

## CHAPTER II

### SOLDIERS' STATUS IN SOCIETY: AN UNDERSTANDING FROM THE PAST

The ex-servicemen as a social category are of a very recent origin. The historical evidences suggest that in ancient and medieval periods a person used to be a soldier for life and his recruitment was primarily determined by his ascriptive traits of the varna or caste to which he was born. Even in the army of the Company Bahadur the native sepoy used to serve the company till the very old age and "those who became unfit for field service, either owing to physical deterioration or age or disability, were allowed to enlist themselves in the 'veterans battalions' which were employed in cities on internal duties".<sup>1</sup>

Although the system of pension and retirement prevailed since the time of Augustus in Roman Army, its evolution in India can be traced only after the revolt of 1857 which was introduced primarily to create and perpetuates a class of loyal natives in society. Besides, it also aimed at attracting young recruits so that their obedient behaviour was ensured either as job seeker or as an employee and to eliminate all those who continued in service despite being old and inefficient.<sup>2</sup> Initially, those who got retired though became veterans or 'ex-servicemen', their problems were basically the problem of retirement and old age. The status

of a soldier and his service conditions depended very much upon the nature of society and organisation of the army of a particular age.

It is intended to make here a historical survey of armies and armymen through the ages so that the subject matter of present research, as far as it is possible, are also viewed in historical perspective. It is unwise to discount the difficulties and limitations in historical portrayal of the life and work of Indian soldiers which are both evidential and methodological. One can barely cull the information relating to the living conditions of soldiers from the already scant historical material on the subject. Even if such material were available, problems of comparing the life and work of soldiers in their totality in entirely different contexts will be a very difficult proposition. Finding sociological insights through comparative history in a time series is indeed problematic. Despite difficulties, however, historical trends provide important clues to understand certain contemporary sociological facts and processes to build a tentative rough sketch of a soldier in different periods of our society.

In ancient and medieval societies, the choice of work was determined by the social status of the people. The hierarchy of varna and caste and proportionate status associated with each of the varna strongly defined the

framework within which a person could earn his livelihood in his lifetime. Ancient and medieval Indian societies are thus characterised as 'status societies' albeit instances of group or individual mobility are not unknown. However, the pattern and scale of occupational mobility do not go against basic characteristics of 'status society' in which the ascription of a social status determines a person's worth and work rather than personal achievements influencing his social status as is the case in 'class societies'.

With the clustering of varna system from the 'second urbanization' in Northern India from the sixth century B.C., the Kshatriyas provided primary recruitment base for different kingdoms. During the beginning of the ancient society, the kshatriyas "were supposed to defend the realm, to protect the people and the Dharma, 'not to forget a kindness or a hurt', not to back out when challenged to fight or gamble, and in the words of the Great Epic they considered it 'a sin to die in bed'."<sup>3</sup> Sir S. Radhakrishnan writes that "they were the defenders of society from external aggression and internal disorder. The military organisation of the state was entrusted to them. They were in charge of political arrangements. It was not the intention of the Hindu Dharma to make the entire body of people a general levy"<sup>4</sup>. Nevertheless, the instances of non-

Kshatriyas getting recruited in the army and holding responsible positions are not few even from the very early days of the ancient society.

The Sultanat period in medieval India is characterised by strong foreign element in its nobility, so much so, that even the local converts of recent generations, who formed the bulk of the Muslim population, "began to discover for themselves as far as possible a foreign ancestry".<sup>5</sup> The large scale influx of the foreigners like the Afghans, Persians, Mughals, Turks and Uzbeks, etc., and their domineering position in the contemporary Indian politics and society<sup>had</sup> somehow shaken the well laid down process of self-evaluation and emulation from within varna frame of reference. At least a section of them now started seeking foreign ancestry, alliance or allegiance. The new process of 'foreignization' if one may use the term, was to soon disappear with the Indianization of the nobility under the Great Moguls.<sup>6</sup> The process of Islamization<sup>7</sup> went hand in hand with 'foreignization', and the non-Muslim base of the former got strengthened during the Moghul period. The process of 'foreignization', albeit for the indigenous Muslims, did transgress the varna model of self-evaluation and emulation at least for short spell of about 400 years in our long and varied history.

It was basically as a reaction to the utter perversion of religious orthodoxies and caste rigidities that different

regions of the sub-continent started witnessing the Sufi and Bhakti movement. Sikhism grew primarily as a product of overall Bhakti-trend in society, which, towards the close of 16th century, got crystallised as martial race championing the cause of Hindus in general and in turn being viewed by them as rejuvenated Kshatriyas of higher order. It was a paradoxical situation: Sikhism theoretically denied caste distinction but in reality the caste distinction under the supremacy of Jat Sikhs, persisted. Yet, the entire community was being viewed by the Hindu collective conscience as militant, reformed and rejuvenated Kshatriya having raised their arms against Aurangzeb to uphold their pride and defend their honour. True, at any given time in the ancient and medieval India, there remained numerous kingdoms and principalities, but all who fought for the armies got subsumed into varna fold getting the position of Kshatriyas.

The foregoing paragraphs suggest that in ancient and medieval society the choice of work was largely determined by one's birth in a particular caste or varna or one's association, descent to a particular tribe or race. The element of bravery, however, irrespective of one's origin or birth was recognized and lucky few among them also got rewarded often by their induction into Kshatriya varna.

In ancient and medieval periods, though the warrior class occupied second rank in the social order, next only to the Brahmins, outside the varna framework, they probably constituted the elite of society. All original sources, directly or indirectly refer to this fact. Status society, by its very characteristics, seldom left any scope for retirement from the hereditary occupations, except for physical inability or renunciation. Therefore, considering the position of warrior class in ancient and medieval societies, one may state that they lived like aristocrats or at least were highly privileged in society.

It is with the coming of Europeans and more especially the East India Company on the Indian socio-economic and political scene that the traditional framework of society took a new direction; essentially as an overall consequence of economic interest of British colonialism the choice of work now gradually and very slowly became a matter of one's personal abilities and achievements rather than one's birth in a particular religion or caste. It is ironical, however, that although the Indian army was the backbone of the British rule the soldiers were the last to get 'modernised' as compared to the emerging new middle classes, such as petty merchants, lawyers, teachers, and salaried clerks of the government, and railways, post-office and banks, etc. From the early days of East India Co. certain revolutionary changes occurred in the organization of

the army - its control and command, financial administration, supply, recruitment and more specially in terms of gun based sophisticated arms and ammunition. Still it took about nearly two centuries for the 'undisciplined and indifferently armed guards of peons' of small establishments who "were enrolled with dual object of protecting the factories of the East India Company and lending dignity to its functionaries to become prized soldiers of British Indian Army".<sup>8</sup> A brief outline culled from the leaves of history can tell an interesting story of the making of an Indian soldier which is also considered relevant for the purpose of present analysis.

In the second half of the seventeenth century the British, the Dutch, the French and the Portuguese were the major European contenders competing for commercial supremacy in India. The resolution of differences with the Portuguese on European plane and the defeat of the Dutch at Chinsura (Bengal) in 1759 led the British to concentrate at quelling the French in Southern India. The struggle for supremacy between the French and the British changed the character of peace seeking mercantile companies into military contenders which resulted into the birth of 'the concept of regular army of Indians'. 'The origin of the regular native army, however, is dated from 1748, when Stinger Lawrence the 'Father of the Indian Army', enrolled

a native force in Madras<sup>9</sup>.

The victory of British East India Company at the battle of Plassey (1757) and Wandewash (1760) with instrumental support of Native Army, set the British eyes on the decadent Hindu and Muslim states which itself <sup>had</sup> emerged as a result of the decline and disintegration of the Mogul Empire. Despite the consistent mistrust of the English on their native forces, the economic compulsions and political considerations entailed their gradually growing ascendancy on the Native Army. The number of the Native Army grew <sup>by</sup> leaps and bounds; <sub>from</sub> only Bengal Army saw the native troops growing from 24,000 in 1746 to 128,000 in 1857-58.<sup>10</sup>

The East India Company did not come to India to raise an army and to conquer the country. It was by sheer chance that the British became the ultimate carrier of the improved instrument of warfare and advanced organizational set up of the West and to take full advantage of it on the politically decadent and socially degenerated soil of the time. The British intrusion and conquest was an adventure of avarice. As no adventure can be carefully planned, the initial growth of the Company's army essentially remained accidental and haphazard.

The Presidency armies of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay grew slowly and separately albeit under complete subordination of the civil authority of the Company and the British Government. The Presidency armies were considered as

discrete 'entities existing to play limited part of suppressing local risings' and 'were considered to counterpoise against one another' in times of armed rebellion or mutinies.<sup>11</sup> The decentralization of the army with overall subordination of an uniform civil authority was the need of the hour and it duly served its purpose of establishing and consolidating the mighty British Empire in the East.<sup>12</sup> Although with the passing over of Company's army to the Crown a new era of planned military development was ushered, it was not considered expedient to unite the Presidency armies as one until the threat of Russian aggression on <sup>North Western Province,</sup>  $\angle$  The Russian danger precipitated the unification of Indian Army in 1895 from where the army got its true character of fighting external enemies rather than policing its people. The changes of 1895 were to pay great dividends for the British in the First and Second World Wars.

The East India Co. brought with itself the elements of brewing modernity of Europe which in itself was a consequence of matured commercialism and the factory system of nascent industrialization. When East India Company shifted its ambition from mercantile gain to territorial acquisition, it was interacting with Indian socio-political institutions with sophisticated technology and advanced organizational base. From this point onwards we find an interesting interplay of tradition and modernity each affecting and

getting affected by the other. In earlier times, as we have witnessed in the foregoing paragraphs, with the influx and surge of foreign tribes in India, we found one tradition (or even traditions), meeting another tradition. If the position of the respective tribe in the given contemporary political framework was superior, the process of foreignization took place; otherwise it has always been indigenization which has been the primary social process in respect of foreign tribes coming to this sub-continent.

Under the Company rule a relatively superior institution of army, civil administration, etc. was interacting with the orthodox, caste ridden and 'degenerated' society. Although the prime motivator of the Company and British rule in India was always been the perpetuation of the colonial rule so that they may harness its fruits continually, it is not difficult to find philanthropic and reformist elements in the army and administration sincerely wanting improvement in the socio-economic conditions of the masses at whatever cost. Still the rule itself could not be perpetuated without active involvement of the masses in manning the Company's army and administration, though initially at rank and staff level.

The initial thinking in the Company considered the employment of 'Natives' in their army as unsafe but the financial considerations always compelled them to look for the 'Natives' to serve and give honour to their army. This

was because the 'Natives' were both cheap and efficient.<sup>13</sup>

"On arguments of safety, an army consisting of Europeans alone would have been ideal. But considerations of safety clashed with the considerations of economy. Thus a compromise between finances and the problems of defence was inevitable."<sup>14</sup> Gradually, therefore, a system of army developed consisting of overwhelmingly 'native' ranks and European officers. However, the pattern of recruitment of the 'native' ranks under the three Presidency armies, greatly differed. The consequences of differential pattern of recruitment and work-conditions of the three Presidency armies are of great sociological importance as a handful of European officers had to manage the native ranks with their superior organizational set up and sophisticated arms. For all these they required deeper sociological insights into native's affairs. It is not without adequate reasons that a great number of articles contributed by the European officers of the British army in their USI Journal reflect rigorous sociological exercise on caste, religion and culture in India.<sup>15</sup>

The sepoy mutiny in Bengal Army is taken as one of the direct consequences of the exclusive dominance of the local Brahmans and Rajputs in the army and the European officer's pampering their casteism, commensality and religious orthodoxies and in turn gradually succumbing to it.

"The Bengal Army, unlike the Madras and Bombay Armies, was always difficult to handle because

of the high caste men, Brahmans and Rajputs. On the Bengal establishment, low caste men were completely excluded from the fighting force; they are employed only on menial jobs and were not allowed to mix with caste Hindus... The Bengal Army did not become Brahmanised by any order of government, but simply through recruiting officers, over a series of years, confining their choice to the tallest, handsomest, and cleanest looking men, who were undoubtedly of the high castes. Gradually, they came to predominate, and to exercise their influence to keep away all low caste people; and, finally, the custom became a rule.<sup>16</sup>

Therefore, "the spirit of exclusiveness in favour of high castes which operated to the full on officers and sepoys alike, created an atmosphere of potential mutinies. 'A subserviency of officers generally to the feeling of high castes, which gave them handsome and intelligent men, was appreciated in all its strength by the sepoys, played with the fears of Brahmanised Colonels.' Thus was the germ of resistance to authority and discipline fostered, and Commanding Officers openly admitted the presence of a power superior to discipline. It was this germ that finally became a cause of the Mutiny."<sup>17</sup>

The Calcutta Review once remarked about the composition of Bengal Army: "Our sepoys come too much from the same part of the country, Oudh, the lower Doab and upper Behar. There is too much of clanship among them which should be remedied."<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, casteism in the Bengal Army was strongly objected by Sir Charles Napiers who wrote to the Duke of Wellington on June 15, 1850:

"the last and most important thing which I reckon injurious to the Indian Army is the immense influence given to caste; instead of

being discouraged it has been encouraged in the Bengal Army. In Bombay Army it is discouraged and that army is better ordered than the Bengal Army. In the latter (Bengal Army) the Brahmins have been the leaders in every mutiny, in the last mutiny about pay, and which I may say, was general throughout the Bengal Army, though it appeared in six segments only, all appeared to be governed by Brahmins.\* 19

The sepoy mutiny of Bengal is usually contrasted with those of the Madras and Bombay Armies<sup>20</sup> which comprised of natives coming from different regions and belonging to practically all castes and religions and the officers consciously discouraged the practice of casteism and religious fanaticism to any extent. Even the Brahman and Rajput sepoys of the Eastern U.P. and Bihar employed in Bombay and Madras armies did not indulge in casteism and religious fanaticism. This helped the growth of a 'secular' orientation in those armies. The foregoing discussion provides historical evidence and strength to the fact that under the Indian conditions caste and religion can dilute the secular institutions only if for some reason or the other men responsible for running such institutions either pamper the 'primordial loyalties' or yield to its pressures.

The inter-personal relationship between the European and the Indians have seldom been cordial because of the ethnocentrism and cultural relativism of the former. The face to face relationship between the native Indians and the Europeans in the Army marked the utter humiliation

and subjugation of the former by the latter. Despite the order of the Court of Directors in 1813, prohibiting the officers from maltreating the natives, the inhumane and abusive behaviour of the European officers towards the native ranks seemed to have continued. Even a sepoy of European origin could insult a native officer without fear of punishment of any kind. There was a gulf of difference between the rank to rank pay and allowance of Europeans and their native counterparts and stark difference persisted in terms of their physical conditions of living and the amenities and benefits provided. The interpersonal relationship of the native sepoys and the English officers have been vividly depicted by Kaye and Malleon:

"a Sipahi on duty always presented or carried arms to an English officer, but an English soldier suffered a native officer to pass by without a salute. Even an English sergent commanded native officers of the highest rank. On parade, the English officers made mistakes, used wrong word of command, then threw blame upon the Sipahis and reviled them. Even native officers who had grown grey in the service, were publicly abused by European striplings. On the line of march native officers were compelled to live in the same tents with common Sipahis, and had not, as in the armies of native potentates, elephants or palanquins assigned to them for their conveyance how great so ever the distance which they were obliged to traverse. And if they rode horses or ponies, purchased from their savings, the English officers frowned at them... The concubines of the English gentlemen were better paid than the native officers and their grooms and grass cutters better than the native soldiers, that English officers could import their zonanas the most

beautiful women in the country, whilst the natives hardly dared to look at the slave girls.\*<sup>21</sup>

Despite the fact of the native sepoys inhuman conditions and insulting and provocative behaviour by their English counterparts, the traditional notion of high status of a sepoy in society seemed to have lingered throughout the British period before the echos of Freedom Movement could move the Indian civilians and army men alike.

"In England an Englishman joining the army was forgotten by his family, it was no great source of pride to an English family to know that one of its members was serving in the ranks of the army of East India Company. In India it was a thing of great pride to join even the ranks; and the boast of many a family was that generation after generation they had 'eaten the salt' of the Company Bahadur.\*<sup>22</sup>

A sepoy who was personally thoroughly dissatisfied with his work-conditions and the inhuman behaviour of the English elements in the Army whether in officer cadres or ranks, one may ask as to how did he receive a high social status from his community and how could they feel proud of a man serving in the Company's army even as sepoy? What possible explanations can be given for this ironical situation?

It is a well known fact that the economic impact of the British rule was very unfavourable on Indian masses. It led to the virtual closure of indigenous cottage and small industries and degeneration of agriculture. The

agonies of rising mass unemployment and poverty was too often intensified by frequent droughts and famines<sup>23</sup> without hardly any measure to safeguard the life of men and cattle. The salary of the natives employed in the army must have given great relief to their family members and relatives as an assured income could be expected from the incumbent. Apart from the direct financial gains by way of regular remittances, the family members and their relatives must have got indirect advantages; in terms of safety and security of life and material from the anti-social elements as well as the oppressive local authorities. The managers of the British colonialism have consistently considered the army men - English or native, as their most chosen and favourite servants. The army men always received the best out of the worst in an enslaved society. Benefits accruing out of the generalised pampering of the army may have discounted the agonies of racial arrogance and lesser pay and allowances of the natives for the same rank. In addition, in the absence of spontaneous industrialization, the continuance of Brahmanical feudal social ethos pertaining to the profession of arms and loyalties to one's master must have accorded substantial legitimacy to the high prestige and power to those serving the army. With the intensification of the Freedom Struggle from the beginning of the 20th century, and the kind of role played by the Indian Army in the Freedom Struggle,

its status got diluted. The sepoy mutinies of the early forties and the formation of INA by Subhash Chandra Bose contributed a great deal in restoring the prestige of armymen during the period when the nationalist sentiments were at its peak.

Notes & References:

1. Singh, M.P., Indian Army under the East India Company, New Delhi, 1976, p.234.
2. Saksena, K.M.L., The Military System of India (1850-1900), New Delhi, 1974, p.213.
3. Majumdar, Bimal Kanti, The Military System in Ancient India, Calcutta, 1960, p.28 ('supposed' added).
4. Ibid., pp.13-14.
5. Ashraf, Kanwar Muhammad, Life and Conditions of the People of Hindustan, New Delhi, 1970, p.107.
6. Athar Ali, M., The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb, New Delhi, 1970, pp.7-33.
7. Yogendra Singh, Modernisation of Indian Tradition, New Delhi, 1973. Yogendra Singh has used the term 'Islamisation' to cover three types of cultural and social mobility in status groups through conversion to Islam... (see p.73). Conversion to Islam was not a dominant factor in the upward mobility of people of India throughout the Sultanat period. More important factor was one's foreign ancestry. Those who could establish or seek foreign ancestry got important position in political, economic and social life. Conversion to Islam liberated indigenous low caste population from caste atrocities but did not assure virtual mobility in politico-economic sphere. The only route left for any substantial upward mobility in political and economic life of the early medieval period was through the establishment of one's foreign ancestry. Conversion to Islam was, however, a step forward in that direction because without that the search of foreign ancestry would have been meaningless and association with foreign rulers would have been difficult. It was only through the process of indigenisation of mobility under the Great Moguls that the process of 'Islamisation' carries the meaning the way Yogendra Singh has argued in his work. For the entire Sultanat period the process of 'foreignisation' was a more dominant sociological process than 'Islamisation'. The process of 'foreignisation' still exists, though in waning form. Yogendra Singh seems to have missed the process of 'foreignisation' while deliberating upon 'Islamisation'.
8. Saksena, K.M.L., cp. cit., p.1.

9. Ibid., p. 3.
10. Ibid., pp. 6-12.
11. Ibid., p. 262.
12. The decentralization of the army was considered to be the acquirement of the conditions which prevailed in those days. 'Unavoidable in the early days of the Company's rule with its separate centres at Bombay, Madras and Calcutta, this system was found so useful that no attempt was made at uniting the three armies in 1796. And when the army was reorganised in 1824 the Court of Directors considered it 'useless' to unite the three armies. Even in 1858, when the armies were transferred to the Crown, the old system of separate armies was allowed to continue in preference to having one army for whole of India. As an army officer put it, there was 'a political safety' in the division of the Indian Army.' See M.P. Singh, op. cit., p. 22.
13. The native army had much more endurance and stamina than the European Army. 'A European was considered fit for service in India for above 12 or 15 years, and a native for 20 to 25 years'. See, Singh, M.P., op. cit., quoted from Minutes of Evidence, Q. 1422-23, vol. 13, p. 1, Commons, 35 V of 1832, Evidence of Sir Robert Scot.

Further on the question of efficiency Lord William Bentinck remarked that Indian Army was the most expensive and the least efficient in the world. Countering his contentions Sir C.T. Metcalfe thus wrote: "Is it no proof of efficiency that it has conquered all India? Is it no proof of efficiency that India is more universally tranquil owing to our Indian army than it even was under any Native Government or Governments we read of? If our Indian army be so in expensive, why do we not employ European troops alone to maintain India? Why but because that we could not pay a sufficient number? If our Indian army so inefficient, why do we incur the expense of making soldiers of the natives? Why do we not entertain the same number of undisciplined people who would cost much less? Why but because then we should lose the country from the inefficiency of our native force". Quoted from Kaye, J.W., The Life and Correspondence of Metcalfe, London, 1858, II, 128 by Singh, M.P., op. cit., pp. 56-57.

14. Ibid., p. 93.

15. In course of research, the researcher has gone through all the original volumes of the USI Journals from 1871 onwards which lie in a highly neglected condition at USI Library, Kashmir House, New Delhi. An exercise of culling down and systematising sociological literature from the Journal can be an interesting subject matter of a justifiable independent research. In absence of workable xroxing facility in the library, the researcher was generously permitted to go through the volumes in the library itself. The researcher has a list of interesting sociological titles culled down from the volumes but even these are so voluminous that it would be improper to reproduce them here. However, just by way of example, a piece of writing of G.J.M. Evatt, Surgeon of the Army Department is being reproduced which he wrote in 1877. Who knew that his notes on a Native Army Hospital will carry such sociologically incisive remark: "Caste is one dead weight that will for years weigh India down for struggle for progress. In a Corps like this, where duties are so particularly and intimately concerned with the European race, caste interferes very much. The mere handling of food of the European would be defilement in the eyes of a high caste Hindoo, and Indian Mohamedanism is so paltry a copy of Mehomets original creed that even the Mussulman in Hindostan is entirely caste ridden.

...The present class of Hospital servants are notably Chamars". See Evatt, G.J.M., USI Journal (1877:vol.6), Notes on a Native Army Hospital Corps for India, see p.115.

16. Singh, M.P., op. cit., p.157.
17. Ibid., p.158.
18. Vol.II, 51. Quoted by M.P. Singh, op. cit., p.155.
19. M.P. Singh, ibid., pp.157-8.
20. For details, regarding the composition of natives in Bombay and Madras Armies, see M.P. Singh, op. cit., pp.154-7.
21. Quoted by M.P. Singh, op. cit., pp.235-36, from Malleson (ed.), Kaye's and Malleson's History on the Indian Mutiny, London, 1888, pp.160-61.
22. M.P. Singh, op. cit., p.234.
23. Mohinuddin Alamgir, Famine in South Asia: Political Economy of Mass Starvation, Cambridge, 1987, see Chapter 3, for a detailed analysis on "Indian Famines of the Past", pp.58-76.