Colonialisms: Its Possible Origins

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Abstract: *Much has been said about colonial traditions. The point is that colonial traditions may not have been colonial at all. The ideologues of the raj may have been drawing from what they considered native traditions. A rider is essential here as the raj interpreted had their own understanding of native traditions based on input from their native informants. The British therefore lent their own spin to what constituted native traditions and what avowedly did not pass the test. Lata Mani in a different context has termed this process as the 'Invention of Traditions'.*

This article would like to investigate the origin of colonial traditions with respect to the colonial armies. How were these so-called colonial traditions derived? How did they evolve over the course of time? Could some colonial traditions be termed as invention of traditions? Was the colonial discourse regarding the army unnidimensional? Or were there multiple voices which spouted multiple discourses? Lastly but not the least what was the native role in the forming of colonial traditions? Did they merely act as informants or did they play an active role in moulding colonial concepts? These are some of the questions this article seeks to answer.

Martial Races: We first turn to the Colonial armies recruitment policies. One says armies because the colonial army was really three armies till the mid 1890's. We first turn to the recruitment policy of the pre-1857 Bengal army where an early variant of the Martial Race theory was in vogue since the 1770"s. To contextualises the recruitment policy of the Bengal Army in a nutshell, the Bengal army enlisted from certain select communities of erstwhile Awadh and Bihar. These select recruits were predominantly hindu upper caste recruits hailing mainly from a middle farmer background. Kaushik Roy has termed the recruitment policy of the pre-1857 Bengal Army as selective enlistment policy, a recruitment strategy which concentrated on certain specific communities and castes.

The moot question therefore before us is why were certain communities favoured for recruitment in the Bengal Army? Apparently those in charge of framing the policies of the Bengal army believed that upper caste men from Bihar and Awadh hailing mainly from a middle farmer background were naturally brave, loyal and tough fighters. Men from these communities avowedly imbibed the qualities required to become stellar fighting men. To add to their appeal these men were considered the equivalent of the yeoman peasantry in England. The English armies had traditionally recruited the bulk of their soldiery from the yeoman peasantry though that was no longer the case by the turn of the 18th century. (Dasgupta, 2015, pp. 79–83)

While the predilection for recruiting men who avowedly were the equivalent of the English yeoman peasantry could be understood what accounted for the colonial perception of these upper caste men from Awadh and Bihar as being naturally brave and hardy fighters? Was it based on existing indigenous perceptions about upper caste men from these regions who mainly hailed from a middle peasant background? After all these regions had traditionally supplied mercenary fighting men to various warlords and rulers even in the pre-colonial times. Mercenary recruits from these regions had a long –standing reputation of being doughty fighters.

Hence the British were not really constructing a novel image of the upper caste Purbaiya being a stalwart fighter. That reputation had been acquired over centuries. The difference was men from these regions had previously served various patrons. (Kolff, 1990, pp. 171-181) In contrast the colonial armies sought to monopolise the supply of these recruits with the bulk of these armies serving in the Bengal army, though significant numbers went into the Bombay army too. Even the Madras army in its early stages recruited some purbaiyas. The accent seemed to be on denying the supply of Purbaiyas to rival powers. The Purbaiya would as far as possible exclusively serve the East India company. The company would reconstitute his identity as an East India company soldier. There would be fine-tuning of his identity.

The moot point though was that the British had not really constructed the tradition of the Purbaiyas being great fighting men. Their martial identity had been built brick by brick through centuries of sustained military service. The British seized upon this already existing edifice and built upon it. Under them the martial identity of the purbaiyas was further evolved and refined. There was no paradigm shift or drastic break, yet at the same time they sought to impart a distinct touch to his identity without effecting a drastic break. The Purbaiya identity was subsumed to their advantage, though the Bombay army and the Bengal army treated the purbaiyas a trifle differently. While the Purbaiya in the Bengal armywas given huge leeway as far as his religious sentiments were concerned it was made clear to the Bombay sepoy that no interference of his religious beliefs would be tolerated when it came to the performance of military duties. His religious beliefs would be respected but it would not be allowed to come in the way of his military responsibilities.

This brings us to a vital question. Why did the two armies deal differently with the religious beliefs of the Purbaiyas? Were the Purbaiyas of the Bengal Army successful in inventing an imaginary orthodoxy of caste beliefs which were sacrosanct even when they conflicted with the call of military duty? If so why were they successful in doing so in contrast to the Bombay Purbaiya who failed miserably? There is no clear cut answer. One possible reason though could be the sheer dominance of the Purbaiyas in the Bengal army till the 1830's before the

advent of the Gorkhas and then the Sikhs would to an extent puncture his dominance. In contrast the Purbaiya in the Bombay army was never a brute majority though they were there in significant numbers. Further they were operating far from their home base in the Bombay army while their homelands fell within the confines of the Bengal Presidency. (Dasgupta, 2015, pp. 79–83)

While this is a partial answer, the explanation for this variation in responses on the part of the Bengal and Bombay army may be also sought in the differing strategies the policy makers of the two armies adopted. While the men in charge of the Bengal Army seemed to conform to orientalist stereotypes which held that Asiatics or natives were very sensitive when it came to the question of conforming to their religious beliefs and practices. Therefore it was best not to interfere with these beliefs and practices, particularly if it involved high-caste recruits as in the case of the Bengal Army. Taking advantage of their reluctance to confront the Bengal Sepoy over his religious beliefs even in cases when they interfered with his military duties, the purbaiya extracted concessions official and non-official over according precedence to his religious beliefs in case their observance conflicted with his religious beliefs.

That interestingly as mentioned before was not the case with the Purbaiyas in the Bombay army. What than accounts for this divergence in responses? Firstly it must be mentioned that colonial discourses were hardly uniform and were widely heterogeneous in character. The deeper question remains as to what accounted for the variety in colonial discourses, in this case the issue of the religious beliefs of the Purbaiyas? The answer may possibly be sought in the nature of native informants and the character of native societies they encountered. The Bengal Army might have encountered native informants and a native society which was orthodox and rigid when it came to observing religious practices and beliefs. Accordingly the Bengal army imbibed these beliefs and sought to represent these traditions in a colonial garb. They were possibly not really inventing traditions, rather they were adopting native traditions and prescribing it in the garb of colonial traditions.

In contrast the Bombay army might have operated in a more fluid terrain where religious beliefs and practices were fluid in nature and were not constricted within tight boundaries. Consequently the Purbaiya who was really alien to this environ found out much to his chagrin that the Bombay army was simply unwilling to make allowance for his religious beliefs if they conflicted with the observance of military duties. Indeed the army followed a policy of insisting on uncompromising obedience. For the policy makers of the Bombay armyheld the belief that religious sentiments were negotiable for the native soldier if it came in the way of performing his professional duties. Again it was a case of transposing native traditions as they interpreted and presenting it with a colonial coating.

The Effeminate Native: We now shift our tradition to those communities who were deemed unfit to serve in the pre-1857 Bengal army, namely the Bengalis.For reasons not fully clear the Bengali male was consistently portrayed in colonial discourses as an effete and cowardly male, who baulked at the prospect of physical activity or action. This negative stereotyping of the Bengali male was a feature right from the early days of the colonial presence in Bengal, the trope about the Bengali male being meek and timid would though acquire certain shades of class and religion going into the second half of the 19th century.

This powerful discourse directed at the Bengali male, emphasizing his physical weakness and lack of courage possibly affected the self- perception of the Bengali male and avowedly also the perception of males from other communities towards the Bengali male. There is an interesting passage in Durgadas's autobiography where certain Purbaiya soldiers are expressing wonderment at the stout physique of Durgadas who was tall and powerfully built. "*Tum Bangali hoke itna balwan kaise?*" (Bandyopadhyay, 1924, p.52) Durgadas is purportedly replied to the effect that there were many Bengalis who were endowed with fine physiques and he knew certain Bengalees who could take on 10 of them, i.e Purbaiya soldiers singlehandedly. Thus two not completely interrelated factors are at play here on one hand there is this strong assertion by the Bengali regarding the supposed illegitimacy of the view that the Bengali male was a weakling. The other interesting side we see here is that it seemed native communities categorized as martial by the British also shared the perception about the alleged effeminacy of the Bengali male. As Heather Graham argues in her study of the notion of martial races across the British Empire communities who were conferred with The avowed lack of masculinity in the Bengali male was a sensitive issue for the Bengali bhadrolok. While it is unclear when and how this notion gained ground, the stereotyping of the Bengali male as cowardly, effeminate, slimy, etc. was already prevalent in early 18th Century British accounts. Bishop Heber in his account of his tour of Bengal writes in the 1730's that the Bengalis were a cowardly and non-martial race incapable of physical prowess. There were certain other accounts where the Bengali male was being essentialised as being feminine and by implication cowardly. These early generalisations though did not discriminate on indices of caste or religion. The term Bengali was used as a broad ethnic term transcending barriers of caste, class and religion. The view that the Bengali was inimical to situations which demanded physical prowess and valour was entrenched by the middle of the 18th century. It led the pre 1857 Bengal army to specifically debar Bengalis from the ranks of the native recruits. The Bengal army therefore concentrated as mentioned before on recruiting upper caste Hindus men from present day Eastern U.P and Bihar. Most of these men hailed from a rural middle peasantry background. Men of these ilk as we already know were supposed to be brave, loyal and virile and avowedly made the best soldiers and thus constituted the bulk of the infantry units

of the Bengal army with the notable exception of the presence of a limited number of Ahirs or Yadavs in the army.

This trend registered a partial break 1830's onward when certain fresh communities like the Gorkhas and the Sikhs were dubbed martial and were recruited in the Bengal army in considerable numbers, though the overall dominance of the Purbaiyas remained intact. Thus the long and short of it was that the Bengali male had no place in these early pre-1857 version of the martial race theory. For he was decidedly and incontroverbly effeminate. This seemingly hard truth was an entrenched part of colonial discourse vis-a vis the Bengali male though the tag martial were also burdened with the onus of acting in certain ways for the martial races were bestowed with certain characteristics and mannerisms which they might not have possessed. Part of this baggage the avowedly martial communities imbibed was the tendency to share with their colonial masters a commonality as far as the mapping of native communities into martial and non-martial was concerned.

Post 1857 things did not change much for the avowed masculinity of the Bengali male. He was still regarded as an enfeebled male. While the old Bengal army and as a consequence its recruitment policy was completely done away with and a balanced recruitment policy which cast its net over a wide range of communities adopted, Bengalis still had no place in the new scheme of things. For he was the original antithesis of all that was manly as far as the colonial discourse on manliness was concerned. And things would only get worse for the Bengali as far as the masculinity index was concerned. The rise of the martial race theory in the 1880's would further seal the fate of the Bengali male and he would further entrapped in his image of a cowardly, effeminate person.

The theory initially propounded by Fredrick Roberts in effect stated that only a few select communities like the Sikhs, Gorkhas, Dogras, Punjabi Mussalmans, Pathans and a few others in the sub-continent were to be dubbed martial and capable of fighting bravely and effectively. The reasons behind a community possessing martial qualities according to the ideologues of the Martial Race theory were manifold and the only point of agreement among the proponents of the Martial Race theory was that wheat eating, less literate peasants from the rural areas made the best fighters. Some of the proponents of the martial race theory ascribed martial qualities it to the presence of advantageous genes while there were others who stressed on ecological, environmental, historical and political factors. For instance Roberts believed that long years of peace in the Madras Presidency had enervated the Madras Sepoy and had made him unmartial. George Mac Munn another important proponent of the Martial Race theory believed that the Aryans had enslaved the original inhabitants and deprived them of the right to bear arms. Therefore only the communities of Aryan origin were capable of being martial. Macmunn also believed that the tenets of certain religions like Sikhism made them martial. Macmunn though did not give much stress to climatic factors unlike

Roberts who believed that people from colder areas proved to be better fighters. (For a discussion on the Martial Race Theory see: Roy, 2008)

Again the moot point was that the Bengali did not figure anywhere in the scheme of things and he was probably as mentioned before further marginalized. Plus class and religion were now added as categories to qualify the notion of the unmanly Bengali. The reason was that the Bengali Hindu. Largely upper caste bhadrolok had emerged as a vocal opponent of the Raj. The middle Classes hoped that the colonial Raj would in course of time introduce democratic reforms in the colonies. Their hopes would be gradually belied and disillusionment with the British would set in. This disillusionment would become marked over the European reactions to the Ilbert Bill in1883 which had sought to empower Indian judges to try Europeans. Further provocation was offered by the provisions of the Arms act which effectively barred Indians from bearing arms. And this was not all. There were a host of other trying issues too which have been ably highlighted by Mrinalini Sinha.

Mrinalini Sinha argues that colonial discourses were not fixed or homogenous categories. Colonial discourses were heterogeneous and evolved in specific contexts. She argues that the labelling of the Bengali Babu as effeminate was the product of a specific material and social context. So was the Bengali Babu's desperate attempt to change this perception of himself as timid and cowardly. Sinha succinctly depicts the Bengali's obsession of attaining physical fitness and the opening of akharas, Byam Samitis etc. There were also the efforts of Bengali elite women like Sarala Devi who established the Volunteer Movement in the 1880's. All these frenzied efforts as Mrinalini Sinha points underscored the tension and unease within the Bengali Babu over this categorization of his physical identity.

She argues that the Bengali Bhadrolok had been feeling insecure since the 1860's when certain pro –tenancy measures introduced by the British in the wake of peasant revolts threatened the dominance of the Bengali babu over the peasant whom he was used to lording over. For most Bengalis Babus had some investment in land to a greater or lesser degree. To add to their woes the Bengali Babu as mentioned before gradually grew disillusioned with the British. Therefore his desperation to shed the tag of unmanly was according a double layered assertion, both to assert his dominance as the unchallenged spokesman of his community, and as an act of defiance against the Raj. (Sinha, 1995)

Having deliberated on the tenets of the Martial race theory and the grounds on which certain communities were dubbed as non-martial, the question still begs us that the Bengali was always considered as unmanly long before the martial race came into vogue. He was the original effeminate native. We see colonial commentaries on his avowed lack of physical prowess as early as the 1750's as demonstrated here by the example of Bishop Heber. How did the British arrive at the conclusion in the first place that the Bengalis were effeminate? Was it the

unimpressive physique of the average Bengali? Or did the fiasco at Plassey convince the British that the Bengalis were hopeless fighters?

While all these are possibilities, I would suggest that the perception of other native communities towards the Bengali male and his avowed lack of masculinity played a huge role in moulding the mentality of the British, who were gradually convinced that the Bengalis were indeed non-martial and cowardly by nature. Inverting the argument of Heather Street I would say that it was rather the perception of native communities towards the Bengali man and his alleged physical incapability which subtly forged the colonial opinion on the Bengali man's alleged lack of physical prowess. The instance cited here of Purbaiya soldiers asking Durgadas as to how he was so strong inspite of being a Bengali could also be cited as an example of neighbouring native communities have a strong negative opinion about supposed enfeebled physique of the Bengali male, who on top of that had no physical courage. And these perceptions could well have had a powerful role to play in moulding colonial notions of masculinity and effeminacy.

Thus I would argue that certain colonial discourses on masculinity or conversely the lack of it in certain communities were probably heavily influenced by existing native perceptions and traditions. These impinged on the colonial mind and the discourses which emanated from the colonial idealogues. In certain instances colonial traditions might not have been colonial at all. These were in reality native discourses repackaged in a colonial paradigm. This is though not to say that all colonial discourses were really native in origin. The martial race theory for instance bore a strong imprint of western notions of race, eugenics etc. Notwithstanding these fact there were also possibly strong native influences, the perception of native communities towards one another also played its part rather than the usual argument of the perception of native communities towards other native communities being influenced by the martial race theory.

The Notion of Paternalism: We now move to examine certain other so called colonial legacies or traditions and try to determine whether they were really colonial in nature. For instance the colonial armies to begin with tried to build a image of the paternal European officer in the belief that the oriental favoured a despotic mode of command. This was in keeping with Orientalist stereotypes which held that the Oriental subject preferred rulers who had absolute undivided powers over them. Keeping in line with these tropes the Colonial armies sought to evolve a system of command where the European commanding officers were portrayed as father figures to the sepoys, a sort of 'Mai Bap'. To bolster this image of the European officer being a father figure, the officers were given generous perks so as to help them to maintain a lavish lifestyle. For that was essential if they were to exude a certain aura which was an integral part of the father figure image. (Dasgupta, 2015, pp. 61–69)

This scheme of things implied that the European officer be given a enormous discretionary so that he could literally have the power of life and death over the Sepoy. The officers were expected to mix with them intimately and punish or reward them without reference to higher authority. The large amount of discretionary powers invested in them meant that they literally had the power of life and death over the sepoy ad could make or mar his life and career without having to refer to higher authority. Lt. Col Greenhill deposing before the Select Committee made a strong case for the paternal officer. In his opinion the paternal officer felt the greatest concern for the Sepoys welfare. Deposing before the Select Committee he opined:

> He felt the strongest interest in their welfare, and treated them with the greatest kindness, though often with a great deal of violence, they saw no person superior to him, superior mentality could not interfere, they respected him accordingly.[1]

The biography of Sitaram Subedar seems to validate these orientalist stereotypes. He talks of native sepoys liking command systems where the Commanding officers had absolute undivided arbitrary powers over them. Apparently the sepoys did not like undivided dispersed powers. They apparently preferred their Commanding officers to have the power of life and death over them. The Commanding officers on their part were expected to mix freely with the sepoys. The sepoys apparently did not mind being chastised for any wrongdoing while they expected rewards for good deeds. In the words of Sitaram:

> There were eight English officers in my regiment and the captain of my Company was a real sahib. His name was Burrumpel, he was six feet three inches tall, his chest was broad as the monkey god's and he was tremendously strong. He often used to wrestle with the sepoys and universal admiration when he was in the earned. He had learnt all the throws and no sepoy could defeat him. One was the prince sahib and another was known as the camel because he had a long neck. Another we called Damn sahib because he always said that word when he gave an order. (Sitaram, 1873/1970, p. 76)

While Sitaram may not necessarily be representative of sepoy attitudes towards the European officer, it is obvious that Sitaram hero-worshipped his regimental captain. That the Captain used to wrestle with the sepoys and beat them at that—wrestling being a traditional Indian recreation—seemed to have especially endeared him to Sitaram. Sitaram's comments further reveal to us that the other officers of the regiment were also held in affection and given evocative nicknames. One officer was called "Damn Sahib", an indication that even an abusive officer could endear

[1] Lt. Col Greenhill. (1832). *Select Committee on Indian Affairs 1831-1832, vol 11*, *Minute of Evidence*. Lieutenant colonel, p.388. (West Bengal State Archives, Kolkata).

himself to his men if he buttressed abuse with displays of care and affection. The sepoys were seemingly prepared to tolerate abuse from caring officers who interacted with them off duty.

In course of time the paternal mode of command gave way to a more impersonal mode of command as the colonial government felt that the paternal mode of command was emboldening officers to verbally and physically abuse sepoys at the slightest pretext. However it is not my intention to discuss the pros and cons of this change in style of command. The discussion here will veer around the legitimacy of dubbing paternalism as a style of command uniquely amenable with the Asiatic.

I would argue that there was nothing uniquely oriental about a despotic mode of command. Despotism was a cardinal feature in the western world before the advent of the French Revolution. This epic event did not change things dramatically. Western armies for example exhibited a feudal mode of command with the commanding officers possessing huge powers of bodily punishing delinquent soldiers. The relation between the predominantly aristocratic office cadre and the soldiery was not radically different from the relation between the European officer and the native sepoy. It was not till the closing decades of the 19th century before a more democratic mode of command would evolve in a few European armies.

Thus there was nothing uniquely oriental about paternalism as a mode of command. The officer in Western armies too sought to employ his power over the common soldier in a despotic, in a manner akin to the ubiquitous oriental despot. Paternalism was a cardinal feature of western armies too. It would be presumptuous to view this mode of command as uniquely eastern. What could be argued that the transition in general to a more democratic society happened earlier in western societies and this had its effect also on European armies too.

In conclusion it may be said that it is time we go beyond the east –west divide as far as traditions are concerned. So called colonial traditions like the martial race theory had possibly a distinct indigenous tinge to it. It is time that the indigenous contribution to the construction of the Martial race Theory is highlighted. That could be the base for a more nuanced reading of the complex ways in which the Martial Race theory was forged. The same could be said about the notion of paternalism as a style of command particularly suited to the Asiatic soil.

Paternalism has been a cardinal feature of all societies and armies at some point of time. The difference lay probably in the fact that western societies and armies evolved earlier out of that mode. Ironically it was colonialism perpetrated by the western powers which was responsible for the late transition to a democratic society in the eastern lands. To put it in a nutshell there was nothing oriental or eastern about the various traditions in the Colonial Indian Army or armies till 1894.All avowedly colonial traditions were an amalgamation of indigenous and western influences. There was no clear cut or black and white divide.

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