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War and Race: Indian Sepoys During the First World War

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex dimensions of race among Indian sepoys during the First World War, beyond the binary of Indian soldiers and White Europeans, to highlight internal racial hierarchies within the sepoy ranks. It examines how the war influenced caste dynamics, focusing on recruitment practices shaped by the Martial Races Policy, which inadvertently reinforced the rigid structures of the caste system. The paper also contrasts the sepoys' interactions with Western civilians to their experiences in India, revealing supportive relationships in the West that contrasted with racial hostilities from British officers. It discusses internal racial diversity among sepoys and its implications for social dynamics and war experience, and examines how recruitment policies limited opportunities for lower-caste individuals, reinforcing traditional caste-based roles and hindering caste system disruption.

Keywords: *Race; Caste; Sepoys; Dalits; Colonial Army; World War I*

INTRODUCTION

Caste composition of the Indian Army was profoundly affected after the Mutiny of 1857 as the recruitment focus was on high caste men. (Constable, 440; Cohen, The Untouchable Soldier…, 455) According to the Peel Commission Report, the total number of sepoys was 80,053, with a significant proportion being high-caste Hindus. (Omissi, The Sepoy…, 7) The domination of sepoys from a few high castes was perceived as a threat to the British Raj. (Ibid, 4-5) Therefore, in the 1840s, Sir Henry Lawrence suggested the enlistment of men from diverse castes, noting, "Our sepoys come too much from the same parts of the country... There is too much of clanship among them, and the evil should be remedied". (Cohen, Indian Army…, p. 34-35) His suggestion gained traction after the Sepoy Mutiny, leading the British Government to appoint a committee under Major-General Peel to examine the Indian Army's organization and recommend changes. The Commission recommended that "the Native Army should be composed of different nationalities and castes, mixed promiscuously through each regiment". (MacMunn, Armies of India…, p. 107-109)

This marked the beginning of the end of the domination by high-caste Hindus, as low-caste soldiers were recruited into the army without bias, and undertakings of abstaining from caste practices were taken from the candidates at the time of recruitment. By 1857-58, a number of low-caste units were raised, reflected in the Bengal Army list of 1862 where regiments 33 to 39 were mainly low-caste units, and regiments 41 to 44 were various local corps from other areas. (Omissi, The Sepoy…, p. 3) Despite better caste representation in the Madras and Bombay regions, caste remained a significant factor across all regions. Even in the Madras and Bombay regions, low-caste men were recruited largely to ensure that regiments were not dominated by any particular caste. (Omissi, The Sepoy…, p. 3) Most of the men were landless laborers who earned land after retirement from the army, a significant economic and social mobility opportunity denied to them by the caste system for thousands of years. (Peers p. 15-16)

However, the preference for high-caste men resurfaced with Lord Roberts, a proponent of the "Martial Races Theory," becoming the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army in November 1885. So, before the First World War, Indian army regiments were largely dominated by high-caste men. (Omissi, Indian Voices…, p. 367) Despite the dominance

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of certain castes, the high casualties during the First World War necessitated recruiting men irrespective of their racial and caste identity. A Punjabi Muslim, Bauli Hasan Khan, wrote in a letter to Rohimdad Khan, Jhelum, on 11th March 1916:

"There is a tremendous amount of recruiting going on in this part of the country. Recruiting parties go from village to village, and the reason is that the famine is driving thousands to enlist. It does not matter what the caste may be – sweepers, oil sellers, dancing girls' attendants – they take them all, even up to forty years of age. Everybody is talking about war, even women and children. There is nothing else on anyone's lips" (Omissi, Indian Voices…, p. 162).

Consequently, sepoys from diverse regions, religions, races, and castes were recruited into the army during the First World War. These soldiers hailed from various parts of British India, including Madras, Bombay, Punjab, Bengal, Bihar, Burma, Assam, Ajmer, and Baluchistan (Omissi, Indian Voices of the Great War, p. 366). They represented a wide array of castes and religious backgrounds: Brahmins, Rajputs, Mahars, Chamars, Muslims, Jats, Pathans, Kashmiris, Sikhs, Dogras, Ahirs, Tamils, Burmans, Konkanis, and others (Ibid, p. 367). The war thus significantly impacted the caste dynamics both in India and abroad (Gaikwad, Caste and the First World War…, Crossing Kala-Pani…). Similarly, religion also played a crucial role, as many sepoys were deeply religious. So Houlihan wrote that: "From the cradle to the grave, popular religion formed a necessary and vital, if analytically messy, part of the human experience of the Great War" (Web). Sepoys came in contact with different racial groups during the war further complicated their experiences. Moreover, some sepoys even considered caste as a form of racial identity. Therefore, this paper explores the complex dimensions of race among Indian sepoys during the First World War, moving beyond the simplistic binary of Indian soldiers and White Europeans.

RACE, MARTIAL RACE AND CASTE

Two decades before the First World War, British officers and recruitment handbook writers often used the terms caste and race interchangeably. David Omissi notes that the term 'martial races' was consistently used until the early 20th century, after which it was replaced by 'martial classes' (The Sepoy…, 43). Recruitment handbooks often conflated these terms; for instance, Brahmins were described as a race, a tribe, and a caste simultaneously (Bingley and Nicholls, 11, 13). Bingley considered Rajputs and Jats to be of Scythian origin but noted that different social factors in Indian society turned them into distinct races or castes (Handbooks… Rajputs…, 28; Handbooks… Jats…, 31; Wikeley, 5). MacMunn also used race and caste interchangeably, observing that Jats were "so mixed up with the Rajputs" (Martial Races of India, 12; The Armies of India, 7). Maratha was considered both a caste and a class consisting of ninety-six kulas (Betham, 47-49). Similarly, Frederick Roberts, in his autobiography *Forty-One Years in India*, used the terms race, caste, and class loosely when referring to Sikhs and Gurkhas (534-540). MacMunn described the Pathans as a race divided into many tribes and clans, yet still considered them a class (The Armies of India, 145-154).

The British linked the concepts of martial and non-martial races with Aryan and non-Aryan identities, particularly among Hindus. They contended that martial castes like Brahmins and Rajputs were of Aryan descent, while non-martial castes, such as Shudras and untouchables, were of non-Aryan origin. MacMunn argued that Brahmins and Rajputs in India were the warrior races, the progenitors of Hindus, and were considered descendants of Aryans who entered India through Afghanistan around four thousand years ago (The Armies of India, 7). The Aryans invaded India, defeated the Dravidians, and seized their lands. The Aryan descendants became the yeomen peasants and landowners in central and northern India, while the vanquished Dravidians were reduced to landless laborers who migrated to towns. Those who owned land, thought to be descended from foreign white Aryans, were classified as martial. These Aryans prevented the defeated Dravidians from bearing arms, leading to a loss of martial skills and traditions among the Dravidian groups (Ibid, 129-131). Furthermore, MacMunn noted that martial races like Rajputs, Brahmins, and some Jats were the offspring of white races who established the caste system in India to segregate themselves from the Dravidian race (Ibid, 9-14). The Sikhs from central Punjab, recognized by their long hair, were distinct from the Pathans, who had curled beards and a Jewish appearance. (Ibid, 133-140, 145-154; The Martial Races of India, 75-80).

Most authors of the recruitment handbooks placed significant importance on the Aryan Invasion Theory. According to their perspective, only descendants of Aryans and Scythians were considered war-like races in India, while others were deemed unfit for combat. Authors such as A. H. Bingely, who wrote handbooks for Sikhs, Jats, Gujjars, and Ahirs; A. Nicholls, who co-authored handbooks for Brahmins with Bingley; A. Latham, who authored handbooks for Kumaonis; P. Holland Pryor, who wrote handbooks for the Moppillas; and R. M. Betham, the author of handbooks for Marathas and Dekhani Musalmans, all underscored the significance of the Aryan Invasion Theory on the first three

pages of their handbooks. They built the foundation of the martial race policy on this theory, asserting that nearly all martial races in India (except some aboriginal Gorkha tribes like Magars, Sunwars, Newars, Gurungs, etc.) possessed Aryan or Scythian lineage. The historical origins and identity of martial races were the primary and most critical criteria for their classification. All handbooks commenced with the historical origins of these martial races. In the recruitment handbooks authored by British officers, castes such as Brahman, Rajput, Jat, Jat Sikh, Jat Muslim, Gujjars, Ahirs, and the 96 kuli Maraths of Hindu origin were considered Aryans and, therefore, martial castes or races. These castes were linked with Aryan or Scythian ancestry, while the original inhabitants of the land were identified as the Dravidian race. The only exception was P. D. Bonarjee, who included South Indian Tamils and Telugus, along with some low-caste (Dravidian) tribes, in the martial category. No untouchable castes were included in any of the recruitment handbooks.

Although hostility of First World War forced the British to change their recruitment policy to make it more inclusive, Martial Races policy significantly dominated the British Indian Army, even during World War I. This policy led to a focus on regions like Punjab and the Northern subcontinent of India where primarily upper-caste men were preferred for military service. Data indicates a clear dominance of upper-caste men in the British Indian Army (Omissi, Indian Voices…, 367). This prevalence can be directly linked to the Martial Race Policy, which seemingly made little distinction between upper castes and martial races, treating most upper-caste men from North and North-East India as fit for combat.

The British, alongside many Indians, equated caste and race concerning physical attributes and skin color. For example, the Rajputs, Brahmins, Jats and other high caste Hindus were perceived to have maintained their Aryan racial purity through the caste system (Omissi, The Sepoy…, 32). Recruitment notebooks from this period also underscore the emphasis on physical features, such as skull and nose measurements, as key criteria for selection. (Bingley, Brahmins, 50; Holland-Pryor, Mappillas Musalmans, 2-3) The fair skin and straight, narrow noses of many north-western martial races matched prevalent Indian and British ideals of beauty (Omissi, The Sepoy…, 32-33). Consequently, short, dark-skinned men, often from lower castes and equated with Dravidian inhabitants, were largely excluded from recruitment. This exclusion was a manifestation of racial supremacy and colonial mentality.

The Martial Races Policy not only barred low-caste and untouchable men from military service but also stymied their potential development and the broader impact on the caste system. If lower-caste and untouchable men had been allowed into the army, the caste system could have been significantly affected. The British Indian Army during World War I played a pivotal role in the migration of untouchables and other low-caste families to urban areas in search of labor, both within the army and in war-related industries. Without the constraints of the Martial Races Policy, Indian urban spaces might have been demographically dominated by low-caste people. This shift would have led to substantial changes in their occupational roles, encouraging lower-caste individuals to abandon caste-related work. Such a transformation would have struck a blow to the caste-based division of labor in Indian society.

Dr. B.R. Ambedkar advocated for untouchables to leave villages and move to urban spaces, viewing this migration as a means to weaken the rigid caste system prevalent in rural settings. (BAWS, Vol. 2, P 32) Studies by Indian and Western scholars also underscore the positive effects of urbanization on the caste system. (Gaikwad, "Caste and the First…", 70) However, due to the Martial Races Policy, low-caste and untouchable men were largely excluded from the army, thereby reducing their growth in urban and industrial workforces. The policy's racial nature effectively barred these men from the colonial army and, by extension, from the opportunities available in urban spaces and industries.

As a result, many lower-caste men were unable to leave their villages and caste-based occupations. The caste-based model of villages, with its socio-economic, cultural, and political structures rooted in the Varna system, remained largely unchallenged. Without the racial scrutiny of sepoys' bodies in the recruitment process, the entrenched casteist village model could have been more effectively contested.

Thus, the Martial Races Policy not only prevented lower-caste individuals from entering new occupations but also restricted their access to new public spaces—primarily urban areas, which offered different caste experiences and material resources. The denial of potential military awards, land, education, and employment to lower-caste and untouchable sepoys hindered their social mobility and potential elevation in caste status. Therefore, the racially discriminatory nature of the Martial Races Theory was a significant barrier to the movement for the annihilation of caste in Indian society.

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PEOPLE AND THE STATE

The state frequently faced fierce criticism for issues such as inadequate payment, pension delays, insufficient leave, and poor care for the sepoys (Omissi, Indian Voices…, Letter: 211, 237, 288, 320, 370, 366). In contrast, the common Western people were often depicted as loving, caring, and supportive. Some sepoys narrated their experiences of substandard provisions, including inadequate food, medication, and accommodation. For example, one sepoy wrote a letter directly to the King on May 24, 1915, detailing the poor conditions in a hospital:

"… Blessed King, what can I say? There is nothing worth describing. We do not get new clothes. In the morning, only tea at ten o'clock, a chapatti, and a spoonful of dal. In twenty-four hours, five cigarettes. In the evening the chapattis are half-baked, and there is no meat. No sick man gets well fed. The Indians have given their lives for eleven rupees. Any man who comes here wounded is returned thrice or four times to the trenches. Only that man goes to India who has lost an arm or a leg." (Ibid, 62)

Such complaints are prevalent in many letters. While a majority of sepoys expressed satisfaction with the King's services, numerous letters reveal widespread dissatisfaction with the arrangements for food, clothing, and medical care. Complaints extended to the trenches, where sepoys faced inadequate supplies and poor living conditions. These grievances were directed at the state, which failed to provide a comfortable life for the soldiers, leading to significant suffering. (Ibid, 135, 148, 174, 190, 214, 216-217)

Conversely, wherever the sepoys stayed in England, France, and other places, the common people treated them with genuine affection and care. This positive treatment is reflected in the term "surrogate mothers" This distinction between the state and the people is evident in the sepoys' letters, where they frequently wrote about European society and its people, particularly women. Many letters detail their observations on how Europeans think, work, and treat others, reflecting a close and appreciative observation of Western society. This knowledge and appreciation helped sepoys form close and friendly relations with Europeans. Relationships, love affairs, and even marriages between British and French women and Indian men highlight the lack of racial hostility from common people. (Ibid, 38, 135-136, 176-177)

The sepoys' accounts of European women's immense love and care contrast sharply with their criticisms of the state. While the state failed to provide essential services, the common Western people offered emotional and material support, fostering good relations between the sepoys and the local populations. This positive interaction was in stark contrast to the racial hostility often displayed by British officers towards Indians in India. J.N. Godbole, a senior assistant surgeon, remarked, "The people here are charming. It is impossible to say why they become so bad on reaching India." (Ibid, 42)

Complaints against senior officers and the military institution were common, but grievances against ordinary people were rare. Out of 657 letters, only one letter talks about racial discrimination by common men. (Ibid, 336-337) The censor described such letters as atypical, suggesting that the majority of interactions were positive. The relationships between sepoys and common Western people were often loving and caring, akin to family relationships (Ibid, 258).

This lack of racial hostility contributed to significant socio-cultural changes for the sepoys, particularly in terms of caste. However, these relationships came under attack by the state, which imposed restrictions to prevent sepoys' affairs with white women. A sepoy's letter reflects this change:

"Brother, there is plenty to eat here and it is a land of fairies; but the supervision over us is very strict, and we are not allowed to go anywhere, and are hard-pressed, and we do not like it. At first, the salas allowed us more freedom and we acted according to our pleasure and stayed out – sometimes all night. We were even placed outside in billets; but some men abused the privilege, and it was entirely stopped…. Some became diseased and some were flogged." (Ibid, 82)

These restrictions aimed to curb sexual relations between white women and Indian men, a common occurrence during the war. Indian troops at Base Camp in Marseille, for example, often established relations with local women, sometimes leading to illicit sex (Omissi, Sepoy and the Raj, 65). Such relationships threatened the racial superiority of whites, prompting the state to impose restrictions. This isolation of sepoys from European society also protected their rigid caste beliefs. The state's actions, including the hostile treatment by British officers, were racially motivated and intended to maintain colonial order.

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CASTE AND RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS AND RACIAL SUPREMACY

The specter of the 1857 revolt, which erupted due to the caste and religious grievances of Indian soldiers, continued to loom large during the First World War. The British, mindful of this history, were careful not to interfere with the caste and religious practices of Indian sepoys. After the mutiny, it became clear that maintaining control over India required respecting these deeply ingrained social structures. Consequently, during the war, the British went to great lengths to ensure that the caste and religious sensibilities of Indian soldiers were not offended.

The British strategy included meticulous efforts to provide culturally appropriate services that aligned with the sepoys' caste, religious, tribal, and regional identities. This approach was rooted in a colonial tactic aimed at maintaining control by preserving and even reinforcing existing divisions. This tactic aligns with the recommendations of Lord Elphinstone to the Peel Commission, where he suggested that soldiers from diverse backgrounds should be kept separate. "Divide and Rule was the old Roman motto, and it should be ours," he asserted (Omissi, The Sepoy…, 9).

To avoid antagonizing the sepoys, the British established separate accommodations, kitchens, prayer spaces, water taps, bathrooms, toilets, burial grounds, cremation grounds, and meat preparation areas. These segregated arrangements were implemented across various locations in the Western theaters of war and hospitals. (Jarboe, 185-86, 213; Jack, 357) This meticulous segregation served dual purposes: it satisfied the sepoys' cultural and religious needs while reinforcing the racial hierarchy that placed white soldiers above Indian soldiers and upper-caste sepoys above their lower-caste counterparts.

This colonial policy of segregation effectively prevented the unity of Indian soldiers, which could have posed a significant threat to the colonial regime. The unity of sepoys from different castes and regions was perceived as a potential catalyst for resistance against British rule. By keeping these groups divided, the British aimed to mitigate any such threat. The notion of racial superiority was a cornerstone of British colonial ideology. This perceived superiority was not inherent but was constructed and propagated through various theories to justify and sustain colonial dominance. The maintenance of white hegemony over non-white populations was central to this ideology. The artificial nature of this racial hierarchy was designed to uphold the colonial order and prevent any challenge to the empire.

The British strategy during the First World War involved a careful balance of respecting and manipulating the caste and religious practices of Indian sepoys. This approach ensured the continued subjugation of Indian soldiers while reinforcing the racial and social hierarchies that underpinned the colonial regime. The legacy of these tactics highlights the complexities of colonial rule and the lengths to which the British went to maintain their dominance over India.

LOYALTY AND HONOUR

The belief that loyalty to the king and the colonial state would bring honour to the sepoy was deeply ingrained. (Omissi, Indian Voices, 25, 26, 29, 39, 62-63, 66, 73, 92) This belief significantly impacted the personal identity of the soldiers, whose identities were deeply rooted in their caste, tribe, race, region, and religion. Loyalty to the king was seen as a reflection of one's caste and religious honour. Consequently, sepoys strove to maintain their loyalty, believing that their dedication would elevate the status and honour of their respective communities.

This colonial tactic of intertwining loyalty with honour was a deliberate strategy to maintain control. By fostering a sense of duty and honour tied to the colonial state, the British ensured the sepoys remained faithful, thereby upholding white racial superiority. This approach did not liberate the sepoys from the constraints of caste; instead, it reinforced their subjugation through a racial hierarchy. Moreover, the British exploited this loyalty on the European front during the war by often sending Indian sepoys to the front lines first, bearing the brunt of the conflict. European troops were deployed only after these soldiers had suffered significant casualties. Therefore, a sepoys wrote: "The black pepper which has come from India has all been finished, so now the red pepper is being used. But the red pepper is little used and the black more. You understand everything so I need not write any further." (Ibid…, 58) Another sepoy wrote a similar letter;

"The state of affairs here is as follows: the black pepper is finished. Now the red pepper is being used, but, occasionally, the black pepper proves useful. The pepper is very pungent, and the red pepper is not so strong. This is a secret, but you are a wise man, consider with your understanding." (Ibid…, 49)

These coded references to "black pepper" (Indian sepoys) and "red pepper" (European soldiers) illustrate the racist nature of the British Empire. This racial attitude led to the early deaths of many sepoys upon their arrival in the Western front. In essence, the British colonial strategy capitalized on the sepoys' loyalty by manipulating their sense of honour and identity. This exploitation not only reinforced racial hierarchies but also ensured that the sepoys' sacrifices were undervalued and their potential for social change was stifled. The early demise of these soldiers, driven by racial discrimination, prevented any significant challenge to the entrenched caste system, thereby maintaining the status quo both in the battlefield and within Indian society.

RACES AMONG THE INDIAN SOLDIERS

The Indian soldiers who fought in the First World War were not a homogenous group; they were drawn from diverse racial and regional backgrounds. Sepoys from the Madras region in the south were distinctly different from those in the north. South Indians, often associated with the Dravidian race, were generally darker-skinned, while North Indians, associated with the Aryan race, were fairer. These cultural, social, and geographical distinctions were stark and continued to influence relationships among the soldiers during the war.

Racial and regional differences led to segregation within the ranks. North Indian sepoys did not mingle with their counterparts from other regions, such as the Northeast or South. This isolation is evident in the experiences of sepoys like Pailad, a Jat from the North Indian subcontinent (often linked to the Aryan race), who was transferred to the 20th Deccan Horse, a regiment dominated by South Indian (Dravidian) sepoys. Pailad's letter reveals his profound discomfort and isolation. (Ibid…, 217) Although Pailad refers to his village, highlighting regional differences, the segregation in the British Indian Army was more often along racial and caste lines rather than strictly regional ones. Many regiments were formed and dominated by specific racial groups. For example, all Gurkha regiments, such as the 1st King George's Own Gurkha Rifles, 2nd King Edward's Own Gurkha Rifles, and others, were composed exclusively of Gurkha soldiers. Similarly, the 6th Jat Light Infantry comprised only Jat sepoys, the 41st Dogras regiment consisted solely of Dogra men, and the 47th Sikhs was exclusively Sikh. Even mixed racial regiments were typically dominated by one particular race.

This racial structuring led to significant isolation for soldiers who were in the minority within their regiments. The racial divisions not only perpetuated segregation but also influenced promotion and patronage within the army. Soldiers from dominant racial groups, often aligned with upper castes, had better opportunities for advancement, as indicated in Pailad's letter. The British colonial administration used these racial divisions to their advantage, ensuring that loyalty and control were maintained by keeping different groups separate and fostering a sense of superiority among certain races. This racial hierarchy was a deliberate colonial tactic to preserve white dominance and control over the Indian soldiers, reinforcing the existing hierarchies within the broader Indian society. The British Indian Army's structuring along racial lines fostered an environment of segregation and inequality among Indian soldiers. This not only maintained British control but also perpetuated and reinforced racial and caste hierarchies, ensuring that the sepoys' loyalty to the colonial state was intertwined with their social identities and aspirations for honour within their own communities.

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