Indigenous Mercenaries in the Service of European Imperialists: The Case of the Sepoys in the Early British Indian Army, 1750–1800

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When the British got drawn into a series of wars against the French and a variety of Indian princes in south-east India (the Carnatic) in the latter half of the eighteenth century, they were short of men to fight them because few lower-class Europeans could be enticed to the East. So they had to turn to the large indigenous Indian military labour market and found many willing to serve for the regular pay which, unusually for India, the East India company offered them. The British had to overcome their own initial scepticism that the Indian troops (sepoys) who fought for them, with their very different cultural values and military traditions, could be trained and disciplined to fight as well as Europeans in the European manner. However, as the company’s imperial attitude grew, it had no choice but to rely on its sepoys. A way was eventually found to raise the sepoys’ performance by partially replacing their Indian officers with British ones. This solution also to some extent allayed growing fears that, as the sepoys became more tactically competent and disciplined, they might one day turn on their employers. It did however blight the career prospects of the company’s Indian officers and this was one of the elements of the great mutiny eight years later which challenged the integrity of the mighty Raj.

It must be a source of anguish to modern Indian historians to know that their country was conquered by the British using armies substantially made up of their own countrymen. But then, it would be anachronistic to condemn eighteenth-century Indians, who served the British, as collaborators, when the notion of ‘democratic’ nationalism or of an Indian ‘nation’ did not then exist. Nor was it a unique example. Earlier, the Spanish and Portuguese had similarly managed to mobilize indigenous manpower to help them create and maintain empires in the Americas; they were to do it again, with the French and British, in
nineteenth-century Africa. The Europeans managed it by accommodating their imperial control to the existing tribal, social, cultural or religious identities of the people, and by isolating, subordinating or collaborating with the local autocrats who governed them.

Mercenaries (professional soldiers who would fight for whoever would pay them, regardless of cause or country), during their heyday in European warfare from the late fifteenth to the late eighteenth century, were usually foreigners in the land in which they were fighting and a minority in the army they served, and so could generally be controlled. What was so noteworthy about the case of the English East India Company, which was the unofficial agent at first of British expansion in India, was that the company’s sepoys mercenaries (from the Persian ‘sipahi’, meaning soldier) were fighting in their own lands, amongst their own people and were culturally alien to their European paymasters. Even more remarkably, the British, who had initially recruited Indians only for auxiliary military roles, succeeded within 30 years, against their own initial expectations, in converting them into regular European-style infantry capable of performing complicated tactical evolutions on the battlefield in the western manner. South Asian military traditions gave priority to cavalry fighting in much less sophisticated looser units with a simpler tactical doctrine.

The British had been trading in India since the early 1600s but, other than establishing three sovereign fortified ‘factories’ (commercial bases) at Madras, Bombay and Calcutta (with a few minor coastal outposts), each covering a square mile or so, the company had shown no interest in territorial expansion before the 1750s and had maintained military forces equal to this lack of ambition. However, between 1748 and 1783 the static garrisons of 100–200 regular European soldiers and 1000 or so irregular Indians at each of the factories grew to three standing armies totalling 10 000 European and 100 000 regular Indian troops which had seen field service deep into the interior of India, establishing the company as a major territorial power.

Before the 1740s the company had managed, generally, to stay out of war, deflecting the backwash of occasional local Indian strife from behind its crumbling but just adequate fortifications. Early in the seventeenth century it had had to force its way past feeble Portuguese opposition and win respect from the Mughal authorities to allow it to trade in India. Thereafter, the European merchants had agreed tacitly or formally to stay neutral when their principals were at war in Europe. But in 1746 the British government, with the agreement of the company, extended its developing global struggle with France to an attack on French trade in the Indian Ocean. This provoked the French to brush aside local Indian protests and launch a successful land attack on Madras in the Carnatic in south-east India.

1 Richard Wellesley Papers, British Library (hereafter BL), Add. MS 12567, fos. 47–54.
The Anglo-French conflict did not end with peace in Europe in 1748. Having discovered that the more advanced European military techniques and their more stable political organization gave their small forces a significant advantage over much larger Indian (‘country’) armies in battle, the French continued the struggle with the British indirectly by sponsoring a local Indian prince for the governorship of the Carnatic. The company responded by backing his rival; the conflict continued throughout the 1750s, merging with a renewed direct Anglo-French confrontation after the outbreak of the Seven Years War in 1756. The company, with substantial help from royal naval and military forces, finally bested the French by taking Pondicherry, their headquarters, 80 miles down the coast in 1761. The company and its ally, the nawab Muhammad Ali Khan, were now the uncertain masters of the Carnatic. Although the French were to prove a spent force politically in India after 1761, the British continued to regard them as a threat. And they now faced formidable challenges from Indian powers along the long western frontier of the Carnatic, particularly from Haider Ali of Mysore, with whom they were to fight two wars (1767–9 and 1780–3).

Meanwhile, in Bengal (the richest province in India) in 1756, the company, through the hubris of its local officials at Calcutta, had provoked an attack from Siraj-ud-dowla, the young, unstable nawab, which landed them in the ‘Black Hole’. Clive famously rescued the situation at Plassey the following year. Using the French threat as a possibly genuine excuse, he exploited the passing British naval and military superiority to begin the process (virtually complete by 1772) of extending the company’s control over Bengal and Bihar and its influence, through further campaigns, over Oudh and up the Ganges valley towards Delhi. Within a few years the Bombay Council, without orders from the directors in London (who hopelessly tried to keep the eyes of their excited servants in India focused on promoting the company’s trade), probably jealous of the power and riches which had fallen into the laps of their colleagues at Calcutta and Madras, also made a bid to become an Indian power. They unsuccessfully launched an attack on the Maratha Federation, which dominated western and central India, and had to be rescued from disaster by Warren Hastings at Calcutta.

However inadvertently the company had got itself into this situation, and there was certainly much aggressive political opportunism by its local servants in the East, Clive’s argument in 1765 that there was no going back to being inoffensive merchants on the periphery of India was reluctantly accepted by the directors. In consequence, they had to authorize the creation of three permanent presidency armies, funded largely from acquired Indian land revenues, to pacify the country and

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to defend their new and extensive frontiers with other Indian powers. Their inability to entice sufficient numbers of Europeans to fill the ranks of their vastly expanded military establishments forced the company to seek recruits from the large local military labour market then existing in India. This had the added attraction of offering cheaper and acclimatized men. However, it also confronted the British with two questions: would the Indians serve, and could they serve? How committed would the sepoys be to their white infidel employers, and how effective would they be as soldiers fighting in the European manner?

Even with their much greater numbers, the company could not field forces equivalent in size to those mustered by Indian powers; a not untypical example was the army of 7000 which the Madras Council sent out in 1767 to face the 30 000 raised by Haidar Ali of Mysore. So, if the British were to prevail in war, and they usually did in open battle though not always in campaigns as a whole, their armies had to be qualitatively better than those of their opponents. And as the Indians in the company’s armies outnumbered the Europeans by a factor of 10:1 or more, the sepoys had to be brought up to a much more effective fighting pitch than Indians fighting in ‘country’ armies. Seemingly they were; the Bengal commander-in-chief claimed in 1767 that some of his sepoys battalions ‘would astonish the King of Prussia’. There nonetheless remained considerable scepticism elsewhere – at first, amongst British officers, apparently borne out by early experience – whether the sepoys could ever be raised to a standard where they would be interchangeable with Europeans in battle. It was invariably maintained that they had to be inspired by European units in the van in an attack.

Explanations for the sometimes alleged lack of pugnacity of sepoys varied. One contemporary British authority, reaching for a cultural explanation, declared Indians to be ‘very timorous and pusillanimous
and ill-calculated for war’. Clive, while tacitly agreeing in general, objected to the notion held elsewhere that Indians were less aggressive than Europeans because the warmer climate had an enervating effect on them, suggesting instead that they had been ‘broken by absolute and tyrannical Governments’. Clive’s superior officer in the early days, Major Stringer Lawrence, sometimes celebrated as the ‘father’ of the British Indian army, also favoured an institutional explanation. He dismissed the idea that Indians suffered from ‘a dastardly disposition and an invincible timidity’, preferring to blame Indian military traditions which neglected infantry (on which Europeans in the eighteenth century increasingly relied in battle) in favour of cavalry, and did not appreciate the value of more regular discipline. It did occur to some British officers that paying sepoys only the ‘market rate’ in India, half that of the Europeans, and treating them as second-class soldiers was bound to sap their enthusiasm. This was dismissed by the civilians, who were under constant pressure from London to keep military costs down.

Gradually a consensus emerged amongst the British, following Lawrence’s lead, that it was possible to raise the fighting efficiency of the sepoys significantly, while paying them less than the Europeans. However, it came to be understood that it was not enough to give them standard western weapons and drill and to push them into more regular formations and uncomfortable European-style uniforms. The sepoys would also have to be imbued with a much tighter culture of discipline backed by a precise military code of law and practice. But in order to achieve this they would nonetheless have to be treated more gently than was customary with the brutalized Europeans who ended up in the company’s service, with due respect for their religious beliefs. The secret, it was eventually concluded, was to encourage in

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the sepoys’ minds a strong identity and pride in their units and loyalty to their British officers.\textsuperscript{15}

As the sepoys undoubtedly did get better, so the British began to worry about their continuing political reliability. A Bengal officer wrote of the British position in the later 1760s that it is ‘by no means on so stable a footing as is generally believed . . . [and] depends solely on the attachment of the Black troops, . . . [who] though at present blind to their own interest and power will not always continue so’.\textsuperscript{14} Clive, retired in Britain, wrote in 1769: ‘It is the prevailing opinion here that we shall in the end teach the natives to beat us, and that extirpation must be the consequence’; he discounted such fears, since he believed the company offered the best terms to soldiers in India and that this would always keep them loyal.\textsuperscript{15} However, nervousness on this score did not die away, even though, before the Vellore mutiny of 1806, occasional mutinous unrest and desertion in sepoys’ ranks invariably centred on pay and conditions or oppressive individual European officers, rather than on politics.\textsuperscript{16} In 1778, the Bengal Council advised its subordinates at Madras to keep their European troops near the capital: ‘It is on the European forces that the present existence of their power and the future safety and duration of their settlements essentially depend . . .’\textsuperscript{17} This was despite the fact that there were many different nationalities in the Europeans’ ranks,\textsuperscript{18} even ex-French prisoners of war. The latter were not in fact trusted, the Madras Council recording in 1761 that ‘the number of French in our service is more than we could wish, but which we must submit to from necessity’.\textsuperscript{19} And, in general, it is questionable whether even Britons saw the company’s service as equally deserving their loyalty as the king’s armed forces; certainly, the company’s officers were ambivalent on this score, concerned whether their service was as ‘honourable’ as that of the royal

\textsuperscript{13} Malcolm, \textit{Political History}, pp. 223, 226–7, 237.

\textsuperscript{14} Col. Sir John Gummie to J. Mackenzie, 24 Feb. 1768, Nat. Lib. of Scotland, MS 1256, fos. 139–40.

\textsuperscript{15} Clive, ‘Miscellaneous Papers’, p. 7; Clive to Select Committee of the Court of Directors, 28 Aug. 1767, Nat. Lib. of Wales, Clive MS 59, pp. 1–14; Mad. Sec. Cons., 21 July 1766, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 56, p. 491, agreed: ‘We have no reason hitherto to doubt of the fidelity of our Sepoys, in General they are well attached to Our Service and to the Party that Pays them’.


\textsuperscript{17} Calcutta to Madras, 26 Jan. 1778, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 86, pp. 207–9.

\textsuperscript{18} For example, in 1757 the commander of the Trichinopoly garrison recruited 14 Dutch, Germans and Italians he found locally, but refused many French: BL (OIOC), Range C, vol. 51, p. 508.

officers. In different ways, then, the whole of the company’s army, not only its sepoy corps, might be seen as a mercenary force, and the intermittent presence in India (permanently from the 1780s) of elements of the British army and navy not only provided a vital military supplement to the company’s forces but also bolstered the company’s moral and political authority amongst its own constituents. It nonetheless seemed to have been generally assumed that a shared culture and religious background, and the consciousness that they were collectively embedded in an alien society in which they would never become integrated and which would never accept them as natural rulers, would keep most of the Europeans regardless of nationality and motivation loyal to the company which provided a material and psychological life-line to home, 10 000 miles away.

By the same token, the company men, at first little understanding either Indian culture and languages despite having been in India 150 years, or, perhaps more excusably, failing to grasp the nature of the massive and complex mercenary military labour market which existed throughout the subcontinent, assumed their sepoys would always retain a residual preference for people of their own kind which could be awoken in certain circumstances. Rarely, at first, did they appreciate that the Hindus, who constituted most of the Indians who fought for them, differed from the Europeans in having a primary attachment to a non-belligerent religion, family and local chief, which was stronger than any identity they might have with a more remote prince or ‘nation’. Clive believed he did understand and wrote in later years that ‘constant revolution in India has eroded loyalty to the dynasties. Our lenient treatment of the natives and military success has bound them to us more closely than the princes [ever] managed.’ So, higher loyalties, especially if the men had warrior traditions and espoused the profession of arms, as the best mercenaries should, did not seem normally to conflict with fighting for the British.

The dilemma, then, which many of the company’s men believed they faced if they were to become significant power-brokers in India with minimal numbers of European soldiers, was whether and how the considerable numbers of Indians in their armies could be brought to emulate the more effective European levels of discipline and styles of fight-


ing and thus give them an edge against larger ‘country’ armies in war, but then for them not to turn on their ambitious British paymasters in peace. Implicitly, making the sepoys better disciplined also made them a more potent threat should they revolt. The problem was succinctly put in an exchange within a parliamentary committee of enquiry into the company in 1772. Colonel Hector Munro, victor of the hard won battle of Buxar in 1764, in which the Bengal sepoys had figured prominently, when asked whether it was not dangerous to train sepoys to equal Europeans, replied: ‘Possibly, but more dangerous not to do it’. By the end of the eighteenth century the company believed it had solved the problem by putting the sepoys under British officers, but the way this was done was to be one of the spurs for the great mutiny 50 years later. It must be stressed that what follows is based mainly on British sources and so gives a largely British perspective; but it was this which determined the way the sepoys were recruited, trained and used in the early British Indian army and which it is the purpose of this article to explore.

II

The Europeans from the first Portuguese settlements in India, early in the sixteenth century, employed locally raised soldiers of all races and faiths to supplement the troops they brought with them. Their active role was largely limited to protecting their employers’ warehouses and convoys up-country against thieves and bandits. They were also intended to give the European merchants some consequence with the local authorities, though when the English in particular wanted to coerce their Indian hosts into granting them enhanced commercial privileges or greater autonomy within their small coastal trading bases, they used their armed merchantmen rather than soldiers, blockading the Indian ports, interdicting trade and pilgrims going to Mecca.

Promoting commerce remained the company’s overwhelming concern until after 1750. It even used its soldiers to model its goods; on one occasion (1664), for example, the directors sent out special light muskets for their Indian troops hoping that a general market would develop for them in India, and eight years later they ordered that their European soldiers should be given uniforms, partly in the hope that Indian princes might be encouraged to emulate them and thus

increase sales of broadcloth.\textsuperscript{27} Since the English in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries did not need large numbers of costly, well-trained European or Indian troops, they showed little discrimination when they recruited local men. They tended at first to go for those of mixed European (usually Portuguese) and Indian blood (known as ‘topasses’ or ‘mustees’), who were usually Christian, because they were often to be found in or near the presidency towns and displayed superficial elements of western culture. This made it easier to integrate them with Europeans in the early quasi-military units.\textsuperscript{28} The topasses were not highly regarded as soldiers; Robert Orme, British India’s first historian, who saw service with Clive, said of them in the 1750s that they were superior in courage to the lower castes of Hindus but greatly inferior to the higher castes as well as to the Moors (Muslims).\textsuperscript{29}

Unconverted Indians were also employed as soldiers (called ‘peons’ by the British) separately from the European units, sometimes contracted to the company by their leader (jemadar) as a mercenary band, sometimes joining as individuals; all were dressed in Indian garb and usually equipped with their own weapons – swords and matchlocks, which they used in their traditional ways. The peons were intended mainly to police the ‘black towns’ (the Indian settlements which grew up around the European commercial bases) and to act as general watchmen and messengers.\textsuperscript{30} The company showed variable concern over quality in recruiting pure-bred Indians in the early days.\textsuperscript{31} In 1684 the Madras Council halved their peons to 100, remarking that should they need to increase their numbers again ‘we think it better to entertain the washermen and beaters in that Service, having no other employment for them at present’.\textsuperscript{32} But occasional attempts were made to be more selective; at Bombay, where non-European levies usually consisted of a mixture of Arabs, Negroes and Armenians, the council in 1653 established two companies of Rajputs (who were from a north Indian military class), each of 100 men with their own officers and arms, and the directors ordered that the Council should henceforth only recruit men of the same ‘caste’.\textsuperscript{33} But generally, before the 1750s, the company made no sustained attempt to create a regular structured force of Indian troops carefully selected and trained to ensure military effectiveness in the field; Bombay in 1707 disbanded four companies.

\textsuperscript{27} Directors to Madras, 21 Dec. 1664, in Love, 
\textsuperscript{28} \textit{Op. cit.}, ii, p. 196.
\textsuperscript{33} Rivett-Carnac, \textit{Armies}, pp. 77, 84.
of Indian troops for neglect of duty (they also happened to be several years in arrears).  

The early mixed company forces were derisory in military terms. They were given no tactical field training, and the civilian governors did not even have general court martial powers to discipline them properly. Such forces, both European and Indian, would have been incapable of regular field operations in the European manner, but this was precisely what was to be required of them when, after the end of the war of the Austrian succession in 1748, the company took on its French rivals and their Indian allies in the Carnatic.

Major Stringer Lawrence, arriving fresh out of Britain in 1748 as a half-pay royal officer to command the Madras forces, grossly disparaged the Indians he found in the company’s service: ‘such dastardly dogs that there is no prevailing on them to go near or even in sight of any enemy’. But a few years later, after they had been introduced to greater regularity and European drill, he grudgingly allowed that the sepoys ‘make no contemptible figure in the field’. When the company men eventually, in the 1750s, came to take the recruitment of pure-bred young Indians to their military service more seriously, they seemed vague about what they wanted, because they had previously used local agents (jemadars) or condottieri to secure men. At first they relied on their own Indian sepoy officers (offering them an increase in rank) to raise units amongst local people; later, as British officers were appointed to the sepoy units, they took over recruitment and established centres, such as at Buxar on the Bihar/Oudh border in the north, where aspirant recruits could present themselves. Other times they toured villages with an interpreter and doctor, as in Britain, seeking likely young men, discovering, no doubt, that unlike in most of Britain the profession of arms, or at least their ownership and use, on a part-time or itinerant basis was widespread throughout India (all local chiefs retaining armed bands) and that they were in a buyer’s market.

The British were aware that some Indians (e.g. Rajputs and Pathans from the north-west) were regarded in India as natural soldiers, and tended to favour them when they offered themselves; they also talked about the higher castes and taller, paler-skinned men from the north as generally being more desirable, and this was to become the domi-

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36 Maj. Lawrence to Directors, 24 Apr. 1748, BL (OIOC), G/18, vol. 10, p. 64.
37 Cambridge, Account, p. ix.
38 W.J. Wilson, A History of the Madras Army (5 vols, Madras, 1882) i, p. 8; Orme, History i, p. 49.
nant dogma in the next century. Initially, however, the presidencies were more open-minded. Even in Bengal, early on already known for its high-caste preferences, the commander-in-chief in 1772 claimed:

We find that men of all casts trained with the same attention and discipline became equally good and that the greatest geniuses and most successful heroes of this Empire in their political affairs have had their origins from Syses [grooms], Chobdaars [court attendants] and Camel Drivers.

And there were also officers who believed that kowtowing to the religious mores of high-caste Hindus actually damaged discipline and military effectiveness. But Warren Hastings, the first governor-general of British India, in the 1770s favoured reinforcing the caste system as a means of preventing the growth of a more ‘national’ identity to oppose the British, and encouraged making the Bengal army a high-caste preserve to give them a stake in supporting British rule, much as Frederick the Great had done for the Junkers in the Prussian army and the Bourbons for the aristocracy in the French army.

Inasmuch as the company was successful in recruiting tall, well-built Indians, it served to highlight their physical difference from the European troops who often, as debauched outcasts of European society, looked very poor specimens alongside typical sepoys. The Calcutta council informed its colleagues at Madras in 1765 that their European troops were so broken down that ‘all our success has been chiefly owing to the bravery and goodness of our Sepoys led on by English officers’. The Madras army often had to settle for shorter, darker men who predominated in the south, but stoutly maintained that they were more resilient, devoted to the company’s service and less finicky

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42 ‘The Bengal Sepoys have many religious prejudices which are hurtful to discipline: for instance their frequent ablutions and custom of stripping off their clothes and accoutrements before meals’. ‘Account of the State of the Carnatic in 1782’ by a royal military officer serving in India, BL (OIOC), Home Misc., vol. 84, pp. 945–6.
43 Alavi, Sepoys, pp. 39, 44–5.
44 Clive, ‘Miscellaneous Papers’, p. 20. The despairing Calcutta Council wrote to their commander-in-chief in 1768, ‘at present our European Regiment compared to a Battalion of Sepoys appear like a Regiment of Dwarfs’: Calcutta Sec. Cons., 17 Nov. 1768, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 8, p. 738; and a royal officer commanding the expedition to take Manilla in 1762 writing to the secretary at war said of the company’s European contingent: ‘Such Banditti were never Assembled since the Time of Spartacus’: PRO, WO 1/319, fos. 353–9.
45 Calcutta to Madras, 7 Sept. 1765, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 6, p. 571. A Bengal staff officer wrote two years later that the company’s military power in India was based on its (European-manned) artillery and its sepoys; the major use of the European infantry was to ‘watch’ the sepoys: Maj. F.T. Smith to H. Strachey, 28 Mar. 1767, BL (OIOC), Microfilm 485.
on religious grounds than their colleagues in Bengal.\(^{46}\) It has been suggested that one of the reasons the Mughal predecessors of the British failed to establish themselves as solidly in south India as in the north was that the Mughal army did not adapt to the different military cultures in the south and failed to integrate local men wholeheartedly into their ranks.\(^{47}\) Perhaps because the company’s army developed originally as three independent forces, at Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, it was more adaptable and successful in this. Pragmatically, in the early days, Madras valued any men who had already handled firearms, even if they were matchlocks, especially those who brought their own arms with them because at first London did not send out enough muskets to equip the rapidly expanding numbers.\(^{48}\)

Not surprisingly, the company’s officers often found the most promising recruits in war zones. All three presidencies soon concluded that the men who offered themselves near the presidency towns and whom they had traditionally recruited were usually poor material. The Madras council in 1754 said of local men that they were ‘not to be depended on, many of them having been menial servants who never bore arms in their life’,\(^ {49}\) a verdict borne out a dozen years later by an officer up-country who said of a draft from the presidency that they were ‘absolutely unfit to carry sticks far less firelocks’.\(^ {50}\) The Calcutta council initially had recruited near at hand in lower Bengal (often itinerant Rajputs, Rohillas or Jats), but soon discovered that their best men came from amongst peasant Brahmins in Oudh.\(^ {51}\) Their commander-in-chief later observed that ‘the natives of Bengal, . . . it is well known, make in all respects the worst soldiers in India, and as such are never to be depended on’.\(^ {52}\)

Bombay was always complaining about the quality of the men accessible to it in its more confined circumstances on the west coast,\(^ {53}\) but this was partly because the council would not at this time recruit amongst the nearby martial but politically dominant group, the Hindu Marathas, with whom relations were invariably poor, so not trusting

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\(^{46}\) Account of a royal officer at Madras in 1782, BL (OIOC), Home Misc., vol. 84, p. 952.

\(^{47}\) Gordon, Marathas, pp. 203–4; Alavi, Sepoys, pp. 6–7.


\(^{52}\) Gen. Stibbert to Calcutta, 10 Feb. 1779, BL (OIOC), Range 18, vol. 47, pp. 132–3.

their loyalty.\textsuperscript{54} The other presidencies were also careful about recruiting in Indian states or areas they believed were potential enemies.\textsuperscript{55} Clive remarked rather sinisterly on one occasion that since the Bengal army recruited within territories it dominated and most of its sepoys were married and had families ‘remaining behind them . . . we have a certain pledge and security for their attachment’.\textsuperscript{56} It eventually became customary for Bengal sepoys to introduce relatives and men from their own villages to the company’s service, which reinforced the growing tendency for the Bengal army to become high-caste. Towards the end of the century the Madras army also tried to reinforce family links with the army when battalions adopted the practice of putting up to 40 sons of old or dead sepoys on the books at subsistence pay until they were old enough to join the ranks.\textsuperscript{57}

Fewer Muslims than Hindus sought service with the company, partly because they excelled in cavalry which hardly figured in early company forces, and partly because they may have preferred to serve under Muslim rulers.\textsuperscript{58} This was not regretted by the Bengal Council, which wrote home in 1758: ‘The Moors are bound by no ties of gratitude, and everyday’s experience convinces us that Mussulmen will remain firm to their engagements no longer than they are actuated by the principles of fear’.\textsuperscript{59} The commander-in-chief of the Bengal army in 1764, General Carnac, saw them in a better light: ‘The Moguls who are the only good horsemen in the country can never be brought to submit to the ill-treatment they necessarily receive from Gentlemen wholly unacquainted with their language and custom . . .’\textsuperscript{60} Another Bengal officer believed Muslims to be preferable because they were less frugal than Hindus, not saving their pay, and so would be more tied to the service; he advised Warren Hastings, ‘we ought to cease to seek for tall smooth-faced Hindus, and . . . get shorter and rough-faced Mussulman soldiers’.\textsuperscript{61} Bombay recruited Muslims into its marine corps because Hindus were reluctant to go to sea.\textsuperscript{62} This reluctance had religious

\textsuperscript{54} In 1781 the Bombay army executed three Maratha sepoys who were trying to get other sepoys to desert during the war with the Maratha confederacy: Bombay to Directors, 11 Jan. 1781, BL (OIOC), E/4/468, p. 611.
\textsuperscript{56} Clive, ‘Miscellaneous Papers’, p. 21. In 1779 it was ordered that monthly returns should record the country, village, name, state, age and caste of each new recruit. Beng. Milit. Cons., 19 July 1779, BL (OIOC), Range 18, vol. 47, p. 172.
\textsuperscript{58} Quarterly Review (1818), pp. 413–14; Maj. Braithwaite at Tanjore to Gen. Munro, 11 Dec. 1781, BL (OIOC), Microfilm 605.
\textsuperscript{59} Calcutta to Directors, 31 Dec. 1758, BL (OIOC), E/4/24, para. 7.
\textsuperscript{60} Gen. Carnac to Calcutta, 10 June 1764, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 5, p. 280.
\textsuperscript{62} Bombay Public Cons., 31 Dec. 1776, BL (OIOC), Range 341, vol. 43, p. 1047. On one occasion, although special arrangements were made for various castes in a Madras battalion going by ship to Bombay, the whole battalion refused to go until after their Indian commandant (suspected of fomenting the mutiny) was blown away from a gun: Capt. Kelley to Gen. Joseph Smith, 16 Feb. 1775, BL (OIOC), Range
origins but there were probably rumours in the ranks that sepoys were badly treated on board ship.\textsuperscript{63} There were also desertions in the Madras army when units were ordered to another presidency either by sea or over land, because they were not allowed to take their families with them as was their custom when going into the field (in Bengal the families stayed at home).\textsuperscript{64}

Indians seemed to have had a number of motives for joining the company’s armies. The attraction of belonging to a generally successful and well-regulated service, or the record of specific generals, might have been a draw; Clive clearly had charismatic appeal in India, but lesser lights such as General Sir Eyre Coote (victor at Wandiwash 1760) and General Joseph Smith, commander of the Madras army in the 1760s, appear also to have attracted recruits.\textsuperscript{65} On the other hand, the tougher discipline in the company’s armies was believed to persuade some to go for the easier ways of the ‘country’ powers, and one officer urged the company to pay above the going rate to compensate them for this.\textsuperscript{66} There are strong indications, however, that the prime attraction of the company’s service was that it paid more regularly than the Indian princes; many of the men who came to the company’s colours were unemployed or in debt.\textsuperscript{67} The company also believed that its

\textsuperscript{63} Directors to Calcutta, 1768, cited in \textit{Fidelity}, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{64} A detachment of Bengal sepoys marching overland to Madras in 1782 lost 3000 deserters, leading the Bengal commander-in-chief to conclude, on facing further resistance, that ‘foreign’ expeditions would not be possible in future: Gen. Stibbert to Calcutta, 13 Apr. 1782, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 64, pp. 339–56. The commander of the detachment explained to Hastings that desertions were due to the harsh conditions of the march compared to the comforts of garrison life in Bengal: cheap rice, ‘mounting a guard once a week, where they are as much at their ease as in their tents, and to perform exercise every second or third day’: ‘Memoirs of Col. Pearse’, p. 80. Col. Forde at Masulipatam to Madras, 3 July 1759, BL (OIOC), Range D, vol. 41, p. 351. Madras sepoys were just as reluctant to serve away from the central Carnatic (the high price of rice was again an issue): Chief at Masulipatam to Madras, 25 Oct. 1752, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 48, p. 339; Maj. Campbell at Madurai to Madras, 14 Dec. 1764, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 51, p. 1052. In 1755 a detachment of Bombay sepoys at Madras were starving because they had asked for all their pay to go to their families at home; they were disbanded and disarmed, given a month’s subsistence and told to return overland to Bombay: Mad. Sec. Cons., 11 Feb. 1755, BL (OIOC), Range C, vol. 48.


\textsuperscript{67} Mad. Sec. Cons., 1 April 1766, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 57, p. 85; Mad. Sec. Cons., 24 June 1781, BL, Add. MS 22 415, pp. 9–13; Hastings’s evidence to the parliamentary committee enquiring into the East India Company, 31 May 1767, MS Eur. F128, Box 2.
introduction of an invalid corps and pensions (a novel feature in India) and giving veterans land were an encouragement.\(^{68}\)

There was a lot of debate amongst the British about whether or not the sepoy units should be of mixed castes and faiths. Those in favour believed individuals would be enthused to do better through the spirit of emulation; opponents feared religious clashes, or refusals by higher-caste rankers to obey the orders of lower-caste officers.\(^{69}\) There were also practical problems arising from mixed battalions; at Madras, the ranks were largely Tamil speakers and the officers Rajputs and Marathas, so ten interpreters had to be appointed, one to each company.\(^{70}\) Eventually, the council ordered each battalion to be of the same caste, probably meaning speaking the same language.\(^{71}\) Clive would have preferred a 50:50 Hindu/Muslim balance in his new Bengal battalions in the early 1760s, not only to promote a competitive spirit amongst them but also to make mutiny less likely; however, the dominance of Hindus amongst the recruits made this impossible.\(^{72}\)

The three presidency armies differed considerably in their caste make-up at this time. Bengal’s Hindu soldiers were said to be generally high-caste – Brahmins, Rajputs, Rohillas, and some Pathans and Jats.\(^{73}\) Richard Wellesley, the Governor-General of British India at the turn of the century, preferred the high-caste Bengal sepoys because Indian civilians looked up to them, and Madras used Brahmin spies for a similar reason.\(^{74}\) Maybe it was not just their caste and size but also their supposed natural military disposition that made the British admire the recruits they got from northern India. In 1780 a Bombay officer wrote of the Bengal detachment serving there:

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\ldots \text{the Bengal Sepoys are Really a fine set of fellows, not a Man of them but would make a Grenadier in one of our Battns, but they are not equal to our’s in Discipline or Dress. These Cast of men are far superior to our’s; and I Really believe they in General possess}\]

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\(^{69}\) Col. W. Fullarton, Report of the Southern Campaign against Tipu Sultan, BL (OIOC), Home Misc., vol. 84, p. 387; Dow, Hindostan iii, p. 2; Clive, ‘Miscellaneous Papers, p. 8; Quarterly Review, p. 397; Mad. Sec. Cons., 7 May 1770, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 67, pp. 111–12.


\(^{72}\) Clive to Directors, 28 Aug. 1767, Nat. Lib. of Wales, Clive MS 59, pp. 1–14. The Parliamentary Committee of Secrecy inquiring into the East India Company wrote in 1773: ‘If it were only on the principle of “divide et impera”, the Moormen and the Gentooos should be separated into distinct companies’: quoted in Menezes, Fidelity, p. 38 n. 27.

\(^{73}\) Barat, Bengal Infantry, p. 4.

more of the true spirit of a soldier than our’s, tho’ they are not so meek and passive in their Disposition as ours.\textsuperscript{75}

A royal officer serving at Madras at about the same time wrote of a Bengal sepoy detachment, ‘[they] have a sense of military honour, are soldiers by birth, and are of a most athletic form’.\textsuperscript{76} But what he went on to say reflected a recurrent conflict in British minds, evident in the remarks of the Bombay officer above, over whether what was wanted were docile men responsive to discipline or ‘natural’ soldiers who might be more dangerous, for he said of the Madras sepoys:

Their religion does not interfere with any part of Discipline. They are hardy little men, and undergo severe duty with cheerfulness. Their courage is more an effect of discipline, and of confidence in their European officers, than the fire of innate prowess.\textsuperscript{77}

The Madras army was more mixed than that in Bengal. Orme recalled that in the 1759 campaign only 80 from a 600-strong sepoy battalion could be used to attack a hilltop temple because only they were sufficiently high-caste to enter it.\textsuperscript{78} However, other Madras battalions refused to go to sea (an indication of higher caste) and were broken for it.\textsuperscript{79} At the end of the century, the commander-in-chief of the Madras army said that, although Madras soldiers ‘are much inferior to northern recruits in caste, size and appearance, they are nonetheless hardy and thrifty, [and] are found to stand the pressure of military hardships with much fortitude’.\textsuperscript{80}

The Bombay army was content, at least in the eighteenth century, to have become a melting-pot claiming to have dissolved religious antagonism within its ranks, so that a Brahmin from Bengal who had insisted on his caste prerogatives there was said to have accepted the egalitarian mixing of the Bombay army when he joined it, while sepoys of all castes readily performed the menial task of digging trenches in an emergency and rarely raised objections about going to sea.\textsuperscript{81} Bombay did, however, get rid of its Arabs and ‘some Mercenaries who wouldn’t depart from their form of discipline’, and in 1760 also disbanded a company of Pathans because ‘we had great reason to apprehend, from [their] general treacherous Behaviour . . . as well as from

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{75} D. Mackay to Gen. J. Stuart, 6 Sept. 1780, Nat. Lib. of Scotland, MS 8326, pp. 69–71.
\textsuperscript{76} ‘Account of the State of the Carnatic in 1782’, p. 952.
\textsuperscript{77} \textit{Op. cit.}
\textsuperscript{78} Orme, \textit{History} ii, p. 502. In 1777 Hindus could not take part in a punitive expedition Hastings sent against upper Burma because of the number of pagodas and priests there: Calc. Sec. Cons., 12 June 1777, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 41, p. 72.
\end{footnotesize}
their chiefly using only Bows and Arrows, that they would not prove serviceable’.82

III

The most effective way of training and organizing Indian manpower to fight in the European manner was not discovered overnight; it evolved with experience. This was partly due to continuing low expectations of what Indians were capable of and partly because the company for much of the 1750s was not envisaging acquiring substantial permanent territorial power and therefore not thinking of creating a large standing army with a well-trained sepoy corps at its heart.

After the fall of Madras to the French in 1746, the council of Fort St David, the remaining British settlement on the Coromandel coast defended by 600 European and 3000 Indian troops, wrote home:

without [the European troops] we think the Country people would give way, as not being used to stand against the fire of regular Troops, but care has not been wanting to put their Chiefs in mind to exercise them often and make them fit for service in our way of engaging, and the manner shown them how to behave in Time of Action.83

Two years later, at the British siege of Pondicherry by royal and company troops, Orme later recalled that the sepoys were ‘as yet . . . scarcely better disciplined than common Peons’, and that their casualties were low because they were only employed on the outskirts and ‘had always run away on the approach of danger’.84

In the years following, when the Madras army began to campaign in the interior of the Carnatic against the French and their princely ally, Chanda Sahib, the sepoys were clearly seen at first as having an auxiliary role. They garrisoned inland ‘country’ forts, guarded camps and lines of communication and engaged in pacification and counter-insurgency operations against the restless Indian population and minor chiefs.85 But they also bulked out the company’s field forces and took part in the infrequent relatively small-scale battles which punctuated the more normal skirmish, siege and ‘stand-off’ character (because of mutual lack of resources) of the prolonged wars the Euro-

82 Bombay to Directors, 20 Nov. 1760, BL (OIOC), E/4/462, p. 295.
83 Fort St. David Cons., 27 Feb. 1747, BL (OIOC), G/18/6, p. 31.
84 Orme, History i, p. 104.

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peans inflicted on the Indians between 1746 and 1761. In 1752–3 Lawrence fought two actions with battle formations which partially integrated sepoys with European troops. In the first (26 August 1752), he advanced against the French outside Pondicherry with two lines; his 1700 sepoys in the first line attacked the covering screen of French sepoys to disperse them, before his 400 European troops in the second line, firing volleys as they advanced, marched through to engage the French troops at bayonet point and defeated them; the 4000 allied irregular Indian cavalry on the left were ordered to complete the rout but preferred to plunder the enemy camp. In another encounter ten months later (7 July 1753), outside the key inland fortress town of Trichinopoly in the south, Lawrence attacked the French line with his European artillery and infantry as a spearhead, with the sepoy companies (described by Fortescue as ‘making wild music on their native instruments’ in the rear) echeloned back on his flanks. The sepoys had been ordered to give covering support, but in the event played a full part in the ensuing battle. The contemporary Indian writer of the Seir Mutaquerin describes the British as fighting apart from their Indian auxiliaries in order to keep their own battle order intact.

Concern amongst the British during the next few years over reports of sepoy indiscipline in several smaller actions and the company’s growing reliance on them led the Madras authorities to introduce European sergeant instructors into their companies (the biggest sepoy unit at the time numbering 80–100 men) to drill them in the western manner. At about the same time the sepoys were put into European-style uniforms and gradually given standard-issue muskets to replace their own indifferent weapons which they privately owned or hired off their subadars (Indian commanders). The sergeants on occasion commanded them on campaign but with mixed fortunes in combat. In other respects also the experiment was not a success; the ambiguity of the relationship between the European NCOs and the Indian officers caused friction (on two occasions substantial detachments of sepoys were placed under Indian commandants and the European NCOs were made subordinate to them) and the sergeants were discovered cheating the sepoys of their pay.

86 'if the English and French were drawn off from the Country Government they would soon end their Disputes, but while we interfere . . . the troubles may not subside many years': Gov. Saunders to Lawrence, 23 July 1753, BL (OIOC), Range 240, vol. 9, p. 145.
90 Dodwell, Sepoy Recruitment, pp. 7–8; Mad. Sec. Cons., 9 Feb., 7 and 30 Nov. 1758, BL (OIOC), Range C, vol. 52, pp. 70, 461, 483; Mad. Sec. Cons., 28 May 1766, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 55, p. 311.
Throughout the 1750s the sepoys, as part of the field army or on bigger detachments, acted under the general supervision of European commissioned officers, culminating at the end of the decade at Madras and Calcutta in the creation of battalions of 800–900 men, each under a single European officer. An Indian commandant was appointed to assist the European CO (usually a captain), almost as a co-commander standing side by side on the parade ground. In practice, the role of the European officers, who usually could not speak any Indian languages, was supervisory. The reform, consolidating the companies into battalions, was at this stage intended to get greater administrative regularity in the sepoys rather than to change its tactical and strategic role. The sepoys continued to see most of their service on detachment in companies (commanded by Indian subadars) or groups of companies joined to European units in forces under general European command, rather than as battalions. The Madras army command ordered the sepoys to be given ‘A form of exercise the most simple and easy, as likewise evolutions such as will be best adapted to the nature of these troops, and the intended use of them’. A Madras major who had seen a lot of service with sepoys said of them at this time:

The best I have ever seen them do is to maintain a post under cover or attack in their straggling manner against [other] sepoys or when supported by Europeans...That they can succeed against a regular force well posted, is not to be expected. The least check or stop puts them to disorder.

At the second siege of Fort St George in 1758, the failure of a major sally against the French besiegers by 1000 sepoys under an Indian officer, which broke up in panic when fired on, led the badly rattled

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93 The Madras Council commented, ‘the Sepoy Officers are very remiss naturally’, and ordered the British officers appointed to the sepoys ‘to infuse ... the Spirit of Command amongst them’: Mad. Sec. Cons., 19 Sept. 1759, BL (OIOC), Range D, vol. 42, pp. 519–20; Gen. Carnac to Calcutta, 10 June 1764, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 5, p. 280.


95 Mad. Sec. Cons., 19 Sept. 1759, BL (OIOC), Range D, vol. 42, p. 519; Lt-Col. Carnac in Bengal to Col. Fletcher, 6 Nov. 1765, BL (OIOC), MS Eur. 128/4: ‘I would recommend the shortest and most simple method of exercise, especially for the Sepoys; it is needless to teach the latter the forming of the Square, or any of those Manoeuvres to which recourse is had when ... being obliged to retreat, as they can never be taught sufficient firmness under such an emergency to reduce their lessons to practise’.

Madras Council to declare that ‘no dependence can be placed on the sepoys’.97

It was not the courage of the sepoys which was in question, but their discipline and unit cohesion under fire, and this was to remain a problem for another 20 years. One of their British champions, General Sir Eyre Coote (as he was to become), wrote in 1759 of a skirmish, where he had been commanding, that it would have been ‘a noble affair had the sepoys acted according to orders’. However, he later reported of an attack on a fort: ‘The good behaviour of the sepoys was more remarkable than anything I could conceive’.98 Nonetheless, a year later (1760), at the last big set-piece battle against the French outside the fort of Wandiwash, Coote only used the sepoys alongside some European artillery and cavalry in an opening skirmish manoeuvre; the main battle was fought entirely between the British and French infantry and artillery in accordance with standard European tactical doctrine.99

The victory at Wandiwash and ensuing fall of Pondicherry marked for the British the final eradication of French political and military power in India. At the same time, after a decade of dithering during which it had been generally assumed the company would scale down its military forces, especially the sepoys elements, once the French menace had been dealt with, the reluctant directors in London were persuaded by Clive and others to assume a permanent dominating political position in Bengal and the Carnatic.100 Although still partially hiding behind Indian puppet rulers and using an inherited Mughal administrative system, this decision committed the company’s military to the defence of frontiers thousands of miles long against antagonistic Indian powers, and to imposing acceptance of the new situation on millions of Indian people and their restless local chiefs.101 This inevitably entailed a considerable and permanent expansion of the company’s armies during the 1760s; and in view of the continuing difficulty and expense of recruiting sufficient numbers of Europeans and the lesser likelihood of persuading the British government to send royal forces to India, the company had to rely even more heavily on the sepoys in the future and to continue trying to raise their fighting capability. In one respect the problem was less formidable, since their likely adversaries would in future be entirely Indian with their more primitive

100 Calcutta to Directors, 29 Dec. 1759, BL (OIOC), E/4/24, p. 401; Madras to Col. Coote, 12 Jan. 1760, BL (OIOC), Range D, vol. 43, p. 56; Bryant, ‘The Military Imperative’.
military systems, though the company’s forces would still have to have a significant qualitative edge if they were to succeed against the much larger ‘country’ armies.\(^{102}\)

The aim became to make it possible for sepoy and European units to be interchangeable; in 1764 two royal officers commanding a royal/company army in Bengal against Oudh and the emperor’s son had sufficient confidence in the sepoys to alternate their battalions with the Europeans in both lines and to teach the whole army the same tactical manoeuvres.\(^{103}\) A year later, Clive in his second Bengal administration invested even more heavily in the sepoys when he formed them into three permanent brigades, each of seven battalions (six sepoy and only one European) and a corps of artillery, and placed them under British field officers.\(^{104}\) This innovation seems to have been primarily designed to foster a spirit of pride, emulation and commitment among the sepoys following a spell of serious mutinous unrest amongst both the Europeans and the sepoys over the share-out of the nawab’s donation to the army (the sepoys had been grossly discriminated against in this).\(^{105}\) The integration of Indians and Europeans in the brigades was also intended to inhibit a rebellion in one part of the sepoys corps from spreading throughout the army. In the event, the new structure, which in effect created three small self-contained field armies, also proved of great strategic value over the next 20 years, since outside threats to Bengal materialized hundreds of miles apart.\(^{106}\) Regular sepoys were also taken off revenue collection, which was said to be destructive of their discipline.\(^{107}\)

Efforts were further made to upgrade the armament of the sepoys: London was told that sepoy muskets should be of equal quality to those of Europeans and in 1778 it was proposed that rifle platoons should be introduced into both the European and sepoy battalions.\(^{108}\) All sepoys were now given bayonets, which one officer said would be a significant improvement, since his men without them had a tendency when they ran out of ammunition (the sepoys were notoriously spendthrift with ammunition) to fling down their muskets and resort to their


\(^{103}\) ‘General Orders to be observed by his Majesty’s and the Honourable Company’s Forces in the Provinces of Bengal, Bahar and Orissa Under the Command of Major Adams’, 1763, BL, Add. MS 6049, pp. 1–220.

\(^{104}\) Clive to Directors, 28 Aug. 1767, Nat. Lib. of Wales, Clive MS 59, p. 5.


\(^{107}\) In 1761 the Madras sepoys were given tents so that they could keep their muskets dry; Mad. Sec. Cons., 14 Sept. 1761, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 47, pp. 645–6; Mad. Sec. Cons., 28 July 1766, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 56, p. 501; Mad. Sec. Milit., 29 Apr. 1778, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 87, pp. 777–80.

own swords. In 1767 the Madras army phased out the traditional Indian ‘tom-toms’ in the sepoy battalions in favour of European drums which aided cadenced step and tactical manoeuvres on the battlefield. Finally, each sepoy battalion was given two brass three-pounder guns, manned by the sepoys themselves, to increase their fire-power and confidence. This innovation occasioned considerable unease in some quarters, since the mastery of field artillery was seen as a key ingredient of European military superiority in India. The directors ordered the sepoys’ guns to be manned by Europeans so that the Indians would not acquire artillery skills and be able to transfer them to ‘country’ armies. An anxious Bengal staff officer wrote to the governor that the sepoys ‘esteem their guns almost as Deities; they are already now on an equality with us in the use of small arms and in a short time will be on a footing with respect to artillery if there is not some care taken to hinder them’. Nonetheless, the practice continued, and in 1778 the Hastings council at Calcutta went further when it created a brigade of artillery consisting of a regiment of Europeans and three regiments of Indians, an innovation soon squashed by the alarmed directors.

Ensuring effective fire control remained a problem in handling the sepoys in combat. In 1764 the commander-in-chief of the Bengal army reported of the sepoys:

... there is no possibility of preventing them from pressing on and breaking ...; [I and others have not been] able to stop them from advancing irregularly, and firing, tho’ they [the European officers] threw themselves to the front ...

Another desperate sepoy officer threatened to shoot any soldier who took his musket off his shoulder before being ordered to when march-

109 Mad. Sec. Cons., 25 July 1766, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 57, p. 210; Lt. E. Moor, A Narrative of the operations of Capt. Little’s Detachment ... Against the Nawab Tipu Sultan (London, 1794), pp. 386–7. Bayonets also gave an advantage to sepoys against some ‘country’ troops who were not accustomed to using them: ‘A Sketch of a Plan for the Attack of a Mountainous Country in India’ (n.d. but c.1784), BL, Add. MS 39892, fo. 22.


ing into action; similar problems were encountered with poorly drilled troops in Europe.\textsuperscript{117}

The introduction during the 1760s of formal martial law into the sepoy corps was seen as another way of tackling the discipline problem, replacing the rule-of-thumb regulation by Indian officers based on Hindu codes, in order to bring greater uniformity to the army and to impress on the sepoys that they were now under stricter and more consistent discipline than was assumed to be characteristic of ‘country’ armies.\textsuperscript{118} But it was to be a discipline fairly administered; the Madras Council in 1770, in censuring the army’s bad treatment of its Indian troops, wrote: ‘It being necessary to impress on the sepoys a confidence in the equal justice and regularity of our government’.\textsuperscript{119} Civilian colleagues at Calcutta were similarly disturbed in 1768 when they learned that the commander-in-chief, General Richard Smith, had applied British martial law to the sepoys without regard for their customs or religion and without choice: ‘A right every human being may demand who is not bound in servitude by absolute tyranny’.\textsuperscript{120} Smith hotly rejected the suggestion of ‘tyranny’, claiming that, ‘the lenity and indulgence with which we treat the native troops is conspicuous’.\textsuperscript{121} He had earlier informed the council that the sepoy courts martial were conducted entirely by Indian officers superintended by a British subaltern, and that this was ‘the established mode of trial [which] has been happily introduced amongst our native troops, than which nothing could have so effectually contributed to promote that good order, discipline and subordination which has prevailed amongst [them]’. Smith added that he had recently revoked a sentence of death on two sepoys for killing a wife and her sister on account of the former’s infidelity, because of the difference in customs, (though on another occasion a sepoy was executed for sodomy).\textsuperscript{122} He concluded that he knew of no ‘circumstances of more dangerous tendency than to suggest to our native troops, that even the shadow of doubt is entertained concerning the legality of their punishments’.\textsuperscript{123}

Cumulatively, all these measures did seem to be having an impact. At Madras, the commander-in-chief, General Joseph Smith, an earlier sceptic about the fighting qualities of sepoys, was full of praise for those who fought under him in the 1767–9 war against Haidar Ali; although

\textsuperscript{117} ‘Orders issued by Capt. R. Stewart . . .’ (1773), pp. 119–24; Col. R. Fletcher, Order Book, 21 Jan. 1765, BL Add. MS 6049, fo. 17.

\textsuperscript{118} Col. Munro to Calcutta, 8 Sept. 1764. Munro wrote that following mutinous unrest amongst the sepoys, he had had the Articles of War relating to Mutiny and Desertion translated into ‘Persian and Jentoo’ which he understood had not been done before: BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 5, p. 497.


\textsuperscript{120} Calcutta to Gen. R. Smith, 18 Mar. 1768, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 8, p. 211.

\textsuperscript{121} Gen. R. Smith, comments to Calcutta Council, 27 Apr. 1768, op. cit., p. 263.


\textsuperscript{123} Gen. R. Smith, comments to Calcutta Council, 27 Apr. 1768, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 8, p. 265.
three years later, he expressed reservations after a peacetime inspection of the Trichinopoly garrison when, in comparison with the European troops, he found the sepoys' fire drill too slow and criticized their tendency to waste ammunition.\textsuperscript{124} Gradually, the conviction grew during the 1760s and 1770s that the only way to bring the sepoys entirely up to European standards was to increase the number of British officers in the battalions so that there would be one at the head of each company as in the European corps, or at least 11 per battalion, and this was generally achieved during the 1780s. This was still only one-third the number in the European battalions, and the ranks of the sepoys officers were lower, a sepy battalion being commanded by a captain rather than a field officer. This implied that the Indian ‘officers’ (subadars and jemadars) were expected to continue to act as officers though they were subordinate to every European officer in the battalion, even a teenage ensign fresh out from Britain. As ever, the other concern of the British was their recurrent anxiety over the fidelity of the sepoys – the Madras commander-in-chief in 1776 recommended increasing the number of European officers in the sepoys corps solely to provide further reassurance on this score, even at the expense of the efficiency of the European units.\textsuperscript{125}

Expanding the number of British officers in the sepoys corps was both expensive and difficult, since high-quality men were needed, wil-

\textsuperscript{124} Gen. J. Smith to Madras, 18 Jan. 1760, BL (OIOC), Range D, vol. 43, p. 124; Gen. J. Smith to Madras, 29 Sept. 1767, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 59, p. 988. In 1767 the Madras Council noted how damaging it was for sepoys discipline in the field if battalions were also broken up into companies for garrison duty: Mad. Sec. Cons., 18 Sept. 1767, op. cit., p. 881. But they were still not deemed equal to Europeans: Madras to Col. Wood, 28 Jan. 1767, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 58, pp. 55–6. In Bengal in 1776 the commander of a substantial detachment was unable to prevent the sepoys attacking a ‘country’ force (winning but with heavy loss) when he had intended to defeat it with artillery; Calcutta Sec. Cons., 19 Aug. 1776, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 37. Gen. J. Smith to Madras, 29 June 1771, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 70, pp. 535–8. Smith, however, later said of the oldest sepoys battalions, that they ‘were capable of performing such Evolutions as but three or four years ago sepoys were thought incapable of being brought to . . .’: Mad. Milit. Cons., 8 Mar. 1773, BL (OIOC), Range 251, vol. 73, p. 263–4. And Smith shortly after ordered uniform tactical exercise for the whole army and added adjutants to every sepoys battalion to enforce greater regularity: Mad. Milit. Cons., 11 June 1773, op. cit., pp. 470–1; Col. R. Fletcher’s Order Book, Bengal Army 1765, BL, Add. MS 6050; Gen. Munro, Mad. Sec. Cons., 31 May 1779, declared constant training of sepoys was essential to keep them up to the mark, BL (OIOC), Range C, vol. 66, pp. 319–22.

ling and able to learn the sepoys’ language and to understand and empathize with their customs. The British, knowingly or not, were trying to reconcile two different cultures of command. Indian military traditions could still be highly personalized (as they had been in Europe a few centuries earlier and still were in the Scottish Highland regiments), with men being recruited and commanded by a chief often from their own locality who exerted authority by his local status and personality. The European approach to command had evolved into a more abstract system of discipline based on law; although the general social superiority of the officer class commanded deference, it was the rank rather than the individual which was being saluted. The British gradually discovered that the best way to command sepoys was for the battalion and army commanders to try to assume a personalised ‘chief’ role while still relying upon a general code of regulation for the ultimate enforcement of discipline, though administered with greater gentleness than was normal in the more robust British army.126

In order to pull this off, British gentlemen cadets would have to be convinced that service in the sepoys was ‘honourable’, while Indian officers would have to be persuaded that they had not lost status as a result of the influx of Europeans.127 The company was more successful in the former than the latter aspirations. Cynics might say that this was because service in the sepoys became very lucrative for young British officers through special allowances, and also career-enhancing since they got far more responsibility as subalterns in the sepoys than they would have in the European corps and there were more opportunities for independent commands. The Indian officers, on the other hand, although they were given commissions, saw their responsibilities decline and their effective rank descend to a status more akin to a warrant officer, at best, in the British army. They could not aspire to the post of commandant since this was abolished as redundant, and promotion, after original selection by merit usually from the grenadier companies, was by seniority (introduced because British officers had been taking bribes to recommend men) and progress was very slow. Promotion for British company officers was also by seniority, but it came faster because the death rate was higher and most British officers were anxious to get back to Britain as soon as they had made enough to retire on comfortably, whereas more Indians were in the company’s service for life. It was said that as a result, Indian men of ambition, talent and status were dissuaded from joining the company’s armies,

which one British officer believed was a good thing since those that did owed everything to the company and would remain loyal servants.128

It was fears of this sort which had stymied the possibility of Indian officers ever being given power and status equal to that of their British colleagues. Early on, in the 1750s, when the company’s military establishment and system was more ad hoc, a few able Indian officers were given independent commands. The most talented and highly regarded by the British, Yusuf Khan, between 1758 and 1763 had commanded a detachment of sepoys and European artillery thousands strong engaged in pacifying the far south of the Carnatic. However, as was the wont of some ambitious Indian officers in the declining Mughal empire, Yusuf Khan developed dreams of independence from company and nawab and had to be suppressed by a major military expedition. The company vowed thereafter never again to give an Indian officer such power; it would probably have happened eventually anyway as British anxieties about security grew with dependence on the sepoys.129

IV

By the close of the eighteenth century the British were satisfied that they had created a sepoy force which could act as equals with European troops in the line: after the battle of Porto Novo in the Carnatic (1 July 1781) between a company/royal army and Haider Ali, Eyre Coote said: ‘The Spirited Behaviour of our Sepoy Corps did them the greatest Credit; no Europeans could [have been] steadier’.130 A royal officer not long at Madras in 1782 wrote home of the sepoys: ‘It is hardly credible, though true, that few troops in Europe cut a better appearance upon parade; and I have been told by some veterans here, that when led by European officers, they behave in the field with astonishing conduct and intrepidity’.131

The British believed by 1800 that they had lessened the sepoys' fidelity


130 Coote to Madras, 6 July 1781, BL (OIOC), Range A, vol. 61, pp. 143–54.

problem by grafting the European battalion commanders onto the inherited military culture of their Indian troops as surrogate ‘chiefs’. However, increasing numbers of British officers were also drafted in at subordinate levels in battalions to improve their fighting efficiency, which depressed the status and self-esteem of the Indian officers. Yet the British could not dispense with subordinate Indian officers at ‘warrant’ officer and NCO levels because most Europeans would not have been capable nor would have wanted so to immerse themselves in Indian culture as to be capable of hands-on, day-to-day drilling and control of Indian troops (the use of British NCOs had proved a failure because they tended to be corrupted by their power; this occasionally happened even with commissioned officers). Besides, the aloofness of the sahib officers from the ranks helped to reinforce the general notion of the British as a new Brahmin governing class.

Although the company had not set out to create a mercenary force of Indian sepoys equivalent in skills and effectiveness to European troops, this is what they had largely achieved by the end of the eighteenth century. Western-style discipline, formations and tactical doctrine had been introduced into the sepoy corps to give the British a qualitative edge over their more numerous Indian opponents. In the process it is likely they had unwittingly enhanced the loyalty of the sepoys to the emerging Raj. Although many Indian recruits might have imbibed or been schooled in very different Indian military traditions, the tighter unit cohesion and more uniform martial appearance and drill of the company’s battalions (which some rival Indian princes tried, not altogether successfully, to copy), and not least the battle honours they had won, probably strongly appealed to the sepoys, as did the social status in their own communities and the financial security which the company’s military service increasingly offered. However, continuing anxiety over the ultimate fidelity of their sepoys led the British in the nineteenth century to pursue arrogant and demeaning policies towards them which gradually undermined their loyalty, leading to the mutiny of 1857 in the high-caste Bengal army.  

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133 Barat, Bengal Infantry; Lunt, Sepoy.