

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To explain the military supremacy of the numerically inferior British-Indian Army, both in the decisive battles against the Marathas and the Sikhs before 1850, and in the low-intensity conflicts against the tribals of northeast and northwest India in the second half of the 19th century, a group focuses on the symbiotic relationship between the colonial army and the Indian society. Since this perspective assumes that social factors shaped the configuration of the armed forces, this group could be categorized as the ‘Societal Determinists’. Seema Alavi and Stephen Peter Rosen, the two spokesmen of this School argue that the colonial army was able to dominate the Indian society by functioning as a vehicle of upward mobility for certain key social groups.11

That superior managerial expertise, as evident in the cohesive internal structure of the Raj’s military establishment, made its army dominant, is the basic premise of a certain group of historians. Because of their preoccupation with the structural aspects of the military forces, this approach is labeled as the ‘Organizational’ perspective. This methodology points out that the army was a complex bureaucracy with its own ethos, code of conduct and laws, and that it was alienated from the social fabric. Hence social imperatives could not totally explain the inner configuration of the armed forces. What were the institutional characteristics of the Raj’s army? Geoffrey Parker asserts that the Western style armies, which were based on drilled infantry armed with muskets, were the products of the Military Revolution in early modern Europe. When imported in the Afro-Asian world, they gave the Westerners supremacy.12


12 Geoffrey Parker, *The Military Revolution: Military Innovation and the Rise of the West, 1500-1800*
What Parker's broad survey misses out is that the Sepoy Army, the work horse of British imperialism, was a hybrid organization which integrated elements of the traditional military system with the Western military organization. Hence the conceptual framework of Military Synthesis is more applicable.

My focus will be on the institutional aspects of the Indian Army: I will ask who were inducted in the service, and how they were controlled. The bloodbath of 1857 involved massive changes in the social architecture and the organizational format of the army. Later, from 1914 onwards, the colonial army registered massive expansion. So the period between the 1857 Mutiny and the First World War, which is the time frame of my study, constitutes a sort of historical unity. However, 1857 did not represent a complete break with the past. The implications of my study have bearings for the earlier period also. Section I examines the literature on recruitment. The next section evaluates the historiography of the Indian Army's command structure.

I

The Martial Race Theory as an Interpretative Framework

The British-Indian Army had to use South Asian manpower, as Britain lacked an adequate number of males to garrison her colonies. Moreover, Indians were cheaper and far more effective in the Indian climate.\textsuperscript{13} For inducting indigenous manpower, the imperialists fabricated the Martial Race theory. Though scholarly understanding of this ideology has changed with time, the Martial Race paradigm dominates analysis of

\textsuperscript{13} *Peel committee*, pp. 1, 11.
military recruitment.

The Martial Race Theory as a Recruitment Strategy

Did the British have any consistent plans as regards recruitment, or was it *ad hoc*? For a number of authors, the Martial Race ideology was an integral part of the Raj’s recruitment strategy. They view the Martial Race theory as part of the British policy geared towards the internal consolidation of the colonial order.

N. C. Chaudhuri, K. M. L. Saxena and Chander S. Sundaram can be categorized as belonging to the Nationalist camp, because they presume that the British deliberately used the Martial Race theory to prevent the growth of nationalism in India, for furthering the imperial hegemony. They thus subscribe to the view that the Martial race theory was a sort of imperial conspiracy.

Chaudhuri wrote a series of articles in the 1930s, which mark the beginning of academic writings on the colonial army’s enlistment policy. Earlier, a Bengali named P. D. Bonarjee, who worked in the military department, wrote a book on the ‘martial races’. But while Bonarjee accepts the imperial stereotypes as regards the various Indian communities, unlike him, Chaudhuri attempts to show the hollowness of these stereotypes through rigorous analysis. Chaudhuri’s essays are part of the Moderate paradigm (those who demanded Dominion Status) to debunk the imperial recruitment programme. Chaudhuri tries to disprove the British view that, if they left India, then

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the ‘martial races’ would exploit the non-martial people and for this reason, India should not get Independence. Chaudhuri attempts a comparison between the metropolitan and the colonial military establishments. He asserts that the Indian Army was used for guarding India against the Indians. So it could not afford short service enlistment of all types of Indians, as European armies did with Europeans in Europe. Universal military service was prevented by the Martial Race ideology. For him, this theory was an imperial technique to confine recruitment to certain selected groups. The Martial Race theory also stifled the growth of nationalism among the soldiers by emphasizing caste and tribal loyalties.

The next attempt to revive the Nationalist approach is Saxena’s monograph.¹⁶ Like his predecessor, Saxena links recruitment with the strategic deployment of the army. Saxena writes that recruitment was guided by the ‘Divide and Rule’ principle, as the army’s main function after 1857 was internal security. The British balanced different social and religious groups from different regions against each other. Saxena asserts that the Martial Race ideology was the continuation of the ‘Divide et Impera’ strategy as the various martial groups balanced each other in the war machine.

In two articles, Chander S. Sundaram shows that in the late 19th century Indian Army a marginal faction was for commissioning Indians as officers.¹⁷ His originality


lies in shifting the focus to the effects of Martial Race ideology on the scheme of Indianization of the officer corps. The imperial conviction was that if at all the Indians were to be made officers then it would be better to enlist the loyal 'martial' groups rather than the seditious babus.

Besides the Nationalist approach, we have the Functionalist perspective which argues that the imperatives of ruling India and certain traits of the Indian society gave rise to the Martial Race ideology. The spokesmen of this approach are the historian David Omissi, an ex-I.C.S. officer Philip Mason and the American political scientist Stephen P. Cohen.

Cohen's monograph\textsuperscript{18} asserts that the Indian Army's recruitment policy was an imperial response towards two bipolar components of the indigenous society. These were the militarism of the landed gentry and the rising nationalism of the middle class. The British evolved the Martial Race theory, which was a formula for excluding the politically conscious groups.

The quasi-popular book by Mason, which gives a picturesque impression of the Raj's armed forces, also considers the social and political imperatives behind the propagation of the Martial Race ideology.\textsuperscript{19} Mason writes that colonialism was viable because it utilized the traditional elements of indigenous society. This was reflected in the colonial military machine's recruitment. Both Cohen and Mason accept that the intellectual paradigm of the Martial Race ideology was rooted in indigenous society.


While Cohen says that the British exaggerated and systematized the mental and physical differences among the different indigenous groups, Mason goes to the other extreme and puts the onus fully on Hindu civilization. He argues that the Martial Race ideologues did not fabricate an imaginary martial-unmartial division among the Indian groups but made use of the Hindu division of labour in which Kshatriyas were natural warriors. However, both Mason and Cohen do not pursue rigorously the indigenous roots of the Martial Race ideology.

About two decades after Mason, Omissi of Hull University discussed the issue of the social and political basis of recruitment. For Omissi, the recruitment policy was composed of two components. His contribution is to focus on the indigenous component of the British recruitment programme—only those groups responded to the call of arms for whom soldiering offered advantages. The principal component was the imperial agenda—the search for loyal and brave soldiers, which was shaped by the colonizer’s need to sustain his regime by dividing and manipulating different Indian groups. The process of categorization and classification helped the Raj to identify potential allies, who were then drawn into the army. In an article, Omissi, like Chaudhuri, argues that the Martial Race theory was merely the extension of the Divide and Rule strategy. But Omissi modifies his interpretation in his monograph, where he writes that due to the principle of ‘Divide and Rule’ the colonial army enlisted selected groups from a particular area. The theory of the Martial Races as it evolved in the

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20 Omissi, Sepoy and the Raj.

1880s, appropriated the idea of enlistment of the selected few, thus resulting in Punjabization. This was adequate for meeting the limited manpower demand of the small colonial wars. So all went well, till the World Wars ripped apart the colonial army.

Ethnicity and the Martial Race Theory

In the 1980s a new tool, that of ethnicity, was introduced by the political sociologist Cynthia H. Enloe, for understanding the Martial Race ideology. For Enloe, the members of an ethnic group believe in common descent and possess a distinct geographical and cultural identity. Enloe and DeWitt C. Ellinwood claim that the recruitment of the ethnically distinct regiments (Sikhs, Gurkhas) by the Raj was the British response to social reality. Religion, caste and region fragment Indian society. These fissures fragment the social complexions of the military forces.22

There is a lacuna in Enloe and Ellinwood’s framework. They have used ethnicity as a catch-all term. Enloe and Ellinwood’s portrayal of ethnic politics by the colonial army appear similar to Saxena’s ‘Divide and Rule’ policy. However, on one point they differ from Saxena. Saxena says that this Divide and Rule strategy had no roots in the Indian society, because indigenous society was not divisive but imperial politics fragmented it. But Enloe and Ellinwood argue that the politics of divided communities was the result of the fragmentation of Indian society.

To sum up, the British had different recruitment policies at various moments of time. Unlike Saxena, Omissi does not accept the Martial Race theory as the continuation of ‘Divide and Rule’ policy. But he does not clearly differentiate these two ideologies. Saxena’s attempt to establish continuity throughout the second half of the 19th century is problematic. The Martial Race ideology was not the continuation but the opposite of the ‘Divide and Rule’ strategy. While the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy aimed to establish a balance between various groups recruited from all over India, the Martial Race ideology aimed at intensive recruitment from particular areas like Nepal and Punjab.

Imperial Diplomacy and the Martial Race Theory

Thus the British had complicated ideologies. But the brasstacks of recruitment was something more than the imperial attitudes. Especially when the British cast their nets to draw recruits from beyond their actual line of control, like from Nepal, the recruitment policy, argues a group of scholars, involved realpolitik. Since this group turns the flashlight on the tortuous diplomatic activities of the British policy makers and the Kathmandu government, their approach could be labelled as the ‘Diplomacy’ perspective. Two scholars, Mary Des Chene, an American, and Purushottam Banskota, a Nepali, explore the linkages between recruitment of the ‘martial races’ and the Raj’s coercive diplomacy.

Clausewitz has argued that war is the continuation of politics by other means.

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23 Army committee, vol. 1-A, Minority report, p. 156; Supplementary report, p. 4, Appendix no. 22.
Des Chene in her article shows that recruitment was continuation of diplomacy by other means. Nepal was an independent state, and enlisting her subjects necessitated diplomatic manoeuvrings, which Des Chene and Banskota chart. They write that the Gurkhas became vital to the Raj with the rise of the Martial Race theory in the last decades of the 19th century. The Nepali elites used the Gurkhas as bargaining counters to extract the maximum advantage from British India. In return for Gurkha recruitment, the Ranas retained their autonomy. The impact of Kathmandu’s court politics on recruitment is elaborated by Banskota. Banskota writes that factionalism pushed the court towards the British. In 1885, the Shamsher Ranas acquired power after a coup. To prevent the British from supporting the Jang Bahadur Ranas who had lost power, the Shamsher Ranas agreed to supply Gurkhas to the British.

Demography and the Martial Race Ideology

That the size and composition of the armies were also shaped by long term impersonal forces like demography, is the argument of a group of historians who could be classified as ‘Demographic Determinists’. Dirk Kolff and F.W. Perry agree that, not the official mind of imperialism or the underlying social and cultural milieu of the subcontinent, but manpower resources were the principal historical primer in shaping the contours of the militaries. They make clear that due to the massive human resources of India, the British could afford to be choosy about which groups to recruit


and designate as 'martial'.

Kolff writes that if one takes a long *duree* perspective then it is clear that the key factor, which shaped the Sepoy Army’s enlistment, was the huge supply of manpower linked with the ecology of the subcontinent. On the basis of these related factors, Kolff constructs a cyclical model for explaining recruitment from the 15th to the mid 19th century. For Kolff, India always had a huge surplus manpower, which could not be accommodated in the semi-pastoralist agrarian economy. Treacherous monsoons frequently caused famines, which pushed the surplus labour into part time military service. As warfare was endemic among the Indian powers, there was a constant demand for military manpower. So a tradition of armed service evolved among the north Indian peasantry. The Company also tapped this source of armed manpower. A vicious circle developed. Extra manpower was pushed towards the armies and some ex-soldiers came back to their villages with loot. They married and their sons were forced to become armed retainers during harvest failures. This cycle ended from about 1790 onwards, because the British demilitarized the military labour market by creating a centralized empire.

For the manpower problem of the Indian Army during the two World Wars we have F.W. Perry’s monograph which shows that the manpower pools of the respective countries shaped the size of the armies of Britain and the Commonwealth. In his framework the influence of demography was mediated through other factors like the

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27 F.W. Perry, *The Commonwealth Armies: Manpower and Organisation in two World Wars*
relation between the armies and the polities. During the two World Wars the armies registered massive expansion. Britain introduced conscription in 1916 but this was not possible in India for political reasons. However this was not an obstacle in expanding colonial recruitment because of the huge manpower resources of the subcontinent. The Indian Army was capable of expanding even after 1919. In 1943, expansion of the Indian Army ceased due to lack of equipment.

Kolff and Perry have opened up a new perspective by connecting the growth of the armies with the available demographic resources, making ideology and diplomacy appear secondary. While the chief determinant in Kolff's model is ecology, Perry fuses the effects of demography and polity. Perry's methodology is too mechanical. He deals with dry statistics, with such questions as the number of units, and does not take into account the passions and emotions of the recruits.

Historians of Ideas and the Martial Races

Imperial and Indigenous perceptions of the ‘martial’ recruits are the concern of another batch of scholars. Since these scholars examine the role of ideas behind the imperial and colonial views as regards the ‘warrior’ groups, their approach could be termed as the ‘History of Ideas’ approach. British recruitment of indigenous manpower created stereotypes among the officers about certain groups. These historians ask the questions: What were the constituent parts of such stereotypes? Did the Indians believe in such imperial constructs or did they have their own images of the recruits?

British officers believed that the Gurkhas were warlike. Lionel Caplan argues that the British literature on the Gurkhas was an attempt by the colonizers to imagine a

(Manchester, 1988)
part of the exotic Orient.\textsuperscript{28}

What then was the causation behind imperial ideas? Pradeep Barua throws new light on the imperatives behind the Martial Race doctrine.\textsuperscript{29} For him, it was neither the pragmatic demands of the ‘Divide and Rule’ policy, nor the nature of Indian society, but the Western intellectual climate which shaped the Martial Race theory. Barua assumes that ideas do play an autonomous and important role in history. He writes that the Martial Race ideology was an amalgam of three elements: an emphasis on environment (i.e. people of cold hilly areas were warriors), an emphasis on physical qualities (muscular people made good soldiers), and an emphasis on behavioural characteristics (particular martial groups had special aptitudes). These three strands were connected with the growth of Victorian geology, anthropology and eugenics.

The colonial army had an internal value system; the Martial Race ideology which shaped the army officers’ view about the recruits. Richard G. Fox, an anthropologist, shows that this value system spilled into Punjabi society.\textsuperscript{30} But Michael Hutt shows that Nepali society evolved a separate value system in opposition to the army’s recruitment rhetoric.\textsuperscript{31} Hutt breaks new ground in constructing the Nepali perception of the Gurkhas from 20\textsuperscript{th} century Nepali literature. Nepali prose depicts the

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Gurkhas as drunkards and rogues. Hutt points out the hard realities, which gave rise to such images. The soldiers were carriers of disease. Moreover the literati were Nationalist-Marxist. So they hated the mercenaries in imperial service.

Let us sum up the contours of historiography on the Martial Race theory. Those who try to link up the Martial Race ideology with British India’s recruitment strategy, diplomacy and demography, throw light on the structures and processes involved in acquiring military labourers while the ‘History of Ideas’ perspective addresses the experiences and perceptions of the recruits. On the basis of their methodological formulations, the scholars can be divided into two groups. While Cohen, Enloe, Ellinwood and Fox use an inter-disciplinary approach, Saxena, Mason and Omissi are more historical in their approach. The second group’s methodology could be termed as ‘interpretative empiricism’ since their works are based on rich historical data and are analytical, but have no direct influence of theories churned out by other disciplines. Their approaches differ greatly. Mason’s book is a account by an official of the colonial state. Cohen and Omissi link up recruitment with the Raj’s politics. Finally, Barua’s work represents a paradigm shift as he fuses the colonial enlistment strategy with the evolution of the Western concept of race.

As regards the role of the caste system in shaping the Martial Race ideology, we have two opposite interpretations. Kolff argues that the castes were fluid categories and byproducts of military service. But Enloe and Ellinwood argue that castes had fixed boundaries and were not a colonial construct. Hence the caste system was one of the building blocks of the imperial ethnic game. The latter group’s argument is more reliable because the British perceived the Indian society as divided along caste lines.
This is evident from the army’s internal documents.\textsuperscript{32}

Then how alien was the Martial Race ideology? While authors like Mason, Enloe and Ellinwood argue that the Martial Race theory had an indigenous base, others like Chaudhuri, Saxena and Barua point out that the Martial Race theory was an alien project on the Indian soil. For Saxena and Chaudhuri, the causative factor behind shaping the imperial discourse lay in the periphery, in the imperial necessity to divide the colonized. But for Barua the principal imperative behind the British theoretical model was in the metropole: the evolution of pseudo-sciences in the West.

Scholars working on the Indian Army are generally shy of broad thematic patterns. The only exception is Kolff. Both Perry and Kolff remind us of Malthus by bringing demography into the orbit of history. While Kolff is for a direct linkage between demography and the architecture of the militaries, Perry’s framework is more nuanced as he links up the demographic factor with the limitations of state power.

Faction fights within the colonial polity influenced the rise and fall of the different recruitment ideologies at various moments of time. Since Namierism is unfashionable nowadays, factional struggles within the army are neglected. The victory of a particular faction, by itself a micro phenomenon, occasionally had a macro effect. Ideas emerge over a long period, but when and how a particular organization (in this case the colonial army) accepted the dominant intellectual trend, depended on internal factors such as faction fights within the war machine. The issue of which communities were martial rocked the army only with the emergence of Roberts and his coterie towards the end of the 19th century. Once they were in power they propagated the

\textsuperscript{32} The army officers’ conception of the caste system can be deduced from Caste returns, circular no. 4495, Adjutant’s General’s office, Simla, 14 Aug. 1862, Adjutant General’s circulars, vol. 2, N.A.I.
Martial Race ideology. But their theory was not a complete break with the past. They absorbed several trends, which had evolved over the first half of 19th century. Chapter 1 addresses this issue.

Those who are working on the Indian Army assume that army history by itself is unimportant and if at all any aspect of the army is to be studied then it must have a connection with the general non-military aspects. They have assumed that just because ethnography, anthropometry and phrenology were in currency in late 19th century Britain and India, only the Martial Race ideology, which borrowed from these strands, is important and needs to be studied. So these scholars, in their eagerness to link up recruitment ideology with the prevailing social and intellectual mores of the second half of the 19th century, have neglected the presence of a body of ideas which continuously challenged the Martial Race ideology. I term this ideology, which was the polar opposite of the Martial Race ideology, as the Anti-Martial Race theory and chapter 2 deals with it. Another group of officers tried to accommodate some elements of the critique provided by the Anti-Martial Race lobby, and was in turn influenced by the wider intellectual currents. This interrelationship between the military recruitment and the broader intellectual fashions is studied in chapter 3.

II

Command Mechanism Revisited

Once the recruits joined the imperial war machine, they were conditioned into soldiers. How the army not only attracted the personnel, but also retained them and motivated them to fight the imperial wars, and prevented mutinies, is a problematic I term as the command
mechanism.\textsuperscript{33}

Most of the literature emphasizes the sahib-sepoy interaction. Amiya Barat in her monograph claims that the paralysis of the command structure in the 1850s was due to the qualitative and quantitative decline of the British officers in the sepoy regiments of the Bengal Army.\textsuperscript{34} What functions exactly did the white officers perform?

Patron-Client Relationship

A particular group of scholars view the white officer corps as the fountain of all patronage for the Indian soldiers. Mason writes that the officer-soldier relationship in the Indian army was a sort of father-son relationship. This was possible because of the inborn leadership quality of the British landed gentry who constituted the officer corps, and their public school training.\textsuperscript{35} What Mason overlooks is that the officer corps of the Sepoy Army came from the middle class of Britain.\textsuperscript{36}

Cohen interprets the sahib-sepoy relationship as a dependent tie, which was one sided.\textsuperscript{37} His seems to be a core-periphery model, in which the British officers constituted the core and the Indian personnel symbolized the periphery. Cohen derives

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{33} For an exhaustive analysis of the literature on command mechanism see Kaushik Roy, 'The Historiography of the Colonial Indian Army', \textit{SIH}, vol. 12, no. 2 (1996), pp. 255-66.
  \item \textsuperscript{34} Amiya Barat, \textit{The Bengal Native Infantry: Its Organisation and Discipline} (Calcutta, 1962).
  \item \textsuperscript{35} Mason, \textit{A Matter of Honour}.
  \item \textsuperscript{36} T. A. Heathcote, \textit{The Indian Army: The Garrison of British Imperial India, 1822-1922} (London, 1974), pp. 123-24, 141.
  \item \textsuperscript{37} Cohen, \textit{Indian Army}, pp. 49-50.
\end{itemize}
his model from the Western theoreticians like E.E Hagen and O. Mannoni. For Cohen, the Indians, in return for a position in the colonial system, gave their obedience to the sahibs.

Lorenzo M. Crowell elaborates and modifies Cohen’s line of analysis by conceptualizing a sort of colonial professionalism among the white officer corps. The elements of colonial professionalism were caring for the Indian troops’ religious and cultural sensibilities, and the officers’ command over the vernaculars. By these techniques, the officers acquired the sepoys’ affection and loyalty. While Crowell focuses on the early 19th century Madras Army, the Canadian historian Douglas M. Peers shifts the limelight to the pre 1857 Bengal Army. He asserts that the Bengal Army’s British officers lost command over their troops’ language and this was a vital factor in the disintegration of the loyalty mechanism in 1857. Even for the early 20th century, Edwin Latter regarded the personal loyalty of the troops towards their officers as the key factor in the functioning of the Indian Army.

Cultural Determinist Framework

Another approach, as followed by the American historian Jeffrey Greenhut, assumes

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that the visions and the responses of both the partners- the sahibs and the sepoys- were shaped within the frame of their distinct cultural paradigms. Greenhut writes that the sahibs functioned, not as representatives of Victorian paternal liberalism, but as bridges between the subcontinent’s ruralites and the Western military system. The officer-soldier relationship was actually an amalgam of horizontal and hierarchical relationships. The British officers believed that their actions would provoke equivalent reactions from the soldiers. The Indian peasants who joined the army believed in hierarchical relations; they regarded it as their dharma to obey their superiors, the officers.  

To conclude, Cohen’s attempt to explain collaboration between the white men and the brown soldiers with the aid of theoretical insights unnecessarily complicates the issue. Finally, Greenhut overemphasizes the role of the social and cultural milieu in influencing the officer-soldier interaction. Recently, to explain the sepoys’ loyalty, Omissi has brought in two more additional factors-the Commander-in-Chief and the King Emperor.

While constructing their colonial military forces the British introduced a new organizational gamut from Europe. This organizational format experienced continuous intercourse with the colonial scenario, thus giving birth to a unique colonial military system. However all the scholars view the Indian Army’s command system in terms of


42 Omissi, Sepoy and the Raj.

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a personalized sahib-sepoy relationship and overlook the structural apparatus of control. For the first time in Indian history, the colonial army offered a welfare package, which included both tangible and non-tangible incentives geared for purchasing its personnels’ loyalty. Chapter 4 discusses this theme. Further, the British replaced the mansabdari organization with the regimental organization. This European institution absorbed a corpus of indigenous traits like the caste and clan ethos and mutated into a new entity, which was aimed to produce regimental loyalty among the personnel of the colonial war machine. This is the theme of chapter 5. Some amount of coercion in the form of military laws and the court martial apparatus was also necessary for the proper functioning of the command structure. Chapter 6 and 7 show the role of force in preventing insubordination among the soldiers.

The colonial army was always engaged in combat: either in great battles or in subconventional conflicts. The British withdrawal from the east of Suez was linked with loss of imperial control over the subcontinent’s military force. Here lies the importance of the military establishment of India. The proper understanding of British India would be possible, only when the armed sepoys and the sowars will occupy the center of the historical canvas. Without them there would have been no colonialism, at least not the one which the Indians experienced. So far as colonial India is concerned, Clio should no more neglect Mars.