

## **Revisiting the historiography of the Madras Presidency Army, 1801-1858**

**Manas Dutta**

*Research Fellow Department of History, University of Calcutta, West Bengal, India*

---

**Abstract:** *Madras Presidency army was the earliest army establishment under the colonial rule in India. While talking about the army, it is necessary to focus on the historiography so that it could form the basis of our understanding of this particular field. The rise of the New Military history again questions of the so called army historiography in alternative way. The conventional method of writing historiography of military history of India has been questioned by the new age military historians. Researchers now somehow influenced by this term and consequently tried to explain the militia in this regard. This short paper will discuss what New Military History is and its application for the reconstruction of the idea concerned with the Madras presidency army. This paper will revisit the history and historiography of the Madras presidency army.*

**Keywords:** *army, caste, historiography, lower, warfare.*

---

### **I. Introduction**

Armies and warfare have been crucial determinants in India's history. Yet, rarely do we recognize the importance of armies and warfare in shaping the course of modern Indian history. Chandragupta Mauriya maintained an army of about 600,000 men. The land forces in the Mughal Empire exceeded several hundred thousand. The army remained the largest government employer till 1947. The socio and economic impact of the military establishment was also massive. However, there have been sporadic works on the various dimensions of Indian military history. Most of the works focus on the last two hundred years of Indian history. This is because of the easy availability of records in English. The beginning of modern writings on military history could be traced back to the British officials of the late eighteenth century. This essay surveys the most important works on India's military history. The current article reviews recent works on the colonial Madras Army by focusing on the available present writings as well as the nineteenth century writings on the colonial army. First, I have explained in brief about the formation of the Madras Presidency army under the British East India Company in 1748. Here, the role of the British army officers in constructing the professional army, have been explained. The second sections deals with the various sources that helps me to formulate the idea of the Madras regiment.

Third, the role of the caste specially the lower caste which formed the basis of the Madras Presidency army would be analyzed in greater details. This part form the basis of my paper as the role of the caste has often been neglected by the modern scholars while describing the various aspects of the different presidency armies in colonial period.

### **II. History of Madras Presidency Army**

The history of the army of India falls naturally into three periods. To the first belongs the history of the military forces of India under the East India Company; to the second the armies of the Bengal, Madras and Bombay Presidencies under the Crown; while the history of the third period is concerned with the unified Indian army. The Indian army sprang from very small beginnings. Guards were enrolled for the protection of the factories or trading posts which were established by the East India Company at Surat, Masulipatam, Armagon, Madras, Hooghly, and Balasore in the first half of the seventeenth century. These guards were at first intended to add to the dignity of the chief officials as much as for a defective purpose, and were not really soldiers, but as time went on their military characters became slightly more marked. The origin of the regular native army of India may be more accurately traced to the enrolment of sepoys, in Madras, in 1748. Under Major Stringer Lawrence, 'father of the Indian army.' war had broken out in 1744 between Great Britain and France, and the capture of Madras by the latter power in 1746 obliged the Company to commence the formation of a military establishment. The Madras Regiment was initially formed as the Madras European Regiment in the 1660s by the East India Company as the second company established in India. However, it was formed as a battalion in 1748 under the command of Major Stringer Lawrence.

The battalion was involved in all the battles against the French forces in India. Lawrence structured the regiment to include two battalions, one European and one *Sepoy* (Indian). Both battalions were similar in structure and included seven companies each, with each company including three officers in command and seventy privates. Also part of the companies was four sergeants and corporals and three drummers. The oldest

Battalion in the Madras Regiment (and the Indian Army) was the 9th Battalion, formerly known as the Nair Brigade (*NayarPattalam*- "Nair Army"). This militia was raised in 1704 at Padmanabhapuram as bodyguards for the Maharajah of Travancore, and were active in the Battle of Colachel in defeating the Dutch forces. The army was made up of soldiers from Nair warrior clans. However, in 1748 Major Stringer Lawrence, a veteran of action in Spain, Flanders and the Highlands, was hired by the East India Company to take charge of the defense of Cuddalore. He laid the foundations of what was to become the Indian Army. Training the levies to become a militia, the Madras Levies were formed into "companies" and trained to become a disciplined and fine fighting force. In 1758 Lawrence raised the Madras Regiment, forming the several Companies of Madras Levies into two battalions. Madras was raised in 1776 as 15 Carnatic Infantry at Thanjavur [and underwent many nomenclature changes thereafter]. The regiment has been through many campaigns with both the British Indian Army and the Indian Army. Many well-known British officers have commanded this regiment. Robert Clive is one among them. This regiment has fought the Carnatic wars, which were fought in South India. The elephant crest symbolizes its gallantry in the Battle of Assaye under Arthur Wellesley, later Duke of Wellington. There after the British annexed the Indian sub-continent, largely with the help of the Madras Regiment sepoy.

### III. Review Literature

It is W. J. Wilson who first took the task of writing the detail history of the Madras Presidcy army in four volumes and one volume that addressed and mapped the various battles fought by the regiment in due course. This work generally recorded the general origin and further development of the Madras army. The professional attitudes of the army have yet not been fully described. The operational aspects have been explained here. Later, H.H. Dodwell in his book, '*Sepoy Recruitment in the old Madras Army*' had described the earliest formation of the regiment. He also analyzed the participation of various castes in it. This book is path breaking in many respects as he first explained the colonial recruitment and regimental system in Madras. Surprisingly, he had not written anything about the operations that had been participated by the then Madrassi sepoy. It is Pythian Adams Lorenzo M. Crowell and Douglas M. Peers elaborate and modify the idea that the quantum of control of the sahibs over the sepoy was directly proportional to the degree of professionalism of the officers. Crowell and Peers consider two presidency armies and attempt a socio-cultural analysis of the officer's corps institution.

The works hitherto cited here do not do full justice to our subject. We cannot wish away blood and death. Other sets of sources bring to our attention actual combat, which is violent. The Colonial officers were aware of the military importance of the army. They wrote intensively about strategy, tactics and commissariats but neglected the organizational and socio-political aspects of the war machine. Academics on their part neglect those very areas which colonial officers reflected upon. At present we have one article on logistics, one on tactics, three on strategy. Let us now take quick look at the writings of colonial military officers to assess their strength and weakness.

The British established and maintained their rule in India with the aid of their superior military organization against which all military systems proved ineffective. But academicians too often forget the military dimension of colonialism. Different forms of warfare need various types armies and shape the politics deploying such armies. This section would explain the possible frame works for analysing the relation between war, armed forces and society in colonial south India. Colonial British officials had tried to narrate the history of the Madras Presidency army while it was first set up in the south. One of the staff officers of the army had explained the establishment of the Madras regiment. This is full account of the regiment with their regular activity. It is clear that the earlier writers had narrated the first establishment of the Madras Presidency army with minute details. The only problem of their writings is that they had concentrated in describing the administration, discipline, training mechanism, punishment, barrack and cantonment lives of the sepoy and their role in the battlefields. They had never explained the emotional world of the sepoy and the role of caste and religion in running the army set up in India. They simply avoided these issues simply because they were fully unaware about these and had not comfortable in understanding all while writing the regimental or presidency army system. They had glorified the role of the white masters in forming these Presidency armies in India. On the other hand, we have number of autobiographies and memoirs of officers. Besides, explaining personal heroics and some observations about indigenous society, they tried to understand their own success in the subcontinent.

General Robert's autobiography is a model of this genre. Before going to appointed as a commander-in-chief of the Indian army, he was appointed as the Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Presidency army. So, it is natural that his account full of that establishment. Some officers concentrated on writing histories of the armies. MacMunn wrote a history of all the armies which operated in the colonial period. Thomas Evans Bell John Briggs and James Stuart Fraser's work is a chronological narrative containing minute activities of their army life in the Madras Presidency.

The British officers of the Indian Army had a professional journal (the Journal of the United Service Institution of India, published in Simla) to air their views in order to sort out the malaise affecting their service.

While the autobiographies and memoirs were concerned with individual glories and heroics, the articles in this journal addressed broadly the service issues. Even, many articles in this journal try to analyze the operational aspect of colonial war. It is surprising that the modern scholars have neglected this journal.

#### **IV. Position of the Lower Classes in the Madras Presidency Army**

Most of the colonial and post colonial writers have explained the establishment of the Madras Presidency army by describing its strength, loyalist nature, operation aspects both within the sub-continent and abroad. Very little work has been done on the marginalised or untouchable or labourer caste's role in the Madras Presidency army. These groups played a very significant role in the army basically in lower rank as sepoy, guard, watchman and so on which was overlooked by the military historians like Kaushik Roy, DeWitt C. Ellinwood and Cynthia H. Enloe, Douglas M. Peers, David Omissi, Zacaria Haji Ahmed, Lanny Bruce Fields, William R. Heaton, Constance M. Wilson, Carol Hills, Henry Russell, Henry Dodwell, W.J. Wilson. The English East India Company has given new opportunity to the lower caste which gave the occupational social mobility and new socio-economic and cultural strength.

The advent of British rule in south India provided the lower caste specially the Paraiyans and the kindred classes with opportunities of employment in the army. The advent of British rule in south India provided the Paraiyans and the kindred classes with opportunities of employment in the army. The Paraiyans, as part of a degraded humanity were scattered throughout the Tamil speaking districts of the Madras Presidency.

Their population was concentrated heavily in Chingleput, South Arcot, North Arcot, Tanjore and Trichinopoly districts. Like the other caste groups, they too had many sub-divisions. Interestingly, these districts provided larger soldiers for the colonial army. They were for long treated as 'untouchables' and their social inferiority was utilized by the upper castes to maintain their economic dominance in the agrarian sector. They had also been considered as agrestic slaves in Tamil Nadu. Naturally, there was a search for the upliftment of the socio-economic condition within the Paraiya community. They were looking for alternative employment which will give them economic freedom as well as societal respect. The colonial army at the second half of the eighteenth century started to form an army establishment in the south and this opportunity both way help the Paraiyans and the British. The Paraiyans since the 1760s and 1770s had constituted the bulk of the foot soldiers in the Company's army. In the following decades too, they continued to find employments in the military department. The military depots, functioning in Madras and Trichinopoly, often served as recruitment centres for the Paraiyans. The British army bosses praised the Paraiyans recruits highly for their submissive nature and dutiful conduct. The high ranking British officials expressed the opinion that opportunities to serve in the army had inculcated among the 'untouchables' a certain degree of self respect and independence. The Paraiyans also sometimes expressed their satisfaction for being offered employments in the British army, as it provided them with the privilege to experience the civil equality enjoyed by the other British as well as Native subjects. The extremely docile and loyalist attitude of the Paraiyan soldiers towards their British seniors, more than often accounted for their promotions.

Significantly, by the early decades of the nineteenth century, recruitment in the British army brought about important changes in the self-perceptions of the ordinary Paraiyan soldiers. In fact, they might have realised that sincerity and devotion could guarantee an improvement in their economic status. Thus many of them adopted an overtly loyalist line to gain promotions to the ranks of non-commissioned officers in the regiments. The performance of the military rituals and drills also invoked in them a sense of belonging to a martial race. The award of the King Emperor's uniform instilled in them an idea that caste discriminations could no longer keep them tied to bonds of servitude and exploitation.

The Paraiyans were exclusively recruited for one of the regiments of the Indian army, more popularly known as the '*Queens Own Sappers and Miners*' till about the middle of the nineteenth century. But, after the Great Rebellion of 1857, there was a shift in the British Government's military recruitment policy. At this time, the British military superiors felt that the recruitment policy needed to be based on the 'martial race' theory. It was argued that while recruiting soldiers from the various native communities, the military, social; and environmental perspectives needed to be taken into account. In other words, different aspects of the martial race theory were employed to recruit native soldiers for the Indian army. *Jats, Gurkhas, Sikhs* and *Pathans* were recruited in large numbers in the Bengal, Bombay and the Madras armies. These communities were believed to be more trustworthy, tough and hard working than the native soldiers belonging to the other communities. The Company's military officials had frequently praised the Paraiyan soldiers for their submissive nature and dutiful conduct. Some of them had opined that opportunities to serve in the army had inculcated in these recruits a degree of self-respect and independence. The Calcutta Review of 1859 pointed out that serving the Company army was satisfactory to them. The employment in the British army provided them the privilege to experience the civil equality enjoyed by the other British subjects. The extremely docile and loyalist attitude of the Paraiyan soldiers towards their British seniors more than often accounted for their promotions.

## V. Conclusion

If one takes a long term view of Indian military history then several structural changes which occurred in the nature of the armies and their conduct of battles become visible. Within the armies, personal loyalty to clan leaders and *mansabdari* organization were replaced by the loyalty of soldiers to officers and the particular regiment in which he was supposed to involve. Perhaps, modern scholars are overly concerned with the socio-political aspects of the army. Regimental organization and court-martial apparatus were the two revolutionary elements introduced in the south Asian military milieu by imperialism. An analysis of these is necessary in order to understand the army's internal organization. To keep internal organization fit and discipline one has to take care of the caste and religious issues of the sepoys in the regiment since they formed the basis of the organization. After all armies are for warfare. It was Assaye, laswari, Chilianwala, which were landmarks in the progress of colonialism.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful to my Supervisor Dr. Raj Sekhar Basu who has always motivated me to write meaningfully. Dr. Kaushik Roy helped me by providing two books. The research grants from the History Division, Ministry of Defence, Government of India helped me in writing this paper.

## References

- [1] Ancient India as described by Megasthenes and Arrian, being a translation of the fragments of Indika by Megasthenes collected by Dr. Schwanbeck, and of the first part of the Indika of Arrian, ed., by John W. McCrindle, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, rpt., 2000), 141
- [2] Jos J. L. Gommans and Dirk H. A. Kolff, 'Introduction', in Gommans and Kolff, eds., *Warfare and Weaponry in South Asia: 1000-1800*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 16
- [3] W.J. Wilson, *History of the Madras Army*, 1-5, (Madras: E. Kays at the Government Press, 1883) Henry Herbart Dodwell, *Sepoy Recruitment in the Old Madras Army*, (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing), 1922
- [5] Lorenzo M Crowell, 'Military Professionalism in a colonial context: The Madras army circa 1832,' *Modern Asian Studies*, (Henceforth MAS) 24(2), 1990, 249-74; Douglas M. Peers, 'Between Mars and Mammon; The East India Company and efforts to reform its army, 1796-1832,' *The Historical Journal*, 33(2), 1990, 385-401; 'The habitual nobility of being: British Officers and the social construction of the Bengal Army in the early nineteenth century,' *MAS*, 25(3), 1991, 545-69
- [6] Lorenzo M. Crowell, 'Logistics in the Madras Army circa 1830,' *War and Society*, 10(2), 1992, 1-33
- [7] Staff officer, *Historical Record of the Honourable East India Company's First Madras Regiment: containing an account of the establishment of independent companies in 1645; their formation into a regiment in 1748; and its subsequent service to 1842*, (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1843),
- [8] Henry Frowde, *The Imperial Gazetteer of India: The Indian Empire (Administrative) 4*, Chapter XI, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1909) 326-330; P.J. Begbie, *History of the Service of the Madras Artillery with a sketch of the rise of power of the East India Company in Southern India*, I, (Madras: Christian Knowledge Society Press, 1852), 74-77; H. H. Dodwell, *The Cambridge History of the British Empire*, 4, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1858), 154-158; Count Magnus Bjorns, *The British Empire in the East*, (London: J. J. Erna & John Murray, 1840). Here chapter xii described the Anglo-Indian Army that has a reference of the Madras Presidency army.
- [9] G. F. MacMunn, *The Armies of India*, (New Delhi: Asian Educational Service, rpt., 1991); Roberts, *Forty One Years in India from Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief* (London: Macmillan, 1901), Thomas Evans Bell & John Briggs, *Memoirs of General John Briggs of the Madras Army*, (London: Chatto & Windl, 1885), Hasting Fraser, *Memoir and Correspondence of General James Stuart Fraser of the Madras Army*, (London: Whiting, 1885)
- [10] Major General J. Michael (Madras Staff Corps, Late Secretary to Govt., C.S.I.), *The Native Army of Madras: Organization, Equipment, and Interior Economy*, *Royal United Service Institute Journal*, 32, (144), 1888, 329-63; Donald Featherstone, *A Military Anomaly, The Army of the East India Company, 1757-1877*, *Royal United Service Institution Journal*, 138(1), 1993, 48-52
- [11] *General Order of the Governor*, 3(4), 1852, TNA, 145
- [12] T. P. Kamalnathan, *K. Veeramani is refuted and the Historical facts about the Scheduled Caste Struggle for Emancipation in India*, (Tiruppathur: Geetha, 1985), 35
- [13] *Calcutta Review*, 33, 1859, 143
- [14] Raj Sekhar Basu, *Nandanar's Children: The Paraiyans' Tryst with Destiny, Tamil Nadu 1850-1956*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2011), 160 See also V. Geetha and S.V. Rajadurai, *Towards a Non-Brahmin Millenium: from Iyothee Thoss to Periyar*, (Calcutta: Popular Prakashan, 1998), 72
- [15] For more details, see Stephen P. Cohen, "The Untouchable Soldier: Caste, Politics of the Indian Army", *The Journal of Asian Studies* (henceforth JAS), Vol. XXVIII (28), No. 3, May 1969, p. 456