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The Military System of East India Company

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ABSTRACT: Following the loss of the American colonies in the War of Independence (1775-83), India became the centrepiece of Britain's overseas possessions. This was partly the product of ongoing Anglo-French conflict, but also of the East India Company's interventions in the political and commercial rivalries of the fragmenting Mughal Empire.Formed in 1600, the East India Company traded in Asian textiles, spices, porcelain and tea. As it grew, it needed to secure its Indian settlements from European rivals and hostile locals. It purchased land from Indian rulers and recruited troops to protect these 'Presidencies'. Eventually, these forces evolved into the Bengal, Bombay and Madras Armies.

The Company became India's dominant power following victories at the Battles of Plassey (1757), Wandewash (1760) and Buxar (1764). Its supremacy was confirmed in 1765, when it secured from the weak Mughal Emperor the right to gather tax and customs duties in Bengal, India's richest province.Now an imperial administrator, the Company expanded its domains at the expense of native powers like Mysore (1767-99), the Marathas (1775-1818) and the Sikhs (1845-49). This expansion was driven by a mixture of personal ambition, commercial interest, concerns about security, and the need for revenue. By the mid-1850s, the Company governed two thirds of the subcontinent.

KEYWORDS: military, east, India, company, army, dominant, domains, commercial

I. INTRODUCTION

The Company's rule in India was heavily criticised by many at home.
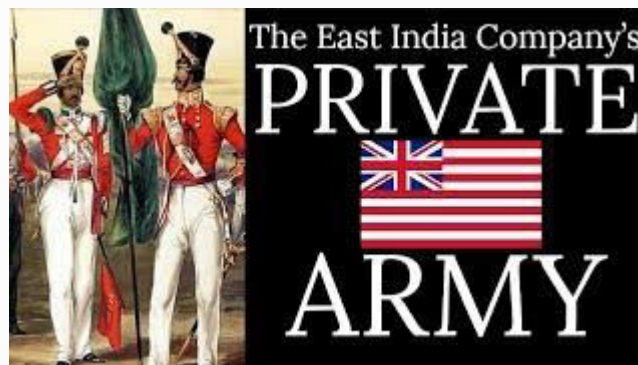
Several of its leading figures - including two governors of Bengal, Sir Warren Hastings and Major-General Robert Clive - were denounced as corrupt 'nabobs' who used their political and military influence to amass personal fortunes. But as long as the profits rolled in, the British state took an arms-length approach to regulation, at least initially. At one time, a tenth of the British exchequer's revenue came from customs duties on Company imports. Eventually, Company misrule and a series of financial crises led to government bail-outs, greater state intervention in its affairs and the removal of its trading monopolies in the East.Each of the Company's three 'Presidencies' - Bengal, Bombay and Madras - maintained its own army. At first, these amounted to no more than a handful of factory guards. But from the 1740s onwards, as Anglo-French rivalry spread to India, they started to grow.[1]

The Company troops' superior European training and weaponry also enabled them to defeat Indian forces many times their size. At Buxar (1764), for example, around 7,000 Company troops defeated nearly 40,000 enemy soldiers.

Eventually, the Bengal Army became the largest and most important of the three forces. Its commander-in-chief was recognised as the senior Company military figure in India.British Army units were sometimes attached to the three armies. The Crown lent these in times of need, with the Company usually underwriting the cost of their deployment. The first British regiment posted to India was the 39th Foot, which arrived in 1753.Many British Army officers first came to prominence serving alongside and leading Company troops, including General Sir Eyre Coote and General Sir Arthur Wellesley (the future Duke of Wellington).By the early 19th century, the Company's army was 250,000-strong, larger than that of many nations. The officers were British and there were several regiments composed only of Europeans. But the vast majority of Company soldiers were Indian.The Company was quick to combine Western weapons, uniform and military training with Indian martial traditions. In a society where warriors were well respected, it could always attract new recruits with the prospect of good pay, pensions, land grants and honoured status.[2,3]

Although some British Army officers transferred to its service, the Company also operated a system of patronage in Britain to commission officers directly. In 1809, the Company established a college at Addiscombe in Surrey to train its cadets in military subjects and Indian languages.

II. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

During many campaigns, the Company's armies were assisted by the forces of Indian 'princely states'. These were not British possessions, but semi-independent territories subject to varying degrees of political supervision through a system of subsidiary alliances.

These states maintained their own armies and often employed Company officers to command their troops. In large states like Hyderabad and Gwalior, the Company also maintained small armies - known as the Hyderabad/Gwalior Contingents - which operated besides the states' own small forces.The main priorities for the East India Company's soldiers were the defence and internal order of India. But they also allowed Britain to project its power more broadly across the eastern hemisphere.As well as intervening in states that neighboured British India, including Nepal (1814-6), Burma (1824-53), Afghanistan (1839-42) and Persia (1856-57), they were despatched further afield, to places such as Egypt (1801), Java (1811) and China (1839-42).[4,5]

The Company's mismanagement of India contributed to the outbreak of the Indian Mutiny (1857-59), an uprising of Indian soldiers against their British commanders. Native rulers and thousands of ordinary people joined in this struggle that threatened to destroy British colonial power on the subcontinent.The British eventually prevailed in the conflict, but it marked the end of Company rule. Political control in India was transferred to the British Crown. A secretary of state for India was appointed and the Crown's viceroy became head of the government.[6,7]

III. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The Sino-Indian War between China and India occurred in October–November 1962. A disputed Himalayan border was the main cause of the war. There had been a series of violent border skirmishes between the two countries after the 1959 Tibetan uprising, when India granted asylum to the Dalai Lama. India initiated a defensive Forward Policy from 1960 to hinder Chinese military patrols and logistics, in which it placed outposts along the border, including several north of the McMahon Line, the eastern portion of the Line of Actual Control proclaimed by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai in 1959.

Chinese military action grew increasingly aggressive after India rejected proposed Chinese diplomatic settlements throughout 1960–1962, with China re-commencing previously-banned "forward patrols" in Ladakh from 30 April 1962. China finally abandoned all attempts of peaceful resolution on 20 October 1962, invading disputed territory along the 3,225 kilometres (2,004 mi) long Himalayan border in Ladakh and across the McMahon Line. Chinese troops pushed back Indian forces in both theatres, capturing Rezang La in Chushul in the western theatre, as well as Tawang in the eastern theatre. The war ended when China declared a ceasefire on 20 November 1962, and simultaneously announced its withdrawal to its claimed "Line of Actual Control".Much of the fighting took place in harsh mountain conditions, entailing large-scale combat at altitudes of over 4,000 metres (13,000 feet).The Sino-Indian War was also notable for the lack of deployment of naval and aerial assets by either China or India.As the Sino-Soviet split heated up, Moscow made a major effort to support India, especially with the sale of advanced MiG fighter-aircraft. The United States and Britain refused to sell advanced weaponry to India, causing it to turn to the Soviet Union.[8]

IV. DISCUSSION AND RESULTS

In the aftermath of the Mutiny, the Company's European units switched to British Army service. The artillery was integrated into the Royal Artillery, while the infantry were retitled as regiments of foot (numbering 100 to 109 in the order of precedence).

Following further reforms of the British Army, some of these became famous Irish regiments like the Royal Munster Fusiliers and the Royal Dublin Fusiliers.The Crown took over what remained of the Company's armies. These units were restructured and merged, eventually becoming the Indian Army.Recruitment of Indian soldiers also changed. The high-caste Hindus from the Ganges Valley who had dominated the Bengal Army - the Company's most important force - were now distrusted due to their role in the Mutiny. They were replaced by Punjabi Muslims, Sikhs, Gurkhas, Baluchis and Pathans.This restructured force went on to serve in many campaigns on India's unruly North-West Frontier, but also in Afghanistan, China, Burma and elsewhere. During the two World Wars, the Indian Army made a vital contribution to Allied victory, serving in most theatres of war.[8,9]

Thus, The East India Company maintained a formidable army in each of its three Presidencies. Although there was a military presence in each Presidency beforehand, the Company established formal armies following the French capture of Fort St George (Madras) during the War of Austrian Succession in 1746. These armies grew over the next hundred years until the renowned 'Indian Mutiny' (1857-59). After the Mutiny, the India Act of 1858 of the English parliament, decreed the dissolution of these armies. Its European soldiers were given the option either of transferring to the British Army or of discharge with a bounty and shipment back to Europe. About 50 percent selected each option. The mutinous native regiments were disbanded but those few, who remained loyal to the British, plus loyal native irregular units, formed the basis of the new 'Indian Army', which continued until Independence[10,11]

The three Presidency armies were quite distinct from each other and operated independently. More information can be found on their respective articles:

- Bengal Army
- Bombay Army
- Madras Army

V. IMPLICATIONS

According to statistical analysis of the Depot Lists and Embarkation Lists of recruits going to India by FIBIS Chairman, Peter Bailey, six percent of soldiers were consistently recruited as married.

One of his ancestors joined the EIC Army at nearly the same time that his daughter was born and was sent to India several weeks later with his wife and new-born baby c mid 1820s. Although the East India Company provided a passage back to Britain for soldiers at the expiration of their term of service it appears that very few elected to return. Samuel Hickson, who was in India 1777-1785, lists the reasons for this in his Diary as disease, the good provisions made by the Company relating to age and incapacity, the bounty paid on renewal of service and family ties. Mostly a European soldier would be in a European Regiment. However at times a European soldier could be in a role such as Quartermaster Sergeant in a Native Infantry Regiment.[12,13]

The army took responsibility for many civil and social activities in the country, particularly in the vicinity of the cantonments. These responsibilities were undertaken by Warrant Officers generally acting through Sergeants of differing titles. These were positions of significant importance and standing and the chance to attain them was one of the attractions of joining the Company's army rather than the King's/Queen's army. Many NCOs were able to take on other work and attract an extra income. By doing so, they could frequently buy themselves out of their units, could earn more money and qualify for a pension much sooner.

Hence, during the seventeenth century, the East India Company (EIC) was a minor power in South Asia, repeatedly defeated in battle. However, this changed rapidly, beginning in the 1750s, as the EIC started projecting power from its coastal enclaves into the interior. One after other, the indigenous powers were defeated and destroyed. This article argues that the EIC's military success was not merely the result of importing the military institutions that emerged in western Europe: there was no military revolution in early modern South Asia. Rather, the EIC blended imported British military institutions and techniques with South Asia's indigenous military traditions, creating a hybrid military establishment in which South Asian manpower, animals, and economic resources were crucial. The article focuses on the construction of the EIC's military establishment by concentrating on three spheres: military technology, manpower management, and logistics.[14,15]

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Contrary to popular belief, the capture of India was not accomplished by the British Army, but by the private armies of the East India Company, whose primary objective was the protection of their trading empire.
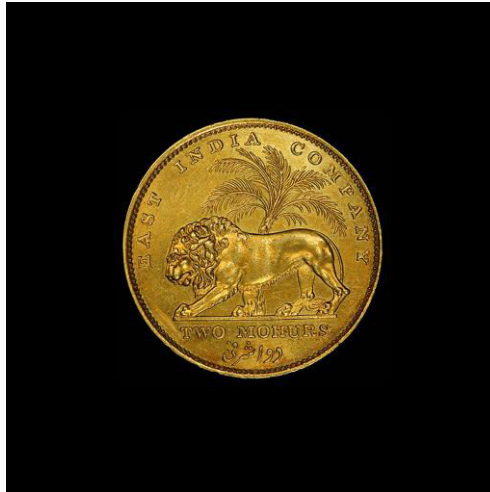
Under the leadership of the legendary Robert Clive (founder of the East India Company) and Stringer Lawrence, this small force of mercenaries and adventurers grew in size and strength to eventually become an army larger than that of any European sovereign state. Highly disciplined and professional, it fought almost continuously for a century until the Great Mutiny of 1857 led to its disbandment and its troops passed into Crown service. One of the many British Army officers who fought with this force was Arthur Wellesley, the future Duke of Wellington. This is the fascinating history of the East India Company army, examining the many conflicts in which they fought, and their equipment and training, with its regiments of horse, foot and guns, which rivalled those of most European powers. The exotic uniforms combining traditional Indian and British dress are illustrated in detail and make for a wonderfully colorful account of a private band of adventurers that successfully captured the jewel of the British Empire.[16]

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