

Subaltern Struggles and Imperial Designs: The Role of Untouchable Soldiers in the Battle of Plassey

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Abstract; The Battle of Plassey represents a crucial turning point in history, where the British and French East India Companies achieved victory over the Nawabs of Bengal. However, it's important to shed light on the overlooked contributions of untouchable soldiers who played a pivotal role in supporting these companies, despite facing marginalisation. Understanding the circumstances surrounding their recruitment and acknowledging their incredible courage can provide a more comprehensive perspective. Recognising and commemorating their contributions would be a positive step towards honouring their impact on history.

Keywords: European company, Native Indian Army, Nawab, Robert Clive, Dusadh.

Introduction

The eighteenth-century world was known for power games, war, aggression, invasion, betrayal and struggle. The war location was scattered from European soil to Indian soil. It was a time when many changes were seen in the political and economic fields. This was the period remembered for the fierce power struggle. As a result, the European powers and tottering Indian powers came in front for the showdown of supremacy. The Battle of Plassey on 23rd June 1757 was an epoch-

making event in the history of the colonial world. The battle of Plassey weakened the Nawabs and strengthened the British East India Company. It proved chivalrous for Robert Clive and unchivalrous for Siraj ud Daulah. It exposed the hollowness of the unity of Indians and the bravery of the native depressed class army who fought on the side of Europeans. This Indian venture in Plassey had a background of European wars and the industrialisation process in Europe. Moreover, Britain was the first country in the mid-eighteenth century to experience industrialization which necessitated colonial aspirations. The aims and ambitions of England for trade led to fierce competition with the European powers. The European nations were engulfed in wars but desired to win over the colonies for trade and profit, both in and outside colonies in Europe. These powers were fighting dual wars with a motive to control trade initially. On the one hand, the Seven Years' War (1756-63) was fought on European soil between different European countries; on the other hand, the French and British were grappling to take hold of India. In India and America almost simultaneously, and during the same worldwide struggle, occurred the decisive emergence of the British power above the French. For Indians, both the Nawabs and Britishers were foreigners. But this notion of foreigners was based on religion. The recruitment into the European army was preserved for high castes initially which was monopolized later by upper castes. So, "the dominant castes of Hindustan, Bhumihar Brahmans and several clans of Rajputs, made themselves into the dominant castes of the Company's sepoy army, not only culturally, but also numerically. As a result, the Company's regiments, self-perpetuating institutions as never before, became inward-looking preserves of Hindustani elite power." (Kolff, 2013;264) The untouchables at this time were aspiring to secure jobs in the military for better opportunities as ordinary soldiers or jobs suited to their occupations. It was the only service at this time available where they could earn a living with respect and dignity. The Indian untouchable soldiers due to hard work

and honesty reached or attained the post of Jamadar, Subedar and Subedar Majors. Such ranks in the military marked the greatest accomplishment by the untouchables and they were respected within the society. Within untouchables, a few castes were frontrunners namely dusadh, dhusia, doms and dhanuks as far as the Battle of Plassey was concerned. The untouchable soldiers helped the Britishers topple the Nawabship in Bengal and enabled the British to capture power. It was untouchables who joined the army of the British East India Company. The Indian army composed of untouchables also brought victory for the British in India as well as outside India. In this paper, I aim to highlight the following: 1. Why were untouchables recruited by the British East India Company? 2. Within untouchables, which caste was considered for recruitment into the army? 3. What was the role of untouchable soldiers in the Battle of Plassey? 4. How was the Battle of Plassey important for Indians and Britishers?

Background of British East India Company and Bengal Native Army

The East India Company was established in 1599 by a group of merchants. They opened their first factory in Surat in 1612 and built Fort St. George in 1640. The first expedition to Bengal was sent from England in the same year. It consisted of two ships, and the crews were warmly welcomed by the Nawab of those provinces. As a result, the Company decided to pursue trade and eventually established a factory at Hooghly in 1650-51. Although the Bengal settlements existed independently, they relied on Fort St. George for support. Additionally, their trade was regulated by the Native government of Bengal, which prohibited them from having any military power beyond a symbolic "ensign and thirty men" to show respect to the main agents. In 1581 Bengal became independent of Madras, Mr. Hedges being sent from the latter place as the Company's "Agent and Governor in the Bay of Bengal and the factories subordinate." In 1651, a decree issued by Shah Shuja allowed British exemption from trade duties by paying a small sum of Rs.

3000. In 1668, Bombay became the Company's main trade centre after it was acquired from the Portuguese Empire as a matrimonial gift. By the end of the century, the East India Company had a major presence at Madras, Calcutta, and Hughli in Bengal amongst others. These early arrangements were entirely peaceful, but the company wanted more control and more power that would give even greater returns to its private investors. There was a continuous power struggle between the Nawab and the company regarding the privileges and concessions. Sometimes the order was overruled by the Delhi Durbar. However, with the setting of the rule of Alivardi Khan in Bengal, a strict order was passed to all the European companies to maintain neutrality within Bengal. It was in the mid-18th century that the East India Company gained the right through a royal charter to raise its army, principally to protect its assets like warehouses and man its fortifications. The more concessions increased greed among the British companies. Under these circumstances, Nawab had to intervene to control the British expansion in Bengal. The strictness of Nawab upon European companies in Bengal led to a fallout situation and factions among Nawab courtiers. The death of Alivardi Khan on 21st April 1756 and the succession of young Nawab Siraj ud Daula led to a final breach among companies and courtiers which resulted in the Battle of Plassey.

History Writings on Battle of Plassey

There is a gap in writing history on the Battle of Plassey from a subaltern perspective. The dominant historians of Imperialist, Nationalist and Marxist portrayed this battle as the cleverness of Robert Clive and European superiority in terms of warfare, weakness of Nawab of Bengal, insidious fighting amongst Nawab's supporters and courtiers, succession issues for the nawabship, misuse of dastak and private trade by Europeans, the building of fort without nawab's permission, trade rivalry between European powers etc. There was no denying the fact that all the above-stated factors were responsible for the Battle of Plassey.

However, undermining the role played by untouchable soldiers in the Battle of Plassey was equally denying the real truth of history. It was highlighted and written that the battle was fought on the ground for several hours. For a foreign country like England, manpower was essential and core for any achievement. These untouchable soldiers were the backbone of the army and military forces at a very crucial time. The writings of a few imperialists and others had given due importance to the role of the native Indian army and sepoy deployed by the Europeans. However, they did not mention the persons who were mainly comprised of untouchable castes. J.R. Seeley pointed out that “our acquisition of India was made blindly. Nothing great that has ever been done by Englishmen was done so unintentionally, so accidentally, as the conquest of India.” (Seeley,1883;179) The period and events under discussion are extensively documented in works by British historians and officials such as Elphinstone's Rise of the British Power in the East; Scott's History of Bengal; Malcolm's Life of Clive; Orme's History of Hindoosthan; Mill's History of British India; Thornton's History of British India; Ive's Voyage and Journal; Stewart's History of Bengal. Notably, James Mill's History of British India along with the posthumously published The Rise of the British Power in the East by Monstuart Elphinstone, are particularly renowned for their analytical rigour and impartial presentation of their subject. These writings were written to suit their masters and denigrate the divisions within Indian society on various counts. There was a tendency in history writing to highlight the facts that suit their views and positions. Three different imperialist theories have been propounded to explain the conquest of Plassey. As per the Defensive theory, the conquest of India was handy work to be a defensive response to rivalry for trade between the French and English East India Company and the weakening of central power i.e. Mughal empire. However, Philip Mason pointed out that “conquest was to expel the French threat to English East India Company

and project its trade.” (Mason, 1998;181) It was the French East India Company that had control over trade, particularly in southern India. The propounder of turbulent frontier theory stated “that in a disorderly subcontinent the security of Bengal, Madras and Bombay could only be safeguarded by the extension of British authority.” (Galbraith, 1960;152) As a result and need of the hour British by whatever means intruded and ventured into the eastern coast, one of the wealthiest provinces of India. Eric Stokes in his seminal work viewed “the English East India Company as constrained to transform itself into a territorial power because of the insecurity caused by the collapse of the Mughal Empire and the emergence of a rival European threat to its trading areas from the French.” (Stokes, 1973;142) The British government wanted to secure trade with the native rulers and from other European companies. However, Judith M. Brown explained it differently by stating that “this was not only the desire of quick profits for the company and personal ambition of some factors but also an extension of European rivalry which led to the conquest of Bengal.” (Brown, 1994;45-51) How could an extension of rivalry be beneficial for the British? Lastly, Ian Bruce Watson judging from psychologist theory of imperialism expressed that “the psychology of the English officers was a more important factor for conquest than any other. It was the personal urge of the officers like Robert Clive for self-assertion.” (Watson,1980;52-70) Thus, all three theories pointed out the urge for the conquest of Bengal by citing different reasons. However, P.J.Marshall thought that “until 1784, there was no conscious or consistent British policy for political conquest in India. The growth of territorial empire in India was neither planned nor directed by Britain but was the initiative of the company officials operating in India which decided the course of action, despite the absence of any policy directives from London in favour of conquest and colonization.” (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; 37) It was the urge of the company officials with the changing political circumstances of weakening core and strengthening of

periphery which inspired them to intervene in local affairs. C.A. Bayly pointed out that “even after the 1780s, the imperial expansion was primarily motivated by the fiscal and military needs of the company, rather than interests of trade.” (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; 38) These writings may be useful in explaining the motives of the British Raj but with the changing times, there is policy change. Moreover, European wars were more vital for any European country at this point. Philip Lawson made it clear that “in the middle of the eighteenth century the Europeans gained a decided technological edge over the Indians and this paved the way for victory as a policy of aggression and state imperialism by proxy.” (Bandyopadhyay, 2004; 39) In the writings of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, it was mentioned that “India was conquered by the British with the help of an army composed of Indians.” (Moon, 1993;85) Dr. Ambedkar raised a very pertinent question here, mentioning “But who were these Indians who joined the army of their foreigners? Who were these people who joined the army of the East India Company and helped the British to conquer India?” (Moon, 1993;85-86) There was no denying the fact that the native Indian army composed mostly of untouchables played an important role in the decisive battle for the British Raj. Thus, Professor J.R. Seeley remarked that “India can hardly be said to have been conquered at all by foreigners, she has rather conquered herself.” (Seeley, 1883; 237) For a clear-cut understanding of the statement, the initial recruitment process and composition of the native Indian army must be examined which was highlighted by Stephen P. Cohen, Manas Dutta etc. in their writings. Tirthankor Roy pointed out that “the first major military encounter between the Company and a provincial army, the battle of Plassey (1757), has been described as ‘a transaction, not a battle’, by an Indian historian.” (Roy, 2010;5) The nature of the battle can be disputed but how European companies grew in strength and captured territories by becoming powerful. The strength of companies was the native soldiers which was not given

importance in the history writings. It was the most important factor but the subaltern class hardly mattered for the dominant class. Why have European companies started recruiting native people? Was it a compulsion or necessity for the European Companies?

Positions of Untouchables Before Conquest

The battle of Plassey played a dominant role in the establishment of British rule in India. Before the coming of Europeans, the untouchables were looked down upon. The institution of caste did not provide many opportunities for these untouchables to be in service or administrative posts. They were occupied with traditional and menial jobs based on the caste system. On the other hand, the upper castes had an advantage in occupying the most suitable jobs. These jobs were monopolized by Brahmans, Bhumihars and Kshatriyas who brought their kith and kin and native people belonging to villages and towns. There was no entry of untouchables. These untouchables were engaged in occupational jobs based on the caste system in society. After the coming of Europeans in India, they needed local people to be part of their administrative structure. The European countries after the Industrial Revolution needed raw materials, cheap labour and markets of the colonies to carry forward the production and distribution of goods. The industrialization process in Europe caused them to search for new colonies for the needs of the factory system. As a result, there was competition within the European powers to acquire colonies and to compete with each other. Such fierce competition and rivalry led them to get support from the local nawabs, rulers and people. These European powers started collaborating with the regional powers in such a situation. Moreover, to consolidate power, they needed people in various capacities to support them. In India, the French East India Company and British East India Company were trying to acquire the territories in various parts of India.

The international situation for both powers was forcing them to compete with each other. Firstly, the war of Austrian succession (1740-1748) amongst various European countries was not restricted to Europe, but also spilled into their trading countries namely India. The war between France and England ended in 1748, which had brought peace for some time in Europe. As a result, both powers to strengthen their power in the colonies started recruiting Indian troops. It had double-edged advantages for both Europeans and Indian natives. These European powers did not in capacity to spare regular troops for India. To manage the affairs in India, both these powers needed a large number of soldiers. Though the British managed to send the English troops to India in 1754 to control the military affairs, it was inadequate. It was under these circumstances that Europeans started recruiting the local untouchables into military service. Why do they choose untouchables? Was caste not a stigma in the army? How did they manage to convince the upper-caste soldiers? Secondly, with the declaration of the Seven Years' War in 1756 which continued till 1763, these European companies once again struck in a fierce battle at both places. In a situation like this, they had no other way but to depend upon local natives for the safety and security of their trade and further expansion. Both these international battles during the beginning of the mid-eighteenth century provided an opportunity for the Indian untouchables to be part of the decorated army positions, a different experience altogether. The circumstances had provided an opportunity for the native people to secure a position in the army. For untouchables, caste identity in society prevented them from finding such services. The societal stigma of caste, hierarchy and inequality amongst untouchables remained a touchstone to relive a different life with discipline and dignity and earn self-respect with great valour. These opportunities transformed their life and also equally served the purpose of European companies who needed manpower to fulfil their daily needs. Although Indian untouchables

were not granted any high rank, the dignity of labour was preserved in the service of the army. With these limitations of untouchable soldiers, they acquired the available opportunity and made the best use of it to bring further transformation into society. These opportunities not only transformed their way of life but in the long run, made them able person to lead a dignified life.

Recruitment of Untouchables as soldiers in the British army

The untouchables of India were the backbone of the British army. It was highlighted that “members of many different castes, including a large number of low and “spurious” castes, had traditionally maintained a strong foothold on military employment.” (Kolff, 2013;263) Initially, they played an important role in acquiring and acquisition of territories in India. They were employed by Britishers as sepoy, guards, watchmen etc. Manas Datta has pointed out that “English East India Company gave new opportunities to the lower castes, providing them with occupational and social mobility and socio-economic improvements.” (Datta, 2016;58) The untouchables becoming a part of the army allowed them to gain respect and security in society. It was a noble profession to serve in the army forgetting the past occupational menial work. It became respectable to wear a uniform which was considered equal among all. The army discipline and rules and regulations made them understand the various nuances of society where they were looked down upon in rural India. It was also important that not all untouchables got the opportunity to serve in the army. The most suitable and qualified in all respects were selected to serve in the army. This also enhanced their prestige within the untouchables. The uniform of the army adorned by untouchables provided a sense of equality and devotion for the work gave utmost satisfaction forgetting the experience of the society based on caste. The opportunity to do different work from the traditional one marked the departure in prestige among the untouchables. It was a new learning experience which provided an impetus to move upward and

start a new beginning. Such recruitment in the army played an important role in the life of untouchables. They were not different from others but they were lacking in the opportunity. It was pointed out that “the arrival of the East India Company on North India’s labour market did after all mean a break with tradition. The Company was in a position to establish a monopoly as an employer of soldiers, at least at the state level.” (Kolff, 2013;264) Under the British East India Company, they felt the utility of serving in the army and proving their ability for such work. The purpose of recruiting untouchables into the army proved fruitful which made them superior in the consolidation of the power in India. They needed manpower to reduce the conflict and win over the enemies. In foreign countries, the British needed much support from the natives to control the natives. It served the dual purpose which was not at all an easy task. Initially, they recruited the people who were willing to serve mainly untouchables and tribals. Hence, the Britishers relied upon a few untouchable castes which could serve their purpose.

The recruitment of sepoys started in the early part of the 18th century by the French which was later on emulated by the Britishers. It was in 1748 that “a small body of sepoys was raised at Madras after the example set by the French, for the defence of the settlement.” (Seeley, 1883;30) Professor J.R. Seeley remarked that “an idea of conquering India was deliberately conceived by French men.” (Seeley, 1883;30) The foreign manpower by these European powers had been replaced by the Indian manpower. The first chance of associating with the British troops was taken by upper-caste Hindus and simultaneously, they inducted their relatives and friends making it look more homogeneous. Stephen P. Cohen has remarked that “when political systems are engaged in warfare they tend to draw more heavily from low castes for manpower.” (Cohen, 1969;454) This situation provided more opportunities for untouchables for social mobility. However, it was not a

continuous trend. Many a time, peasantry volunteered in times of crisis, but they returned to traditional occupation in peacetime.

Anand A. Young stated that “when Robert Clive organized the first sepoy battalion in Bengal in the 1770s, several recruits were drawn from Bihar, probably including some from Saran. By the mid-nineteenth century, the district had provided as many as 10000 sepoys.” (Young, 1979;43) Similarly, Dr. B.R. Ambedkar mentioned that “the men who fought with Clive in the battle of Plassey were the Dusads, and the Dusads are untouchables.” (Moon, 1993;86) The recruitment of Dusads in the army in Bengal was most significant as per their prevailing socio-economic conditions. These soldiers were loyal to the British but at the same time, they were also concerned with their career and recruitment in the army by the foreign powers. They had been suffering from the caste stigma since time immemorial which prevented them from performing in different walks of life. This was a life-changing opportunity which all of them wanted to continue honestly and dedicatedly. G.W.Briggs in his seminal work pointed out that Jaiswars were with the troops that fought with Robert Clive at Plassey.” (Briggs, 1920;23) Dirk H.A.Kolff pointed out that “lower caste sepoys, such as Pasis who had contributed much to the centuries-old Purbiya tradition of mobile labour and had helped fight Clive’s battles.” (Kolff, 2013;265) Such references point towards the need of the British to recruit people belonging to untouchable caste without any discrimination. It was serving their purpose at the same time these people felt empowered to receive jobs like this. It was remarkably pointed out by J.R. Seeley that “in India we (Englishmen) we had at the outset a sense of inferiority in comparison with them (French) and fought in a spirit of hopeless self-defence and fear of the French.” (Seeley, 1883;30) The fear in the minds of colonial administrators about the rival company forced them to recruit suitable persons of untouchable caste to defend their dignity and power as an outsider. It was both a need as well a

necessity for the British company to take native people into the army. To strengthen their power, manpower needed much attention when competing tendencies were obvious and declared for trade supremacy. The international (European) wars and results had a direct bearing on these European companies in the colonies to compete with each other to maintain supremacy for the sake of maintaining the status of an imperial country. A country like India that had an abundance of all the requirements that these competing countries needed in the eighteenth century. In the absence of weak central power and equally rival regional powers, they were searching and waiting for an opportunity to dismantle completely to catch hold of power in their hand. For European companies, caste was not a criterion for the initial requirement of manpower in saving the profiting business and subjugating the rival company. Bhagwan Das pointed out that “untouchables joined the armies of the East India Company when they turned to empire building.” (Das, 2008;8) It was true that the East India Company needed manpower to fulfil the ambition of making India one of the colonies in South Asia. These untouchable soldiers fought for the cause of the company and with their courage and valour, they were recognized as valiant soldiers.

In 1757, Major Lawrence, a British officer, assigned Robert Clive, a British military leader, with the task of reorganising the Indian troops into regular, well-structured battalions. It was during this year that the Battle of Plassey took place, which gradually diminished the French influence and paved the way for the expansion of the British East India Company's territories in India. The French influence was mainly present in the east and south of India, which allowed the Nawab of Bengal, a Muslim ruler, to feel secure from any other foreign powers. After the expansion of the military, there was a significant increase in the number of troops at its disposal. This led to the creation of the first regular native Indian infantry battalions, which comprised a team consisting of one British captain, two

lieutenants, several British sergeants, 42 Indian non-commissioned officers, and 820 Indian ranks and files. These battalions marked a significant milestone in the history of the Indian military, as they were the first organized units that were trained and equipped to fight in the traditional European manner. The officers in the army were Britishers and in lower ranks Indians. These compositions straightforwardly point towards the hierarchical status which the British army was maintaining. Robert Clive, a British officer who served in India, made a significant contribution to the British colonial rule in India. He was the first British officer to equip Indian troops entirely, which was a remarkable achievement. The East India Company bore the expenses of this equipment, and it was popularly known as 'Sarkar'. His efforts played a vital role in expanding British influence in India. During the British colonial era, the native Indian soldiers or sepoy played a significant role in the British army. These soldiers were even dressed in British 'Red Coats' by their commanders, which eventually led to the coining of the term 'Lal Paltan' for such units. The sepoy held a special place in the popular notion and an essential component of the British army's military might in India. Their uniform held a unique significance in the psyche of the people. On a personal level, these soldiers felt empowered in their assigned duties. During the Battle of Plassey, Robert Clive led a valiant army that included 950 European troops, consisting of 250 men of His Majesty's 39th Foot, 2,100 Indian troops (sepoy and topazes), 60 sailors, and 100 artillerymen equipped with eight 6-pounder guns and two howitzers. The British army, though outnumbered, displayed remarkable courage and resilience in the face of the Nawab of Bengal's army, which boasted a formidable 35,000 infantry, 15,000 cavalry, and 53 pieces of artillery, including 18, 24, and 32-pounders. On the battlefield, a small French unit led by St. Frais supervised the artillery and manned some guns. Despite being outnumbered, the British soldiers comprised of untouchables were steadfast and played a crucial role.

Their intelligence and bravery led to the death of the commander of the Nawab's army. This shows that, while numerical strength is important in an army, the courage and skill of individual soldiers can make all the difference.

Conclusion

The Battle of Plassey fought in 1757 between the British East India Company and the Nawab of Bengal, Siraj ud Daulah, is a significant event in the history of colonial India and holds immense importance for both Indians and the British. Initially, the British were fearful of the French company, and the Nawab of Bengal was apprehensive about the British's growing influence in the region. It is noteworthy to mention the contribution of untouchable soldiers who fought for Robert Clive during the battle. Although it was common to have untouchable soldiers in the Indian army, it was not until the Battle of Plassey that the idea became important for the East India Company's administrators. The untouchable soldiers played a crucial role in the battle, displaying remarkable bravery and discipline despite being discriminated against based on their caste. The victory of the British army over the Nawab's forces was largely attributed to the untouchable soldiers who were pillars of strength. Despite their significant contribution, the role played by the untouchable soldiers had previously been overlooked in historical accounts. Dr. Ambedkar had written about it and highlighted the importance of untouchable soldiers, who had helped the British win the battle. This victory was a turning point in the history of colonial India, and it gave the untouchable soldiers some recognition and opportunities for growth in the colonial administration. As a result, their socio-political and economic conditions improved, and they were able to assert their basic civil and political rights later on, as evidenced by the anti-caste movement. The contribution of the untouchable soldiers in the Battle of Plassey highlights the importance of recognizing and acknowledging the neglected groups from immemorial times, regardless of their caste or social status. The untouchable

soldiers fought with full vigour and zeal, and their bravery paved the way for further advancement once given the opportunity.

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Moon, Vasant (ed.), Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar Writings and Speeches, Vol. 12, Education Department, Government of Maharashtra, Bombay, 1993, p. 86. The Dusadh caste in Bihar was an untouchable caste. Still, the people belonging to the Dusadh caste

work in police stations such as Chaukidar and Dafadar due to their historical past during the colonial period.

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