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VARIABLY INNATE: INCONSISTENT BRITISH PERCEPTIONS OF MARTIAL RACES IN THE LATE-VICTORIAN INDIAN ARMY

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for graduation with Honors in the History

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Spring 2020

All requirements for graduation with Honors in the
History have been completed.

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Honors Thesis in History

Fall 2019

Advisor: Paul Greenough

Introduction

The British Empire come into the height of its power at the end of the nineteenth century, spanning the globe as the world's premier military and economic power. The crown jewel of this empire was India, a possession which provided enormous resources, not least of which was its large population.¹ From this population came the British Indian Army, the force which provided the backbone of the British military and helped spread and maintain control across the subcontinent and the entire globe. The native soldiers of this force were called sepoy,² volunteers who served under British officers. Though they lacked the love of king and country that their British counterparts had, sepoy proved to be an effective and reliable fighting force within India and abroad.

After years of fighting in Burma, Afghanistan, and Africa, the 1890s saw a period of reorganization for the Indian Army. Historically, military forces in British India were decentralized, comprising three separate armies under the control of the Madras, Bombay, and Bengal Presidencies.³ This system was established by the British East India Company in the 1700s and continued in use through to 1895, when the three armies were consolidated into one unified force. Though this unified force would prove a valuable asset in the coming world wars, the unification was a contested process motivated by competing, and ultimately unrealized, fears of internal revolt and Russian expansionism.

¹ In 1891, the population of India was 287,000,000. The United Kingdom had a population of only 38,000,000. These figures are from the 1891 census of India and the 1891 census of the United Kingdom. India supplied several million soldiers to Britain in WWI and WWII.

² The word "sepoy" is of Persian origin, having come into use during the Mughal rule to refer to foot soldiers. Its use was continued by the British East India Company and the British Raj, as well as by the French and Portuguese, who also employed Indian soldiers. "Sepoy" continues in use with modern South Asian states. Titles, uniforms, and other traditions illustrate continuity in the military history of South Asia.

³ Presidencies were administrative units similar in concept to provinces or states. A map locating these presidencies is included at the end of this paper.

In the background of reorganization was the memory of the Mutiny of 1857, variously termed a rebellion, revolt, and war of independence, during which sepoys turned against their British officers, triggering a widespread civil uprising against British rule. Though it was ultimately put down following fierce fighting, the threat of mutiny and civil revolt remained a prominent fear for the British and continued to be referred to for many decades after. Many army officers saw mutiny followed by popular revolt as the greatest threat to India, and thus maintained that the primary focus of the army should be on internal security. These officers wanted the Army decentralized and dispersed across the colony on bases close to the larger cities to limit the possibility and extent of any future revolt. This view, favoring a “garrison state,”⁴ did not preclude the use of Indian forces overseas, it merely made the expeditionary deployment of forces a secondary priority when considering how to organize the army. Officers from this internally-focused school of thought preferred to maintain the three separate presidency armies as a buffer against revolt throughout the entire army, reasoning that a mutiny in one army was less likely to spread to the others.⁵

On the other side of this policy debate were those who considered the main threat to be Russian territorial encroachment in the northwest. In what would be termed “The Great Game,”⁶ the British and Russian Empires vied for dominance in Central and South Asia. British officers in this camp acknowledged the risk of internal revolt, openly admitting that even the best Indian soldiers were likely to turn against them should the tide of war shift, as they were loyal not to the

⁴ Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State: the Military, Government and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947* (New Delhi: Sage. 2005).

⁵ Examples of the arguments from officers both for and against this school of thought can be found in IOR:L/MIL/7/7034, “Substitution of military police for troops in the Chin Hills and proposed reduction of a Madras infantry regiment.” 24 October 1894.

⁶ The phrase “The Great Game,” as used to describe the geopolitical struggle over Central Asia, originated from the correspondence of a British political officer in the 1840s. The term was popularized through the works of Rudyard Kipling at the turn of the twentieth century.

Crown but to their paymaster. Despite this, it was argued that a larger, centralized army was more capable of standing up against the Russians and maintaining control of India. To minimize the threat of mutiny, these officers sought to dampen sepoy discontent through targeted recruitment, sufficient wages and other inducements, acceptable disciplinary treatment, and increasing the proportion of British soldiers relative to sepoys to maintain order.⁷

One of the few areas of agreement between these two factions was the need to select only the most loyal, capable, and martial recruits. To this end, the British devised the concept of “martial races.” This concept focused not on the characteristics of the individual recruit, but on certain desirable characteristics of the group, or “race,” that the recruit came from. Members of “races” which were deemed to be “martial” were recruited, while those belonging to “non-martial” races generally could not serve. Non-martial races and lower classes were seen as inherently disloyal, incapable, and undisciplined, and thus entirely unfit for military service. By cutting down the number of “races” amongst which to look for recruits, the British devised a practice by which they thought they could maximize the number of quality soldiers. The goal was to create a superior army composed of “martial races,” comparatively better soldiers who would willingly choose to join, as opposed to an army of conscripts, criminals, the poor, or others who would join as a last resort, as is often the case with military service. The quasi-sociological concept of martial races therefore became a central component of recruiting and organizing the Indian Army, and its validity was not questioned by the British.

⁷ An excellent example of the debate between internal and external focuses can be seen in the correspondence of Field Marshal Frederick Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief in India 1885–1893. Roberts himself was strongly in favor of a unified army, but even as Commander-in-Chief was unable to convince his superiors in England, though not for lack of trying. Many other officers, belonging both to the internally and externally focused schools, voiced their opinions in letters to Roberts. See letters LXXIX CIV, CXXIV, CXXVII, CXLVI, CLXVII, CLXXV, CCXI, CCXXV, and CCLXVIII in *Indian Series: Correspondence with England While Commander-in-Chief in India, 3rd January 1890 to 8th March 1893*. Vol. IX, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1893).

Scholarly understanding of martial races has developed over time, becoming part of a wider critical theory on British classification as a means of rule. Though the British believed their racial classifications to be innate, scholars have questioned this assumption, seeing it as another misguided attempt at “scientific” classification of people through a Western lens. Others have pointed out that even the British understanding of martial races shifted over time. Gajendra Singh, in his 2014 work *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* illustrated that which races were considered martial varied over time, with certain groups written into and out of the “martial lore.” Kaushik Roy made similar arguments in his 2008 work *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859-1913*, documenting the evolution of British perceptions on martial races.⁸ At any given time, certain races extolled for their martial prowess were heavily recruited and made up a larger percentage of the Indian Army. Over time, however, these races would fall out of favor, making up smaller percentages of the Army as they were replaced by other groups. Citing the variability of the concept of martial races at different points in time, Singh questioned the idea of a single martial race theory, instead pointing out a variety of different theories. Though this work has provided valuable insight, it portrays shifts in the perception and classification of martial races as more gradual and more widely accepted than I believe they really were.

My own examination of primary official documents from the 1890s show that British ideas on martial races varied and clashed not only over time, but also at a single point in time. Different army officers held widely different opinions as to which groups were and were not martial, and they sought to racially organize their units as they saw fit. These differing opinions

⁸ Kaushik Roy is a preeminent scholar of the Indian Army. His research on the concept of martial race has provided an invaluable foundation on which I seek to add.

were hotly debated, both across the subcontinent and within the same regions as officers recruited and traded different races to their liking. Sepoys were recruited, swapped, and mustered out of service based on the peculiar martial race ideas in vogue with their respective officers. Though this constant debate and change would seem to call into question just how innate “martialness” really was, the British did not question the validity of martial races, merely which groups should be considered as martial. This flexibility (or confusion) actually allowed the British to adapt to changing experiences, and thus to continue to rely on the concept of martial races as a relevant guide for recruitment. The great degree of variation and continuous debate show that “martial race” is not properly understood as a unified theory, or even as a general consensus that changes over time, but as a series of hotly contested arguments with different officer pulling in different directions. Larger changes over time were the result of this back and forth, with certain races happening to emerge as more popular, though never universally accepted, in any given period.

At the center of this back and forth were the resplendent sepoy themselves.⁹ Though they lacked any direct voice in the debate over martial races, they wielded indirect influence over British decisions. British rule in India was dependent on sepoy, all of whom were volunteers. In order to draw in volunteers, a variety of inducements had to be offered, such as pay, promotions, pensions, and an array of bonuses known as *batta*. These inducements had to be kept up throughout the duration of sepoy’s service, generally 20 years for enlisted men, lest the

⁹ Regrettably, the primary sources used in this paper, namely India Office records and correspondence of British officers, provide only the British perspective of the relationship between sepoy and their British superiors. Sources from an Indian perspective were unavailable due to lack of documentation and language barriers. Sepoy would undoubtedly see their situation quite differently, and it is important to remember and attempt to account for the inherent bias and prejudice of one-sided sources. Despite this bias, there are still some meaningful glimpses at the position of sepoy, what experiences they had, and what role they played in the Indian Army, both directly and indirectly.

disappointed sepoys refuse orders or even revolt, as they had in 1857. Sepoys had a passive negotiating advantage in this system, as the British were unable to rely on more coercive means of maintaining loyalty and discipline without pushing away recruits. For those groups deemed martial, military service opened up a variety of opportunities for income and social advancement. Thus, the need to satisfy sepoys' expectations ensured acceptable treatment and sufficient compensation to continue serving their fickle British officers.¹⁰

Race and Martialness

The term “martial race” was used by the British to describe groups which they considered better fit for military service. Similar adjectives, like “military,” “fighting,” and “warlike” were also used, and terms like “group,” “tribe,” “class,” and “caste” were sometimes used in place of “race.” Scholars of the Indian Army have identified this racial classification as a ubiquitous component of the Indian Army, and have, in the latter decades of the twentieth century, settled on “martial race” as the standardized term.¹¹ “Martial race” is thus a period British concept, a label used to describe specific groups, and a modern term of art to refer to a British concept of racial classification. The scholarly understanding of the concept of martial races is sometimes referred to as “martial race theory.”

The meaning of the word “race” as used by the British in India is quite different from the popular American understanding of the word. Instead of a few broad categories based on skin color, such as “white” or “black,” race was based on a variety of biological factors and cultural

¹⁰ Notwithstanding the overall need to attract and offer benefits to sepoys, sepoys could still face harsh discipline and abuse. There were occasional brutal beatings and murders of sepoys by their British officers. These moments were widely publicized in Indian-owned newspapers and contributed to nationalist discontent. Further, the army wielded a considerable disciplinary apparatus based in courts-martial where soldiers were virtually powerless.

¹¹ For a more detailed history of scholarship on the concept of martial races, see chapter 1 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

characteristics used by British officers to distinguish different groups of Indian people, similar to the modern definition of ethnicity. Common characteristics such as language, region of origin, religion, physical attributes, and elements of culture could all play a role in defining a “race,” as could the more uniquely South Asian concept of caste, which divided Indian society into broad groups based on occupation and kinship connections. The word “caste,” though properly describing a different sort of classification, was often used interchangeably with the words “race,” “class,” and “tribe,” by the British.¹²

The ethnic diversity of India provided fertile ground for Victorian Englishmen, enthralled by quasi-scientific notions of race, to classify and rank the people they ruled.¹³ Early English attempts at studying India were guided by a desire to learn the languages and customs of the many people they encountered. Looking through imperial eyes, the early study of India, and Asia more generally, briefly spawned a romanticized interest in the far off, exotic lands of the Orient. By the mid-1800s, Europe had become obsessed with even more overtly racist and paternalistic attempts at classifying and ranking the conquered peoples of its colonies. These classifications were used to justify colonization, casting Europeans as bringers of civilization and modernity to the rest of the world. This desire to classify and order coincided with the 1857 mutiny in India, which saw the British government taking formal control in India from the East India Company and purging the army of forces that had been disloyal. Martial capability thus became an

¹² Caste, from the Portuguese term *casta*, is the European term that refers to the indigenous South Asian classification system of *jati*, which has foundations in occupation, lineage, status, and religious hierarchy.

¹³ The British obsession with racially classifying the native populations of their colonies was by no means limited to India, and would play out all across the empire. Other European empires also engaged in this endeavor, often with devastating and lasting consequences.

important component of British racial classification as the army was reformed to draw recruits from more loyal – or at least more reliable – “races.”¹⁴

Of the many race, ethnic, and caste groups that were classified, only a select few were seen by the British to be martial, that is, naturally and culturally best fit for military service. Just as with race, specifically martial races were unevenly defined on the basis of various, supposedly innate, characteristics. Some races were considered martial primarily because of their religion or region of origin, while others were judged by their physical stature. Once these races had experienced combat, their performance, loyalty, and bravery were reviewed and factored in. While these characteristics were all widely agreed to be important, just how important they were relative to one another varied based on the situation and, most strikingly, the opinions of individual officers.¹⁵

Despite the shifting criteria of martialness, there were some general trends. For example, Hindus were generally seen as less martial than Muslims, often considered cowardly and less honorable. Notable exceptions, however, were the Rajputs, Gurkhas, and Sikhs (who considered themselves a separate religion from Hinduism, but were seen as Hindu by the British),¹⁶ who are often cited as perfect exemplars of martial characteristics. Other general trends were a preference for agriculturalists, who generally had greater physiques and had not been “spoiled” by the comforts of urbanity.¹⁷ Similarly, groups from the northwest, such as Sikhs in the Punjab and

¹⁴ For a more detailed discussion of the British study of Asia and the racial reorganization of the Indian Army after the 1857 mutiny, see Pradeep Barua, “Inventing Race: the British and India’s Martial Races,” *The Historian* 58, no. 1 (1995): 107–116.

¹⁵ For a more detailed discussion of these different characteristics and how British officers in different time periods thought of them, see chapter 1 of Kaushik Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859-1913*, (New Delhi: Manohar. 2008).

¹⁶ Though Sikhs consider themselves to be a distinct religion from Hinduism, British records tend to classify them as Hindu when discussing the balance of Hindus and Muslims in specific units. One such example can be seen in IOR:L/MIL/7/7085, “Changes in the cast construction of regiments: Bengal Army.” 6 October 1898.

¹⁷ Many British officers expressed a preference for rural groups, seeing them as more rugged and possessing a stronger physique than their urban counterparts, who lived a comparatively less physically demanding lifestyle. The

Pashtuns in Afghanistan, were seen as tougher and more martial due to their robust physique.¹⁸

The concept of martial race relied on different levels of identity, varying between different officers and in different contexts. For example, an officer might consider most Muslims to be martial, or just Muslims from the northwest, or just Pashtuns, or even just Pashtuns from a specific tribe.

Even though martial races were British classifications, they were not invented entirely from whole cloth; while the members of these groups did not see themselves as members of a “race,” they did often share self-ascribed identities. Some groups even had their own martial ideals, such as Rajputs, who identified themselves as Kshatriya, members of the warrior component of the four-fold *varna* classification system of Hindu caste society. Similarly, Sikhs saw themselves as the bearers of a long tradition of military glory, and Pashtuns maintained conscious legends and traditions of armed self-defense against conquest. However, the relative importance that the British placed on certain identities certainly differed from that placed on them by Indians, who, like everyone else, possessed many different identities, ranging from family to region to religion. The only identity that the British cared about, however, was that which was deemed martial.¹⁹

Innateness was a key part of the concept of martial races, as it explains why certain races were considered more martial than others regardless of training or individual characteristics.

idea that urbanites are “soft” or “city slickers” is not uncommon even today. For discussion of the period Indian context, see chapter 1 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

¹⁸ Though not universal, this view was commonly held by many British officers. In particular, Field Marshal Frederick Roberts, the Commander-in-Chief in India from 1885–1893, wrote voluminously on his preference for Northwesterners. He saw them as fickle but superbly brave and hardy. See letters LV, CXXXIX, LXXIX, and CCXX in *Indian Series: Correspondence with England While Commander-in-Chief in India, 3rd January 1890 to 8th March 1893*. Vol. IX, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1893).

¹⁹ Henceforth, the terms “race” and “martial race” will be used without quotation marks of suspicion, but with the understanding that the racial views of British officers and officials were unscientific and are unacceptable in modern usage.

Innateness is what gave legitimacy to the endeavor of classifying races in the first place. But the understanding of innateness itself had a degree of variability. In some instances, characteristics the British considered martial were heritable (or genetic, in modern terminology), and were passed on from one generation to the next. Traits like stature and personality could be heritable, and thus fit with this model of innateness. However, stature could also be influenced by diet, and personality by social norms, meaning these characteristics were in part acquired or learned as opposed to strictly being inherited. While the cultural elements of martial characteristics were not directly inheritable, they were still treated by the British as innate characteristics shared by all members of distinct races. Races came from different regions and possessed unique cultures which were passed on to future generations. Elements of culture and region of origin were thus, like genetic factors, seen as innate characteristics of specific races. Regardless of their origin, martial characteristics were traits which were present at a race level, meaning some races were innately more martial than others.

Role of the Concept of Martial Races

The concept of martial races played a variety of important roles in the Indian Army, not least of which was its use to organize and guide recruitment. The effectiveness of the Army was dependent on sepoys who were disciplined, brave, loyal, and capable on the field of battle. In an effort to attract just such sepoys, British recruitment targeted martial races. Recruits from martial races still had to meet basic qualifications, such as physical requirements, before being allowed to join.²⁰ Members of martial races were theoretically more likely to meet these minimum

²⁰ Discussion of these characteristics, requirements, and restrictions can be found in IOR:L/MIL/7/7067 “Reorganisation and reduction of the Bombay Army and Introduction of the class system.” 8 November 1893 – 22 November 1894.

requirements, so targeting them in effect pre-screened potential recruits, and thus helped to streamline the recruitment process.

This pre-screening was important because effective recruitment relied on knowledgeable recruitment officers who built connections with the groups being targeted, a process which could not be done with every group. Recruiting sepoys was inherently difficult, because Indian natives were generally not inclined to volunteer for a foreign, colonial power to which they had no natural affinity or loyalty. British recruitment officers, specially trained in local customs and languages, were sent to build connections with local sources of power, such as maharajas,²¹ prominent landowners, and other locally respected and important figures. This allowed the British to tap into local and more legitimate sources of patronage and influence, incentivizing recruitment beyond what the British could do themselves.

Building local connections was a highly personalized process, so there is little documentation of exactly what recruitment officers did or promised. However, there were general strategies, some key components of which are briefly illustrated by an extract from an 1894 report on recruiting desired races into the Bombay Army:

In order to obtain satisfactory results in recruiting it is absolutely necessary that the British officers should acquaint themselves with the language, sentiments, and racial characteristics of the men under their command, and I am to observe... [that the resulting recruitment would] amply repay careful study by officers of the Bombay Army. I am also to suggest that the enlistment of recruits of a superior class might, in some instances, be

²¹ Maharaja is a South Asian title of nobility, and has accorded varying degrees of importance over time. Under British rule, it was used to refer to the heads of the several hundred princely states, which were Indian vassal states under the British Raj. The population of these states varied from several thousand to several million.

facilitated if native gentlemen of real position and influence could be induced to take direct commissions in companies of their own class.²²

Prominent men (and/or their sons and other family members) were frequently offered officer commissions into the Army, providing them with further prestige and status. Presumably it also gave them a favored position with the British civil authorities, as well as greater status and power when their own kinsman and ethnic cohorts made up the military force in the area. These connections proved quite useful for the British, who often credited them with helping increase the number of recruits from desired groups that were otherwise unwilling to serve.²³

These connections could have multigenerational effects, as military service sometimes became an honorable family tradition, especially for Indian commissioned and non-commissioned officers. This practice, though potentially effective in helping attract future generations of recruits, was still dependent on a range of other inducements. If new generations did not see any personal benefits to serving, not even familial connections would sway them to join. An illustration of this is provided by the Madras Cavalry in the mid-1890s, where British officers felt that “hereditary pride in the calling of arms [was] disappearing” as the sons of officers were no longer enlisting.²⁴ When the Indian officers were asked why this was the case, they responded that the pay was too low. Soldiering, even when seen as honorable work, was

²² Military Department document M 9486 1894, No. 2152-B, 1 October 1894, pages 4 –5. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7067 “Reorganisation and reduction of the Bombay Army and Introduction of the class system.” 8 November 1893 – 22 November 1894.

²³ Such examples are mentioned in numerous documents on recruitment and reorganization. An illustrative case of a connection with a Rajput Maharaja leading to increased recruitment can be found in IOR:L/MIL/7/7071, “Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments.” 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

²⁴ Military Department document M 6381 1895, No. 117, “Letter to Her Majesty’s Secretary of State for India: Recommending that the Madras Cavalry should be included in the proposed increase of pay to the dismounted branches of the native army,” 25 June 1895, page 1. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7075 “Madras cavalry and Viceroy’s bodyguard increase of pay.” 23 January 1895 – 25 June 1895.

difficult and dangerous, and just like any other work, sufficient pay and other benefits had to be offered to attract quality recruits from martial races.

The concept of martial races served not only to guide recruitment, but also to guide military organization. While some units comprised a mix of martial races, by the 1890s there was a strong preference for units organized by martial races. Individual companies generally comprised a single race, though the different companies in a regiment could be made from different races. There were general guidelines for this system of organization, and although mixed-race regiments were accepted, it was preferred to have no more than three or four different races in a regiment. Similarly, the unit balance of Muslim and Hindu soldiers was considered, such that one religion did not have too great of a majority over the other – though just what constituted too great a majority is not entirely clear. Organizing by race was seen as a way to increase the cohesion and effectiveness of the unit, while ensuring that the most martial races were being utilized to their maximum potential.²⁵

This system of race-based organization also applied to native officers, who generally served alongside sepoy of their own race, both for recruitment and practical purposes. As already mentioned, some officers had no prior military experience but were commissioned solely to build recruitment connections. Other officers and non-commissioned officers (NCOs) rose through the ranks, being promoted for meritorious and loyal service. Native officers were always subservient to British officers, by whom they were deemed inferior, and were limited to lower level commands.²⁶ Despite this, native officers provided a valuable link between British officers

²⁵ These general guidelines, opinions, and patterns of recruitment are reflected in a variety of documents dealing with reorganization in the 1890s. For examples of all of them, see IOR:L/MIL/7/7084 “Changes in class composition of regiments of the Bombay cavalry.” 18 August 1898 – 24 March 1911.

²⁶ Particularly negative opinions on the capability of Indian officers can be seen throughout the correspondence of Field Marshal Frederick Roberts. He objected to the idea of granting Indian officers more responsibility, as well as to sending them to British war colleges, which he felt would be a waste. See *Indian Series: Correspondence with*

and the sepoys under their command, and they were sometimes retained in service even when the race of the men under their command changed. However, the general belief was that Indian officers of the same race as the men under their command had a more natural connection through shared language, religion, and regional background, making them a more effective intermediary between British officers and sepoys.²⁷

The British claimed that their system of race-based organization was preferred by the sepoys themselves, an assertion which does have some supporting evidence. Though the opinions of sepoys are difficult to get at directly, there are a few cases recorded in government documents that offer a glimpse. One such case is that of Sultan Khan, a native officer in the 124th Duchess of Connaught's Own Baluchistan Infantry, who voluntarily retired early after 23 years of service. Khan, a member of the Ghilzai tribe, a group formerly considered a martial race, was retained upon the request of his superior British officer after the rest of the Ghilzai men in his company had been mustered out and replaced with a different race. Though he served in this newly reorganized unit for several more months, "he applied for his premature retirement as he, being the last remaining Ghilzai in the regiment, found himself alone of his own class and out of touch with the men of the company which he commanded."²⁸ Beyond the case of Sultan Khan, it

England While Commander-in-Chief in India, 3rd January 1890 to 8th March 1893. Vol. IX, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1893). This did change somewhat during the process known as "Indianisation," the transfer of more authority to Indian officers following WWI. Even then, however, Indian officers remained subservient to their British superiors.

²⁷ These preferences were widely expressed, though a particularly succinct yet detailed example is Military Department document M 9480 1894 No. 165, "Letter to Her Majesty's Secretary of State for India: Soliciting final approval to the proposals submitted for the reorganisation of the Bombay Army on the class company system," part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7067 "Reorganisation and reduction of the Bombay Army and introduction of the class system." 8 November 1893 – 22 November 1894.

²⁸ The Ghilzai, also known as the Ghilji, are one of the tribes who make up the Pashtuns, also known as Pathans, a large Muslim, Pashto speaking ethnic group found in modern day Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Iran. Unfortunately, this record does not indicate which race replaced the Ghilzai in this unit. This is a self-ascribed group, not one defined by the British, and was recruited in large numbers. Military Department reference paper M 2169 1911, 2 February 1911, part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7084 "Changes in class composition of regiments of the Bombay cavalry." 18 August 1898 – 24 March 1911.

seems reasonable that sepoys would prefer, or at least have no objection to, serving alongside people who were similar to them, often sharing the same language, religion, and caste, factors which naturally grouped people outside of the military.

British views were not uniform, and reorganization based on race was criticized by some officers, who saw it as causing disruption and uncertainty. One such instance was the reorganization of several regiments of the Central India Horse in 1898, which called for squadrons comprised of non-martial races to be replaced with squadrons of martial races. Upon hearing the proposed changes, Lieutenant Colonel A. Masters, commander of the 2nd Regiment, responded with surprise and concern, writing:

I have the honour to report that I have just learnt the class composition of the Central India Horse is to be changed. This order was quite unexpected, and has taken me and the 2nd Central India Horse by surprise. I respectfully beg to point out that the 2nd Central India Horse has the nucleus of a Tewana squadron, and the 1st Central India horse has the nucleus of a Pathan squadron; and that it would be to the interest of the Government service for these squadrons to be completed and remain in their own regiments.

Otherwise the regiments of Central India Horse will be completely disorganised for some time by wholesale transfers, which are invariably accompanied by heart-burnings and discontent.²⁹

It should be noted that Col. Masters was not disputing the role of martial races (he himself had proposed some restructuring to the race composition of his specific regiment), but only objected

²⁹ Tewana, also rendered Tiwana, are a Muslim clan from the Punjab. Military department document M 3642 1899, "Extract para. 2 of a letter from the Government of India, No. 40, dated 23rd March 1899," page 3. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7086 "Local corps under the gov't of India: changes in class compositions." 13 October 1898 – 23 March 1899.

to the immediate racial restructuring of entire squadrons. He warned that such sudden restructuring would cause discontent and uncertainty as sepoys found themselves out of a job, replaced by allegedly more martial races. The preferability of martial races was acknowledged, but altering unit composition too greatly could cause disorganization and discontent, counteracting the benefits of having more martial races. Some officers, like Col. Masters, preferred more gradual methods, such as replacing sepoys only as they retired or became casualties, as well as accepting voluntary transfers³⁰ between different units. Gradual reorganization had its proponents, and was employed by some other units who saw it as more cost effective and less disruptive. However, Masters' views were ignored, and the Central India Horse ordered an immediate reorganization. The Deputy Adjutant-General, Bengal argued that limiting the reorganization as Col. Masters suggested "would, if sanctioned, involve a departure from the class squadron system, which is an essential condition in any Native cavalry reconstitution."³¹ Though there was a consensus that recruiting martial races was preferable, there was debate over how to implement them, as well as just which races should be considered martial.

³⁰ Voluntary transfers are frequently mentioned during discussions of reorganization along martial race lines, but little information is given on what exactly this entails. Presumably, sepoys would be given the option to transfer to units of their own race, which would indicate that race-based units had some degree of popularity amongst sepoys. The extent of these voluntary transfers is unclear, but one report explained "that no expenditure is directly involved by the changes unless voluntary transfers from one regiment to another are sanctioned, that the cost of such transfers would be small, and that the sanction of such transfers would depend on financial position. Otherwise, the proposed constitution of the regiments would be carried out gradually by the replacement of casualties by men of the required classes." This suggests that any limits were for financial reasons. Military Department document M 9480 1894, 11 September 1894, page 1, part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7067 "Reorganisation and reduction of the Bombay Army and Introduction of the class system." 8 November 1893 – 22 November 1894.

³¹ Military department document M 3642 1899, "Extract para. 2 of a letter from the Government of India, No. 40, dated 23rd March 1899." Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7086 "Local corps under the gov't of India: changes in class compositions." 13 October 1898 – 23 March 1899.

Differing Opinions on Martial Races

The debate over reorganization involved not only how to best conduct the reorganization, but also who was and was not martial. It would seem that organizing units based on the concept of martial races would be a straightforward process, since the martialness of certain races was supposedly innate and obvious enough to motivate reorganization in the first place. This was, however, far from the case. There was no consensus on which races were most martial, as different officers held their own opinions, biases, and prejudices. This debate was often quite vocal and was a prominent part of the reorganization of the 1890s.

The reorganization of the Central Indian Horse, discussed in the previous section, was no exception to this debate. At one point during the reorganization, it was proposed that a squadron of Pathans be transferred from the 1st Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel G. E. Money, to the 2nd Regiment, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel A. Masters. Col. Masters objected, stating:

I did not advocate increasing the Pathan element in the regiment, as I have always been strongly opposed to an excess of this class, who are unsuited for the duties to be performed here [in the 2nd Regiment] owing to the numerous small detachments which the regiment has to maintain scattered over the country and not under the immediate control of their officers. I would mention that there are strong political reasons against increasing the number of Pathans in the Central India Horse... Should any doubt be entertained regarding the correctness of my assertion which is based on 24 years'

experience in Central India, I request that this point may be referred to the Agent to the Governor-General in Central India for an expression of his views.³²

Col. Money agreed with Col. Masters in his objection to this transfer, though for the opposite reason – Col. Money considered the Pathans an effective race, and wished to keep them in his own regiment, where “many of them have served a long time, have done real good work, are contented and happy.” He considered the transfer of Pathans from his regiment to be an “unnecessary hardship both on the men and on the regiments.”³³ The 1st Regiment was ultimately allowed to keep the Pathans, and the 2nd Regiment instead received a new squadron of Punjabi Muslims. The ultimate goal of this reorganization was to replace sepoys from non-martial races with martial ones, but regimental commanders had very different ideas of which races to consider martial. High command, which had overruled Col. Masters’ proposal for gradual introduction of more martial races, nonetheless deferred to his racial preference. Such debate over martial races and deference to the opinions of lower level commanders was a common theme of the reorganizations of the 1890s.

British officers discussed their racial preferences freely in their correspondence and responses to proposed reorganizations. One such example is illustrated by the 1897 proposal for reorganization of the 2nd Bombay Lancers,³⁴ in which the existing squadrons of Deccani Muslims

³² Unfortunately, Col. Masters did not elaborate on his claim that there were political reasons against increasing the number of Pathans, though it may have been in an attempt to maintain the desired proportions of Muslims versus Hindus. It was often feared that there would be discontent, and thus disobedience, if one religion became too dominant or was seen as receiving preferential treatment within a unit. Military department document M 3642 1899, “Extract para. 2 of a letter from the Government of India, No. 40, dated 23rd March 1899,” page 5. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7086 “Local corps under the gov’t of India: changes in class compositions.” 13 October 1898 – 23 March 1899.

³³ Military department document M 3642 1899, “Extract para. 2 of a letter from the Government of India, No. 40, dated 23rd March 1899,” page 4. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7086 “Local corps under the gov’t of India: changes in class compositions.” 13 October 1898 – 23 March 1899.

³⁴ IOR:L/MIL/7/7071, “Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments.” 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

were replaced with Rajputs from western Rajputana.³⁵ The Deccani Muslims had been serving with the unit for years, and the officers of the unit reported no problems with their capability as soldiers. However, the unit's new commanding officer disagreed, claiming that the Deccani Muslims were inferior cavalry soldiers compared to their Rajput counterparts and that they should be replaced. This substitution was ultimately permitted, largely because the commanding officer claimed that a new connection with a maharaja in western Rajputana would lead to more Rajput recruits. However, this change did not happen without opposition from other officers, one of whom quipped that “[t]his changing and & chopping is a bad thing & leads to unrest. Every new C.O. [Commanding Officer] is seemingly allowed to indulge his own taste in castes. Why[?]”³⁶

Similar complaints were lodged in other cases, such as the 1897 substitution of Rahtore Rajputs for non-Jat Sikhs in the 4th Bengal Cavalry.³⁷ The new commanding officer of the regiment requested permission to remove all Sikhs, except for Jats,³⁸ hoping to replace them with newly recruited Rahtore Rajputs on the grounds that the Sikhs made poor riders and poor recruits. In response to this, the Adjutant General in India, Lieutenant General Sir Gerald Morton countered that “[i]f this statement applies only to the recruits so far enlisted for the squadron, the

³⁵ The Deccani Muslims are an ethnically diverse group who speak Dakhini, a dialect of Urdu, and who live throughout the Deccan Plateau. Rajputs are a self-ascribed group of primarily Hindu clans who are part of the Kshatriya varna, the military class of the varna system which classifies Hindu society. Here, the British classify both of these two groups along regional and religious lines, but varyingly incorporate linguistic and caste identity.

³⁶ This unsigned comment was hand-written in the margin of the minute paper ordering the change. Minute Paper M 912 1897, “Caste constitution of the 2nd Bombay lancers.” Part of IOR:/L/MIL/7/7071, “Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments.” 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

³⁷ IOR:/L/MIL/7/7071, “Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments.” 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

³⁸ Jats are agriculturalists from northern India. They comprise a variety of faiths, including Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims. The officer likely excluded them because agriculturalists were often considered by the British to possess a stronger physique and to not have been spoiled by the comforts of urban life. For further discussion of this topic, see chapter 1 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

remedy lies in the commanding officer's own hands,"³⁹ seeing any poor performance as the fault of the new officer, not the Sikhs. Going further, Morton pointed out that if the new commanding officer's statements applied to Sikhs generally, he need only look to the 2nd Bombay Lancers, who served in the same area, or to the cavalry regiments of the Punjab and Bengal, where non-Jat Sikhs served in large numbers without any complaints. Despite the exemplary service of Sikhs in other units and the opposition of the Adjutant General, the request for substitution was ultimately granted.

This substitution of Rajputs for Sikhs in the 4th Bengal Cavalry is a particularly interesting case for two reasons. First, both Rajputs and Sikhs were often understood (including among themselves) to be martial, both groups having traditions of military service predating British rule. In this instance it seems that the commanding officer was more a fan of Rajputs, perhaps out of some personal bias for them over another major "Hindu" martial race. Second, it is notable that this substitution was allowed, even though it originated from a relatively low-ranking officer. Individual officers were permitted a great deal of leeway to "indulge their own taste in castes,"⁴⁰ even when opposed by other officers. If it were not for this deference to the opinions of individual officers when dealing with their own units, the great deal of variation in opinion between different officers would have been much less consequential, as they would have had to follow whatever martial race ideas the high command preferred. Decentralized decision making is thus a key component of why martial races were so variable; individual experiences,

³⁹ Military Department document M 2128 1897, "Enclosure No. 1 to Extract para. 7 of a letter from the Government of India, No. 20, dated 10th February 1897," page 2. Part of IOR:/L/MIL/7/7071, "Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments." 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

⁴⁰ Paraphrasing the previously mentioned anonymous comment in footnote 31, Minute Paper M 912 1897, "Caste constitution of the 2nd Bombay lancers." Part of IOR:/L/MIL/7/7071, "Reorganisation of the Bombay Army – altered class composition of certain regiments." 30 January 1895 – 25 August 1897.

biases, and tastes led to situations where the races considered martial by some officers were objected to by others.

The level of specificity used to define martial races was also a source of debate and variability. Though there were general perceptions of martialness along such broad lines as Muslims verses Hindus, martial races were usually carefully qualified, such as with the specification of Rahtore Rajputs instead of Rajputs generally or Hindus as a whole. That the commanding officer in the 4th Bengal Cavalry considered all non-Jat Sikhs to be unfit for military service was a broad generalization in contrast to the perception of the Adjutant General and other officers. Others preferred to define martial races very specifically. E. H. H. Collen, the Secretary to the Government of India, commented on this point while weighing in on the reorganization of the Bombay Army. Using the Bengal Army as a comparison, he argued that the definition of race used in the Bombay reorganization proposal was too broad, writing:

‘Rajputana Hindus’ or ‘Foreign (i.e., North-Western Provinces and Oudh)⁴¹ Hindus’ is hardly a sufficient distinction, and would permit of an undesirable mixture of castes in each company, or troop of these classes. For instance, Rajputs and Jats should not be mixed, but kept in separate companies or squadrons. The same argument applies to Mahrattas, who are divided, like other Hindus, into a large number of classes or castes. The Government of India consider that the particular Mahratta caste of which each troop or company is to consist, should, if possible, be specified, only fighting classes being enlisted. Among Mahomedans, again, it seems doubtful whether the term ‘Mahomedans from the Bombay recruiting area’ is sufficiently definite... Some such distinction as that

⁴¹ In this context, “foreign” means coming from outside of the Bombay presidency. The North-Western Provinces and Oudh were part of the Bengal Presidency.

involved in the terms ‘Hindustani Mahomedan’ and ‘Punjabi Mahomedan’ should, it is thought, be established between the inhabitants of the various territorial divisions of the Bombay recruiting grounds, and the racial groups thus formed should be treated as separate classes for the purposes of the scheme under consideration.⁴²

Officers like Collen feared that using too broad a definition for specific martial races would allow for less-martial races to creep in, as well as lead to the combination of martial races which were not seen to mix well with one another. Just how precise a definition was preferred varied from officer to officer and region to region. This variability is not surprising, given the differing perceptions of martialness that officers held, as well as the different identities and characteristics (such as religion, geography, and caste) used to define martial races.

There was no single unified set of criteria to decide which races to consider martial, despite the concept of martial races being near universally accepted by the British, who relied on it as a major organizing component of the Indian Army. Certain opinions predominated over others, and certain races were more and less frequently recruited over the decades. The general trends seen across decades were not the result of a gradually changing consensus, but the outcome of a constant debate in which certain opinions, often temporarily, prevailed against stiff opposition.

⁴² Military Department document M 9480 1894 No. 2152-B, 1 October 1894, page 5. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7067 “Reorganization and reduction of the Bombay Army and Introduction of the class system.” 8 November 1893 – 22 November 1894.

Inducement and Indirect Influence

Though drawing from existing identities, classification as a martial race was externally imposed on sepoys and came to regulate many aspects of their lives. Being part of a martial race determined whether an Indian could even enlist in the military. Once enlisted, their identity as a martial race determined which units sepoys could serve in. Sepoys frequently found themselves at the mercy of the varying British perceptions on martial races. Even after decades of satisfactory service, sepoys could find themselves forced out because their new officer had a distaste for their race. However, sepoys were not helpless, and had a great deal of indirect influence over their situation, both in spite of and because of the concept of martial races that came to define them.

British insistence on recruiting only martial races, combined with the fear of revolt, provided sepoys with enough indirect influence to ensure acceptable treatment and compensation for their service. Central to this indirect influence was the recognized mercenary nature of sepoys. Though they had no natural affinity or loyalty towards their British rulers, various bonuses and benefits attracted a sufficient supply of martial recruits and ensured their continuing loyalty after enlistment. Though the exact reason for joining was unique to each sepoy, these financial benefits were perhaps the single greatest incentive.

As discussed previously, recruitment was directed at martial races, and there was a strong desire to avoid recruiting the poor and the non-martial out of concern over their poor performance and discipline. This limited the size of the recruitment pool from which the British could draw, and necessitated the use of local connections and skilled recruitment officers. These connections could only go so far, however, and had to be backed up by sufficient pay. The 1880s saw a decrease in the number and quality of recruits, especially for the cavalry, which had higher

expenses due to the maintenance of horses. In 1890, cavalry pay was increased, and recruits proved more forthcoming. By 1895, there were calls for a similar increase in pay for the dismounted branches, such as infantry, as the cavalry was drawing away recruits.⁴³ Responding to these complaints, the government of India concluded that:

the pay of the noncommissioned officers and privates in the Mountain batteries, the Sappers and Miners, and the Infantry should be substantially increased. There is great difficulty in obtaining a sufficient supply of recruits of the proper stamp, the rate of wages generally throughout India has risen, and heavier duties are required of the Native army than formerly. In 1890, the pay of the native cavalry was raised... with most satisfactory results, and the time has now arrived for an increase to the pay of the dismounted branches... The necessity for the increase is beyond question.⁴⁴

Like any other employer, the Indian Army had to compete with other fields of employment. With no conscription, they had no choice but to raise sepoy pay.

Beyond aiding recruitment, pay was also seen as an essential means to maintain loyalty. The threat of revolt was implicit because of the mercenary nature of sepoys, and this unspoken threat served as their greatest source of indirect influence. The specter of the 1857 Mutiny haunted the British, leaving them wary of the disastrous consequences of sepoy discontent. This influence can be seen acting alongside the declining recruitment in the 1890s, as multiple officers voiced their concerns in a confidential letter to the secretary of state for India, writing:

⁴³ IOR:L/MIL/7/7070. "Increase of pay to dismounted branches." 23 January 1895 – 4 July 1895.

⁴⁴ Military Department Minute Paper M 1585 1895, 23 January 1895. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7070. "Increase of pay to dismounted branches." 23 January 1895 – 4 July 1895.

The subject of the pay and position of the Native soldier in India is one of the greatest importance. The Native Army is bound to us by no ties of blood or patriotism, and the Government of India have always recognized the necessity for ensuring the efficiency and loyalty of the troops by such reasonable concessions to them as the improvement in the condition of the classes from which they are drawn appeared to demand... although every effort has been made to increase the comfort and well-being of the Native soldier, it has been obvious to us, for several years past, that the time was rapidly approaching when we must advise Her Majesty's Government to sanction a substantial increase to the pay of the Native Army.⁴⁵

Showing just how important the British perceived sepoy pay to be, these calls for pay increases met with much less resistance than most other proposals, and what little debate there was centered not on whether there should be an increase, but on how much the increase needed to be. These raises were not motivated by any goodness of the British, but out of the desire to recruit members of martial races and to purchase loyalty to British control. Though sepoys had no direct bargaining power, their potential to revolt indirectly ensured satisfactory compensation, both through pay and other financial benefits, such as *batta*.⁴⁶

In addition to their standard pay, sepoys also received *batta*, which was essentially an extra allowance or bonus given to cover living expenses such as food, travel, and other costs.

Batta was a longstanding custom in South Asia, and had been paid to sepoys from the early days

⁴⁵ Military Department document M 1585 1895, 23 January 1895, page 1. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7070. "Increase of pay to dismounted branches." 23 January 1895 – 4 July 1895.

⁴⁶ These pay increases are not isolated events, but common responses to declining recruitment and fears of waning loyalty. See also IOR:L/MIL/7/7075, "Madras cavalry and Viceroy's bodyguard increase of pay." 23 January 1895 – 25 June 1895.; and IOR:L/MIL/7/ 7077, "Local corps under the gov't of India: increase of pay." 29 January 1896 – 13 May 1896.

of service under the British.⁴⁷ The exact allowances given varied over time, being adjusted to reflect the cost of goods in certain areas.⁴⁸ *Batta* was frequently given to help cover the cost of food, which had seasonal and regional fluctuation that could cause a great deal of hardship for sepoys and their dependents. The rates for food *batta* were generally adjusted to changing prices of rice and wheat, which, though adding complexity to the payment system, was considered necessary to minimize sepoy discontent. An illustrative example is provided by the debate over a 1901 Finance Committee proposal to fix the rate of *batta* to make it easier to calculate payments. Several high ranking British officers objected, writing in response that “the result [of the proposed fixing of rates] in the Native army would be starvation, inefficiency, and discontent. In His Excellency’s opinion, there can be no doubt whatever that to keep the Native army contented there must be a sliding scale which automatically makes up to the sepoy for the fluctuations arising from the season.”⁴⁹ The proposal was ultimately dropped, and variable rates were maintained, albeit in a streamlined form. Though fluctuating *batta* was an added expense for the British, the stability it provided was considered worth the cost; sepoys’ hardships in the face of

⁴⁷ The uncertain origins and military history of *batta* are described in the *Hobson-Jobson*, a period Anglo-Indian dictionary written by British officers. *Batta* predated the arrival of the British, and similar allowances were paid to sepoys serving the Portuguese, whose presence in South Asia goes back to the sixteenth century. There were several similar, possibly etymologically related terms in Hindi and Portuguese. Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrase, and of Kindred Terms, Etymological, Historical, Geographical, and Discursive*, ed. William Crooke (London: John Murray, 1903).

⁴⁸ In general, *batta* was increased when serving in areas with more difficult terrain, poor living conditions, or higher costs of provisions. For a report briefly covering some of these different regional rates over time, see IOR:L/MIL/7/7074, “Special monetary privileges of the Native Army.” 8 May 1895 – 25 June 1895.

⁴⁹ This quote is from Colonel B. Duff, the Officiating Adjutant-General in India. Several other officers lodged similar complaints. In the quoted text, “His Excellency” refers to Sir Arthur Palmer, the Commander-in-Chief in India from 1900–1902, who also submitted a response objecting to the proposed fixing of *batta* rates. That the holders of such prominent positions objected to the proposal is telling. It is also notable that the proposal, which arose from two Lieutenant-Colonels and which was unpopular higher up, was still given a hearing. This speaks to the relative decentralization of power and the ability of lower-ranking officers to attempt to effect change in the Indian Army. Military Department document M 4378 1902, *Extract para. 18 of a despatch from the Government of India, No. 44, dated the 6th March 1902*. Part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7112, “System of compensation for dearness of provisions and forage to the native troops and followers.” 27 June 1901 – 28 January 1904.

changing conditions could be at least partially countered, helping to keep them more contented and loyal.

A variety of other bonuses were also given to sepoys. Rewards were given for good performance and loyalty, such as good conduct pay, prizes for good shooting and swordsmanship, and gratuities for long and meritorious service. Others were designed, like *batta*, to cover occasional expenses, like compensation for repair of arms, shoeing of horses, house rent, railway charges, passage money, postage and telegram fees, and kit money. Bonuses were also awarded on certain occasions, such as New Year's Day *batta* and Her Majesty's birthday *batta*. Bonuses were also aimed at sepoys' families and dependents, such as family allowances and allowances for girls' schools and school books.⁵⁰ These bonuses helped to ensure that the basic needs of sepoys and their families were covered, while helping to attract new recruits and ensuring loyalty.

Alongside pay and *batta*, pensions served as another important inducement for sepoys, and perhaps the one that they had the most direct influence over. Pensions are, by their very nature, both a carrot and a stick – they can bring great benefit to the recipient, but they are conditioned on years of loyal service, compelling one to stay in line or face losing out. This made pensions attractive to both the British and sepoys. The longer a sepoy served and the higher the rank he achieved, the greater his pension. However, the years of continued service necessary for a pension was at odds with the fluctuation in delineating martial races. Sepoys who were otherwise giving good service could find themselves mustered out and their pensions cut short due to their race no longer being considered martial. On the other hand, British officers

⁵⁰ These various bonuses are officially sanctioned by the *Army Regulations, India*, and covered in detail in various financial reports. See *Selections from the Army Regulations, India, for the use of District Officers in the Civil Department*. Calcutta: Civil Department, India, 1895; see also IOR:L/MIL/7/7082, "Reorganisation and reduction of the Madras Governor's body guard and Madras cavalry establishment." 16 December 1896 – 28 July 1898.

frequently called for increased pensions for the sepoys under their command. If the duration of a sepoy's service fell a few years short of eligibility for receiving a higher pension rate, it was often requested that they be given the higher-level pension, which they presumably would have attained had they not been arbitrarily mustered out. These requests were normally granted. Why exactly higher pensions were granted is not entirely clear. The requests for increase generally cite the good service that an individual sepoy provided, thus serving as a similar reward to good-conduct pay. Though not explicitly stated, it seems the rationale for these increases would have been similar to that for other bonuses – to reduce discontent and show potential recruits that they would be looked after even if they were mustered out.⁵¹

To illustrate the general procedure of pension increases, the reorganization of the 2nd Bombay Lancers, discussed in the previous section, once again serves as an excellent example. As the Deccani Muslims were being replaced with Rajputs, the British thought that the remaining Deccani officers and NCOs would be out of place in the newly reorganized regiment, and would block promotion opportunities for Rajputs. Thus, several non-Rajput officers were reassigned to other regiments where Deccani Muslims were still serving. However, there were not enough vacancies for all of the remaining officers and NCOs, and the remainder had to be mustered out. These men had served for between 21 and 28 years, and had most likely intended to continue serving for several years more to secure a higher pension. To solve this dilemma, the commanding officer of the 2nd Bombay Lancers requested that these remaining officers and

⁵¹ Detailed pension rates by years of service, as well as examples of sepoys receiving higher pensions upon discharge can be seen in IOR:L/MIL/7/7079, "Hyderabad Contingent – reorganization and liability for general service." 18 August 1896 – 7 August 1914. A basic outline of pension scales is also given in *Selections from the Army Regulations, India, for the use of District Officers in the Civil Department*. Calcutta: Civil Department, India, 1895.

NCOs receive pensions of one rate higher than their current duration of service entitled them to, decreasing the financial impact of their premature discharge.⁵²

Another example is the pension increase awarded to Sultan Khan, the previously mentioned Ghilzai officer in the 124th Duchess of Connaught's Own Baluchistan Infantry. Having risen through the ranks on his own merit, Khan voluntarily retired early because he felt out of place after the other Ghilzai sepoy in his unit had been mustered out, no longer considered martial by their British officers. His commanding officer, however, had initially asked that he stay in the newly reformed unit, and put in a request for a higher pension after he decided to retire one year short of a higher pension rate.⁵³ Requests for pension increases are one of the few cases in Military Department documents where sepoy were treated as individuals, their names given and their service commended by their British officers. In most other cases, sepoy were lumped together, referred to only through their units and races with no individual identity.

As in every military, the Indian Army also employed a variety of disciplinary measures. Sepoy were subject to numerous punishments under military law, ranging from fines to flogging to execution. These Indian Army punishments were based on British Army codes, and generally followed those applied to British soldiers.⁵⁴ However, a degree of leniency was not uncommon because the Indian Army was a volunteer force – if punishments were too severe, sepoy would quit. Recruiting replacements would be difficult, and the British could not afford to too greatly

⁵² IOR:L/MIL/7/7076, "Class constitution of the Bombay Army – retirement of low-caste native officers." 10 September 1895 – 16 September 1897.

⁵³ Military Department reference paper M 2169 1911, 2 February 1911, part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7084 "Changes in class composition of regiments of the Bombay cavalry." 18 August 1898 – 24 March 1911.

⁵⁴ For more detailed discussion on the disciplinary policy of the Indian Army and how it compared to British policy, see chapter 2 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

damage their relationship with martial groups. Because of this, the British focused on carrots rather than sticks to ensure loyalty and discipline.

Field Marshall Frederick Roberts, Commander in Chief in India from 1885–1893, was a prominent supporter of lenient use of punishment. He thought that this was more conducive to keeping sepoys contented, which therefore made them more loyal and effective. He explained his views in an 1890 letter to Lord Randolph Churchill, writing:

Some years ago when in Madras I urged upon Commanding Officers the desirability of treating crime, especially in the case of young soldiers, with leniency, and abolishing all needless restrictions on the liberty of well-behaved men. The results were so satisfactory that I repeated the order when I took up the chief command in India.⁵⁵

Similarly, Roberts advocated treating sepoys according to their own customs – or, at least, what the British understood their customs to be – in order to keep them contented. He explained this view in an 1892 letter of advice to Major General Barker, commander of the Indian Army detachment in Hong Kong, opining that:

native troops require in many respects treatment different from that accorded to British soldiers. They have not a few peculiar customs and some prejudices, and though many of these are really unimportant yet they are much attached to them. Our system of dealing with native troops in India is based on long experience, and is so framed as to be in keeping with the national habits of the soldiers to whom it applies, as far as is consistent

⁵⁵ Letter LXXVII in *Indian Series: Correspondence with England While Commander-in-Chief in India, 3rd January 1890 to 8th March 1893*. Vol. IX, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1893).

with military feeling and discipline. It has, moreover, one immense advantage, that it is thoroughly understood by the men.⁵⁶

The payment of *batta*, an essential part of recruitment and discipline, is an example of the “peculiar customs” which the British followed. Though Robert’s letters show the paternalism and condescension typical of the British, they reflect the understanding that harsh discipline was less effective than inducement. If the British hoped to field a martial and loyal army, they had to be willing to treat and pay sepoys well enough. That is not to say that the life of a sepoy was a particularly lavish one, but soldiering was made sufficiently attractive compared to the alternatives to make it worthwhile.

Conclusion – Power, Fear, and Fantasy

The quest for power motivated British imperial policy, but not always in the most obvious way. That an empire would seek to expand its power is a given, but equally important was the inverse of power – security. Whether accurate or misplaced, the fear of losing power was very real to the British, and enormously influential. The internal fear of another mutiny like 1857 is what led to the formalization of the concept of martial races in the first place, as the British sought to recruit only loyal and martial soldiers. The external fear of a Russian invasion made recruitment of martial races urgent, as only a select few Indian races were considered capable of fighting the Russians. Paradoxically, the most martial sepoys were also a source of fear for the British, as it was understood that they were perfectly capable of revolting or refusing to fight against the Russians if they became discontented with their British superiors.

⁵⁶ Letter CCXXIV in *Indian Series: Correspondence with England While Commander-in-Chief in India, 3rd January 1890 to 8th March 1893*. Vol. IX, (Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Government Printing, India, 1893).

A central part of this fear was instability. Both internal and external threats could upset the status quo and threaten British power. However, if the British had the best, most martial soldiers, they would be better prepared for whatever threats emerged. Ironically, though the concept of martial races itself was stable (it was employed until the end of British rule, and lingers on informally to the present), the racial content of the concept was anything but. Even though martialness was supposedly based on innate characteristics, which particular races were considered martial varied, leading to frequent unit reorganization and instability.

British paranoia, however off the mark, was not entirely unfounded. Though there was never another mutiny on the level of 1857, minor internal mutinies did occur, as when a Pashtun squadron of the 13th Bengal Lancers attempted to mutiny in 1898.⁵⁷ The attempt was quickly put down without loss of life, though such events kept the British wary. The external threat also eventually materialized – not from the Russians, but from the Germans in the First World War. The unification of the Indian Army did pay off, as hundreds of thousands of sepoys fought in Europe and the Middle East. Many more fought in the next world war, even defending India against the Japanese.

It was the fear of losing power in India, either through Russian invasion or internal revolt, that guided the army reforms of the 1890s. The Army's consistent doctrine was that the right reforms, the right organization, and the right races would create the perfect system to preserve British power. What exactly was "right" was the fantasy of individual officers, who argued amongst themselves over what they saw as the greatest threats and which races they personally

⁵⁷ Unfortunately, few specific details about the scope of this mutiny are given. Three sepoys were court martialed and sentenced, respectively, to one year four months, and nine months imprisonment with hard labor. The rest of the squadron was later disbanded and the sepoys mustered out. The British found the cause to be discontent due to an unpopular British officer and the fact that the native officers in the squadron came from a different Pashtun tribe than the rest of the men. Military Department document M 10387 1898, part of IOR:L/MIL/7/7085, "Changes in the cast construction of regiments: Bengal Army." 6 October 1898.

considered the most martial. The idea that there truly was such a thing as an innately martial race was its own fantasy, and, ultimately, so were the fears of Russian Invasion and a widespread mutiny. Yet, these security fears had a very real impact, guiding British policy decisions and giving indirect power to sepoys.

Scope for Future Research

It is important to note other elements of army recruitment practices, namely sepoy land grants and martial race recruitment handbooks, which are widely reported in secondary sources, but which were not found in my primary sources. In the second half of the nineteenth century, sepoys were often awarded land after completing their service. In the Punjab, parcels were opened up in Canal Colonies, model agricultural settlements established by the British.⁵⁸ For landless sepoys, land grants would doubtlessly have been a major inducement, yet such grants were not mentioned in any of the Military Department documents reviewed while researching this paper, not even those which gave extensive lists of other forms of *batta*. This may be because land grants were managed by the Revenue Department, and so would not have been considered in Military Department documents. It is interesting that such a useful recruitment incentive was not controlled by the military.

The lack of mention of recruitment handbooks is harder to explain. Starting in 1890 and continuing until the First World War, the British published official recruitment handbooks detailing what characteristics defined the most martial of races and which races ought to be

⁵⁸ Land grants are widely cited as an important inducement. See chapter 4 of Kaushik Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859-1913*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 2008); see also chapter 2 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015).

targeted by recruitment officers.⁵⁹ Though these manuals were published contemporaneously, there is not a single mention of any such handbook in my primary sources, not even during discussions of recruitment strategies. This absence, combined with the fact that officers had widely varying and contradicting opinions on which races to consider martial, indicates that these handbooks may have had little real influence. There are several potential reasons for this. The leeway given to lower-ranking officers in making recruitment and organizational decisions, described earlier, may mean that there was no requirement to use the handbooks, and officers who disagreed with them could disregard them. The personalized nature of the recruitment process could also have limited the usefulness of generalized and inflexible handbooks. It is also possible that it took years for the use of handbooks to become widespread, putting their influence beyond the timeframe of this paper. Further research is needed to test these hypotheses.

Lastly, it is also important to note the limited temporal scope of this paper. The widespread variation in British perceptions of martial races seen during the 1890s may not extend to other periods. The 1890s was a period of restructuring situated between major conflict in Afghanistan and Burma in the preceding decade, and the most destructive war the world had yet seen in the next century. The unique conditions of the 1890s may well have allowed for widespread debate that was not present in other periods, and it is hazardous to extrapolate. Despite these limitations, the reforms carried out in the 1890s dictated the state of the Indian Army going into World War One. The decade saw further evolution of the concept of martial races, which was formalized after the 1857 Mutiny and has continued, though more obscurely, to influence modern South Asian militaries.

⁵⁹ A basic overview of the recruitment handbooks can be found in chapter 1 of Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2015) For a more detailed discussion of the handbooks, see chapter 3 of Kaushik Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859-1913*, (New Delhi: Manohar. 2008)

Appendix

Military Map of India, 1893



This map of India from 1893 shows major cities, regions, and the areas of the presidency armies. Bengal is pink, Bombay is green, and Madras is yellow. Map scanned from *Constable's Hand Atlas of India*. United Kingdom: A. Constable and Company. 1893.

Groups Commonly Recruited as Martial Races

The following is a list of groups that were commonly recruited as martial races during the 1890s. This list is based on my review of Military Department documents, and is not exhaustive or official. Some races were more popular than others, and all had their fans and detractors. Larger races often had many subgroups, which were generally, though not always, considered comparably martial.

Races from the Punjab, such as Sikhs, and especially Jat Sikhs;

Rajputs, including Rahtore Rajputs;

Pashtuns, including Ghilzai, Afridi, and other subgroups;

Baluch;

Gurkhas;

Deccani Muslims;

Dogras;

Marathi

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