Martial Race Theory and Colonial Military Recruitment: Constructing Racial Hierarchies in British India

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ABSTRACT:

The British colonial administration constructed the martial race theory to selectively recruit soldiers based on racial, ethnic and geographical criteria. This paper examines how colonial discourse shaped the classifications of Indian communities into martial and non-martial groups, favouring Sikhs, Gurkhas and Pathans while marginalising high caste Hindu and Dalits. Using recruitment handbooks, administrative policies and military reports, the study highlights the racialised logic behind the British military enlistment practices. The shift in recruitment post-1857, particularly the Peel and Eden Commissions' role in reinforcing ethnic segregation, demonstrates how these policies were aimed at dividing Indian society and ensuring imperial stability. Furthermore, the paper explores how martial race ideology was codified through colonial ethnographies, handbooks, and regimental structures. This study argues that martial race theory was not merely a military necessity but a colonial tool of governance, reinforcing racial hierarchies that persisted even in post-colonial India.

KEYWORDS:

Martial race theory, Colonial military recruitment, Racial hierarchy.

The colonial conception of martial race marked certain ethnic communities as inherently disposed towards military occupations by virtue of their physique, blood, and other genetic attributes.[1] According to Lionel Caplan, this reflected scientific racism and biological determinism prevalent in Europe. Metcalf observed that the British identified– Sikhs, Gurkhas, Pathans—as naturally brave and loyal and categorised them as martial races contrasting with groups they viewed as "effeminate" and "deceitful"[2] this perception played a key role in legitimising the colonial domination of groups considered to be 'inferior'. This colonial conception of martial races were further entrenched by the administrative needs to categorise Indian society along rigid racial lines. Stephen Cohen argues that British officials equated race with jati, failing to recognise the fluidity of caste and community in Indian society. This created a rigid recruitment framework where social mobility was virtually nonexistent, reinforcing military hierarchies based on ethnicity rather than individual merit. The rise of the martial race theory led to the displacement of high caste Hindu warriors, altering traditional patterns of military recruitment. The British, drawing from their battlefield in India, selectively assigned martial attributes to groups they deemed suitable for military service. Lord Roberts of Kandahar played a key role in formalising this policy, emphasising that the northwestern frontier races– Sikhs, Pathans, Gurkhas, Brahmins, Rajputs, and Mahars– were naturally suited for warfare due to their geographical origins and racial traits. His policies reflected broader British fears of Russian expansion and the need for a loyal disciplined Indian Army.

This essay critically examines the colonial discourse on martiality, with special reference to the recruitment patterns of Sikhs, Pathans, Gurkhas Brahmins and Rajputs in the mid 19th century, as reflected in British military handbooks. It argues that martial race

theory was not merely a strategic military decision, but a racialised construct designed to reinforce British imperial control. This paper argues that the British construction of martial race theory was not simply a strategic recruitment decision but a racialised mechanism to reinforce colonial control, prevent unity among Indian soldiers, and institutionalise divisions that would persist even in post–colonial India.

The notions of British paternal hierarchy and civilizing missions were intrinsic, the belief in the Martial Race doctrine was partially also shaped by the Aryan Invasion theory, which posited that the fair–skinned, blue–eyed Aryans from Eurasia's colder regions conquered India. Gavin Rand highlights the Martial Race theory in colonial power and governance, Lionel Caplan, examines the imperial rhetoric, notes that while the Gurkhas were romantically celebrated for their martial prowess, they were simultaneously depicted as naively subordinate to British officers.[3] Thus creation of these discourses, necessitated a focus on understanding different peoples and cultures.[4]

The Indo–Aryan racial group, with certain attributes, such as tall stature, fair complexion, dark eyes, narrow and prominent nose, and ample facial hair were listed by H.H. Risley. Narratives regarding the martial race theory's inception begin with a description of the 1857 Revolt. A significant uprising occurred when approximately 70,000 members of the Bengal army rebelled,[5] the regular infantry of the Bengal army which consisted of 83,946 soldiers consisting of a diverse composition: Brahmins, Rajputs, Muslims, Christians, and Hindus.[6] British officials responded by deploying a combination of British troops, the Punjab Frontier Force, and Gurkha units. This upheavel combined with rural dissent and financial strain of colonial governance led to a change in the British perspectives and consequently some Indian communities were now seen as

untrustworthy, while others were perpetually viewed with mistrust, these disturbed groups were to be replaced by 'martial' races.[7]

While individuals who had taken part in the 1857 revolt , against British were demobilised and given non–martial identities, the majority of the post–1857 Indian Army was made up of populations that had supported the British during the uprising and were thus increasingly assigned martial identities. This approach had several benefits for the colonial government: martial identities promoted pride in one's skill among soldiers and helped maintain combat cohesion. The British integrated ethnic culture with the colonial authority by making military service a fundamental part of recruits' identities in the hopes that these ethnic communities would fight both to uphold their caste/communal pride and to protect the colonial state. Amar Farooqui links the idea of martialisation to the greater colonial method of divide and rule. For him, Charles Wood stating that he was for Divide et impera merely implied restating a policy that continued ever since 1857. This hatred along caste and community lines in the armed forces became a state policy that was then applied to the entire Indian society.[8]

Following the uprising, the British rapidly organised 34,000 Punjabis, predominantly Sikhs, into infantry regiments, alongside 14,000 irregulars, primarily Muslims from West Punjab. The uprising prompted the British to shift their focus from higher caste groups to non–Hindu communities like Gurkhas, Sikhs, and Trans–Indus Pathans for recruitment, a change supported and rationalised in the writings of British officers involved in the conflict. These groups were increasingly recognised for their martial prowess.

The Sikhs became crucial to the Indian Army during and after the Rebellion of 1857, offering valuable traits, unlike the Purabiyas disregarding caste taboos and willingness for overseas ser–

vice. A significant population of the Martial Sikhs, earlier serving in the army of Ranjit Singh, had presented their military prowess before the colonial state in the Anglo–Sikh wars. Later in 1857, Captain F. Wale had organised the 1st Sikh Irregular Cavalry at Lahore, drawing from the Sikh community as well as Muslims from west Punjab and the trans–Indus Pathans. A large number of the staff had previously been in the Khalsa army. It's noteworthy, Roy exclaims, that a large number of Punjabis only sided with the British after realising that the military tide was turning against the rebels. The Sikhs from the region between the Sutlej and Ravi rivers, for instance, only joined the Punjab Frontier Force after Delhi fell.

In this discussion of the events leading up to the Punjab becoming the primary recruiting ground for the Indian Army at the close of the 1800s, Tan Tai Yong demonstrates how the initial demilitarisation policies had to be reversed after the Great Revolt of 1857, when a new army had to be raised to fight the rebel Bengal regiments. The Punjab regiments were preferred above the Bengal soldiers by the 1880s because it was thought that they would be better equipped to operate in the northwest passes, where an impending threat of a Russian invasion was rumoured. Punjab has a long history of violence and militarism, with internal armed conflicts frequently being the norm as a frontier society that served as the "primary arena for military conflicts amongst rivals for political control in the Indian subcontinent."[9]

Increased demand for soldiers, driven by ongoing conflicts and the expansion of Indian Army regiments, led to a focus on Punjab for recruitment. The existing 'class system' placed a disproportionate burden on Punjab to supply manpower. The Punjab territories had a dynamic administrative flexibility characterised by paternalistic despotism.[10] The military here would assume a

Clive–Hastings model of a military–fiscal state. More than 60% of the soldiers from India during the war came from Punjab, and recruiting was allowed in all 28 districts of the province. As a result, the creation of a strong and wide alliance between the military leadership and the civilian government was necessary for the mobilisation of the province throughout the conflict. This, in Punjab, subsequently laid the foundation of an integrated civil–military administration.

The discussion of Sikhs as a martial race is followed by a peek into how Gurkhas replaced Brahmans and Rajputs of plains in Bihar and Bengal. In 1858, Dunlop stated that the Gurkhas were dependable, in contrast to the Purabiyas. He went on to say that the Gurkhas were very muscularly developed, short, and had Tartar features. The Gurkhas were perceived by the British as the Indian counterpart of the Scottish Highlanders, and in the same way that the highland heritage of the "martial" Scots was created, so was a comparable process evident in colonial India. The term 'Gurkha' was coined by the British to refer to Nepalese recruits, and it was named after a district located in the northeastern part of the Gandak basin.

The Gurkhas accrued to their standards of war–like personnel in hilly, rugged and cooler terrains, unlike, in this case, the rice–consuming, flat–nosed, lazy crowd in the plains of Awadh, Bihar and Bengal. Nepal, by the end of the 19th century was classified into various ethnic units with specific characteristics ascribed to each of them. Caplan examines the portrayal of the Gurkhas in British writings, exploring ideas of bravery and loyalty, in the context of what Enloe calls, 'Gurkha Syndrome'– labelling a group that in geographical and political proximity with the centre is quite alienated, as martial.[11] The identity of Nepalese war–like groups, as previously stated, did not remain static over time and was exposed to differ–

ent 'external' influences, notwithstanding the idea that martiality was 'born in the bone' and/or ecologically influenced by the climate of the hills. However, martiality was thought to be the essential component of enrollment. According to Ragsdale's estimation, nearly 60% of males who enlisted in the Gurkhas (1894–1913) were recruited as Gurungs and Magars, 27% as Rais and Limbus; all other ethnic communities, amounted to approximately 12.5 percent of recruits.

Despite manufacturing a colonial idea of martial race, which deeply impacted the Indian social life, their reliance on local elites for military recruitment revealed the essence of a 'limited raj'. The caste and community identity, as a consequence of the deeply embedded martial race rhetoric, was more entrenched in the Bengal Army than in Bombay or Madras Army. Talking of army maxims, Dirk Kolff emphasises that the Bengal army would resonate with the words, "Hindustan zat ki ghairat" (In Hindustan it is jealousy of caste) whereas, in Bombay, one could hear, "Bombay paltan ki ghairat" (in Bombay it's jealousy of regiment).[12] By the end of the 1870s, the Bengal Army was seen as clearly superior to both the Bombay Army and the Madras Army. The Eden Commission suggested reducing the size of the Madras Army, which was by this point thought to be of relatively average military prowess. The commission permitted the Bengal army to maintain ethnically pure regiments while tightening recruitment restrictions in Madras and Bombay. Stephen Cohen notes that this period saw the definitive decline of the Madras army, which was increasingly viewed as militarily inferior, colonial officials justified this decline by emphasising the 'fair complexion and wheat consumption'[13] of norther recruits, reinforcing racial biases in military selection. This seemed quite ironic because the soldiers who had first fought and conquered for the British had come from southern India.[14]

Amar Farooqui underscores the diversive nature of the martial race categorisation, labelling the recruitment handbooks as nothing more evident than the martial race as 'vehicles of vicious colonial propaganda.'.[15] This colonial mindset permeated civilian society, contributing to the solidification of caste identities, as theorised by Nicholas Dirks.[16] The legacy of this historical encounter between India and colonial rule is the enduring construct of caste and community as central, albeit complex and contested, features of social identity in the Indian subcontinent.

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