

From the Pages of History :

The National Liberation Struggle and the Indian Armed Forces

- Subrata Banerjee

(Read in the Seminar on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee of Chittagong uprising in Delhi)

The Indian liberation struggle can in no way be compared to the Great October Socialist Revolution in Russia. Nevertheless, the transfer of power from the British to Indians amounted to a change of regimes. The old imperialist regime yielded place to the new national regime. In that limited sense it was a revolution. In this situation too it required the “disorganization” of the armed forces to give the final push towards victory.

As we celebrate today the golden Jubilee of Chittagong Armoury Raid, we should also recall the RIN revolt. Exactly 33 years ago today those brave young men were still fighting a losing battle. It was probably no coincidence that the naval ratings at IMS Talwar went on strike on 18 February 1946 and the British Prime Minister, Mr. Clement Attlee, announced on the following day, the decision to send liquidation of the British Empire in India.

The year 1857 marked the beginning of the organized participation of Indian soldiers in the fight for liberation. The year 1946 was its culmination. Much happened during the nine intervening decades. One was the series of dramatic, spectacular, violent actions by individuals of small groups of revolutionaries. The second was what is known as the constitutional movement. From small beginnings the genius of Gandhi converted it into a mass movement.

The origins of the Indian armed forces go back to the early days of the East India Company. That was in the 17th century. The company enrolled Indian guards to protect the several factories set up in different parts of the country. By the end of the century three fortified positions grew up in Madras, Calcutta and Bombay. Around them developed administrative units with their own armies. Europeans, recruited locally or from abroad, and Indian sepoy served in these armies. This emerged the sepoy army, commanded by its own Indian officers, serving the needs of the British rulers. At this stage even the British soldiers served under Indian officers.

In the middle of 1734, the first contingent of British troops arrived in India. The Company reorganised its armed forces in three categories—the King’s troops, the Company’s European troops and the Company’s Indian sepoy. It took some years for these three categories to be gradually incorporated into one monolithic structure. In the process the Indian officers lost their prestige and powers of command. This was one of the factors that contributed to the first organized revolt of Indian soldiers, the revolt of 1857.

The sepoy army was an army of mercenaries. Between 1757 and 1857 it fought 20 wars. It enabled the British conquer the whole of the Indian subcontinent from Burma in the east to Kabul in the west. With the total military occupation of the country, the character and role of the sepoy army changed. This transformation was very well explained by Karl Marx:

“With the conquest of Scinde and the Punjab, the Anglo-Indian Empire had not only reached its natural limits, but it had trampled out the last vestiges of independent Indian states... Hence a great change in the position of the East India Company. It no longer attacked one part of India by the help of another part, but found itself placed at the head, and the whole of India at its feet. No longer conquering, it had become the conqueror. The armies at its disposition no longer had to extend its dominion but only to maintain it. From soldiers they were converted into policemen; 200,000,000 natives curbed by a native army of 200,000 men officered by Englishmen and that native, in its turn, being kept in check by an English Army numbering 40,000 only. On first view it is evident that the fidelity of the allegiance of the Indian people rests on the fidelity of the native army, in creating which the British rule simultaneously organized the first general centre of resistance which the Indian people was over possessed of”. (The First Indian War of Independence, 1857-1859, K. Marx and F. Engels, Foreign Language Publishing House. Moscow, PP. 39-40).

It would be wrong to think that the Indian soldiers of the Company’s army, raised the banner of revolt for the first time in 1857. It is very significant that there were reputed “mutinies”, for various reasons. The Indian soldiers never ceased to be civilians. In the cantonments, on the line of march they mixed with the people. They corresponded with friends and picked up news in the bazars. They could not but be affected by the sufferings and moods of the general population.

The Cambridge history of India records one incident after another. Every time the leaders of these revolts were blown up from guns in the presence of their compatriots. The first recorded incident took place in 1764. It was a turbulent year. According to Sir John Kaye one battalion even imprisoned its British Officers. This was the period of the Sannyasi-Fakir rebellion in Bengal.

The mutiny at Vellore in July 1806 has a clearly anti British edge. The rebel soldiers were personally encouraged by the third son of Tipu Sultan, and hoisted Tipu's flag on the palace. Some 40 rebellions soldiers were killed by the British.

In 1824, the 47th Regiment at Barrackpore refused overseas service at the time of the British invasion of Burma. They were brought out on parade and literally mowed down by artillery fire. With the expansion of the British Empire in India, more and more troops were needed for garrison duties, away from home and without active service allowance. From 1835 onwards, after the annexation of Sindh, there was a series of revolts, extending over wider and wider areas, and drawing in ever increasing numbers. In 1843 and 1844, at least five infantry, regiments, two cavalry regiments, and some artillery units refused garrison duties. The next two years there were reports of conspiracies which failed to materialize into action.

Again during 1849 and 1850 there was the same problem of garrison duty in the newly acquired territory of Punjab. One regiment even went on a pay strike at Rawalpindi. Another significant development in 1850 was the introduction of a Gurkha regiment to replace the rebellions 66th Regiment. Once again in 1856, the Bengal Army and the Madras Army refused to go on overseas service to Burma. The soldiers claimed overseas service was not part of their contract. In response to this stand, Lord Canning introduced a new rule on 25 July 1856, incorporating obligation "for general service in or outside India".

In each of these rebellious acts by the Indian soldiers in the 100 years between the Battle of Plassey and the great uprising of 1857, there was evidence of close collaboration with civilians. Thus 1857 was really the culmination of a series of peasant struggles and revolts in the Indian armed forces. The links between the two movements were not always direct. There is no doubt, however, that each influenced the other, however indirectly. There is also evidence to show that many of the disbanded soldiers joined the different peasant struggles and provided them with the necessary military leadership. Most of those revolts and struggles were the outcome of their own immediate experiences. Ultimately, however, they found themselves facing the British might. Thus they inevitably took the form of a struggle for freedom against foreign rulers.

The lesson that Marx drew from the revolt of 1857, was not lost on the British either. The first war of independence was ruthlessly crushed. India passed under the direct rule of the Crown. The sepoy army was reorganized. The theory of martial races was evolved. The idea was to keep out of the armed forces those who had already developed to some extent intellectually. At the regimental training centres the soldiers were motivated through the development of their racial or religious pride. The newly organized regiments were given racial and religious names – Punjab Regiment, Rajputans Rifles, Kumaon Regiment, Sikh Light Infantry and so on. Their regimental histories were histories of battles fought for the expansion of the British Empire. These were the traditions included in the soldiers as part of their training.

The government took well considered steps to keep the armed forces isolated from the people. Soldiers' families received special treatment with regard to housing and food. Land was given to retired soldiers to create vested interests; Special schools were set up for soldiers' sons. They got special preference at the time of recruitment. Some joined the same regiment as their father's. They became the rural elites. The officers' cadre, when Indian officers began to be recruited, came from the feudal aristocracy. The elitist attitude was carefully nurtured at all levels.

The soldiers learnt to look upon the civilian population with contempt. This was the process of converting soldiers into 'police-men". This was the only way to let them loose against unarmed people fighting for the country's freedom. One of the important tasks of the Indian armed forces was assistance to civil authorities in the maintenance of law and order. The other tasks were the defence of the borders of Britain's Indian Empire and serving as auxiliary forces in Britain's imperialist wars in different parts of Asia and Africa. These roles they fulfilled, in the main admirably, even winning royal recognition, much as the Royal Garhwal Rifles.

The units were so organized as to prevent any united action by the Indian soldiers. An infantry brigade, for instance consisted of British, Gorkha and an Indian battalion. Certain units were further divided on communal and caste lines. The Sikh Regiment had, for instance, a Mahar battalion. Another might be composed of 50% Punjabi, Muslims and UP Hindus. Then there was a class of Indian officers, known as Viceroy's Commissioned Officers, as distinct from the Sandhurst trained, King's Commissioned Officers. The VCOS formed the backbone of the unit administration. With caste and community divisions, one section or the other felt that the VCO would not do justice to its complaints or grievances. Thus the British Officer was the ultimate dispenser of justice and the *ma-baap*. It was the VCO, however, who advised the *ma-baap*, and carried out all the unpleasant disciplinary measures.

There would have been no more effective way of keeping the Indian soldier isolated from the people. To them the Indian armed forces always remained a mercenary force of occupation. The immense hatred against the army found expression at peak periods of the national movement. This isolation was further strengthened by the very pattern of development of our national consciousness and the main form of struggle ultimately adopted.

Individual terrorism was presented as an act designed to inspire armed uprising. On the first anniversary of the attempted assassination of Lord Hardinge in Delhi, a pamphlet *Shabash*, appeared in Delhi, on 23 December 1919. Referring to the bomb thrown at Viceroy the pamphlet maintained that the "roar of the bomb" represented the voice of the nation. It helped convey the message of freedom to the Indian soldiers, as it was difficult to approach them physically, confined as they were in cantonments. The message was that the British Government could be destroyed and the brave men of India should come out into the field of battle.

The First World War presented a great opportunity for the Indian revolutionaries to spread disaffection in the armed forces. Major attempts were made in 1914 and 1915 to trigger a military uprising. The Ghadr party was very active in Punjab. In November 1914 an attempted mutiny on the 23rd Cavalry, stationed at Main Mir near Lahore, was foiled by premature leakage of information. Vishnu Ganesh Pingley came to Punjab at this time. He was joined by Rashbehari Bose and Sacha Singh, a student from Ludhiana. Sacha Singh succeeded in recruiting a retired Havildar of the 9th Bengal Infantry, who later became a 'choudari' of the regimental bazar. He helped establish links with the soldiers.

Secret meetings were held at Meerut, Kanpur, Allahabad, Banaras, Fyzabad and Lucknow. Ghadr served as the organizer and was circulated widely among the soldiers of the 23rd Cavalry at Lahore, the 26th Punjab at Ferozpur, the 42nd Deoli Regiment, the 7th Rajput at Banaras, and the 89th Punjab at Dinepur and so on. A general uprising was planned. Lahore was to give the signal on 21 February 1915. Fear of discovery led to pushing the date forward by two days. In the confusion the news leaked out and many leaders were arrested. In Burma too, in January 1915 the 130th Baluch regiment was ready to revolt, under the influence of Ghadr. A mountain battery and the military police also attempted a mutiny. Many were punished.

The revolutionaries, however, did not give up easily. Their efforts continued. With a provisional government set up in exile by Barkatullah, work started among Indian prisoners of war captured by Germans. Leaflets published in different languages were smuggled into the country and circulated widely among the armed forces. On 23 March 1915; Pingley was arrested in the lines of the 12th Cavalry. In June, in the 8th Cavalry, some Indian soldiers killed a number of British officers and men. Ultimately all these efforts failed. In the trials and court-martials that followed many patriots, civilians and military, suffered imprisonment and martyrdom, unhonoured and unsung by their countrymen.

One of the main reasons for the failure of these attempts at an armed uprising was the inability to link them up with militant mass movements. This opportunity opened up when Gandhi gave the national liberation struggle a new dimension in the post-war years through mass mobilization. At the same time he circumscribed the action of the masses by choosing as the form of struggles, non-violence and non-cooperation. He recognised the role of military personnel in the struggle. It was confined only to refusal "*to offer themselves for service in Mesopotamia*" (Mahatma, D.G. Tendulkar, Volume 2, page 10).

During the civil disobedience Gandhi described the state under the British as corrupt and evil and preached the doctrine of disloyalty. He declared:

"Indeed loyalty to a state so corrupt is a sin, disloyalty a virtue."

He went even further and said:

"It is the duty of those who have realized the evil nature of the system, however attractive some of its features may, torn from their context, appear to be, to destroy it without delay".

At the same time Gandhi insisted on non-violence as the only form of struggle. He said: "*Non-violence, that is, civil disobedience is the only and the most successful remedy and is obligatory upon him who would dissociate himself from evil*". (Mahatma, Volume 3, pages 25 to 27).

What was more, as far as the armed forces were concerned, Gandhi did not advocate disloyalty to that extent. He made this very clear when he explained his attitude towards the RIN revolt. He referred back to his statements during the non-cooperation movement and said:

"The soldiers should declare what they will do soldiering, not for their bellies, but to make India free and to keep her free. I do not want them to be disloyal to the government, in whose pay they are, if they are disloyal to the present government tomorrow". (Mahatma, Volume 7, page 72).

Such an attitude negated any questions of establishing lines of communication between the national movement and the armed forces. They were condemned to be “mercenaries” and eternally loyal to the Government of whose salt they had partaken. So great was the influence of such thinking that even the various revolutionary forces in the country, including communists and socialists, who accepted the concept of armed struggle, never seriously thought of establishing contacts with the armed forces.

Born in the womb of the Gandhian movement, they could not appreciate the teachings of Marx and Lenin on this critical aspect of the revolution. They failed to understand that, by creating the Indian army, *“The British rule simultaneously organized the first general centre of resistance which the Indian people were ever possessed of”*. This understanding of Marx had been drawn from the experience of 1857. This lesson was not learned by our later day, revolutionaries. This applies equally to Lenin’s statement: *“Not a single great revolution has ever taken place, or ever can take place without the ‘disorganisation’ of the army”*.

In such circumstances it was but natural that the Indian armed forces continued to remain loyal to their salt and mercenary. There were exceptions. The isolation from the people could never really be complete. As the Indian struggle for freedom gained momentum and dynamism it had its impact on the Indian soldier too. How could he remain untouched by the reverberations of the Chittagong armory raid, or the capture of Sholapur by the workers?

The Chittagong armory raid took place on 18 April 1931. Only five days later on 23 April two platoons of the second battalion of the 13th Royal Garhwali Rifles, refused to fire on unarmed demonstrators at Peshawar. Thousands of Muslims had gathered round the place of detention of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan. The British game of letting loose a communal holocaust with the help of Hindu soldiers was effectively foiled. What was more, the British were forced to withdraw and Peshawar was in the hands of the people till 4 May. Another example of what happens when sections of the armed forces come over to the side of the people.

Significantly, Garhwali soldiers were not violent. They handed over their arms. They were obviously “disloyal” to the government that Gandhi considered evil and had only a short while back called upon the people *“to destroy it without delay”*. This disloyalty may have been one of the reasons why he did not make their release an issue when signing the Gandhi-Irwin pact withdrawing the civil disobedience movement. His explanation was:

“We brought all the pressure we could bear on our negotiations and satisfied ourselves with what in justice we could have under the provisional settlement. We could not as negotiators on the provisional truce forget of our pledge of truth and non-violence, forget the bounds of justice”. (Mahatma, Volume 3, page 63).

After this, how could one expect the Indian soldier to join the mainstream of the national movement?

Then came the Second World War. The character of the war, as it developed, demanded and entirely new type of an army, with different motivations. The strength of the armed forces in India had to be increased considerably. The old restrictive policies could no longer be maintained. The compulsions of a total war, a war whose political overtones went far beyond the narrow ambitions of British imperialism, forced the government to open the armed forces to the people.

This was no easy task. No popular enthusiasm could be created for the war. The only motivation was really economic. Hundreds of thousands of starving peasants enlisted. A large number of the educated middle classes joined the clerical and technical services. Many of them had participated in various popular struggles. Others had, at least, felt the impact of the national movement. They all wanted freedom, but economic compulsions were imperative. The armed forces provided an immediate solution.

By 1943 this army of mercenaries expanded tenfold, into a force two million strong. It not only received accelerated training in arms, but also in the politics of the war. The skeptical Indian soldier was told about fascism, about the war to bring freedom to enslaved people, and even about the heroic role of the Red Army.

This army went into the world to fight for the freedom of different peoples from the tyranny of the German, Italian and Japanese fascism. These mercenaries fought alongside their White masters and inflicted crushing defeats on the so-called invincible White soldiers of Germany, Italy and their Japanese allies. What a different role it was from that of their predecessors, who had fought to help their British masters enslave other people. In the process the Indian soldiers went through a transformation.

I had the privilege of sharing some of this experience and witnessing this transformation. I served with Indian soldiers in Burma and Indo-China in 1945. It was they who won the Battle of Burma. Their

victories in the deserts of North Africa, in Italy and Greece, and on the high seas in the Mediterranean, developed in them a sense of pride and self confidence.

Did they really face death for the pittance they got as their monthly wages? The British cleverly exploited the latent national pride of the Indian soldiers to inspire them to give of their best in battle. It was the Maratha, the Rajput, the Pujabi, the Jath, each fought to uphold his national tradition. When we entered the more politically alive area of Central Burma, in the summer of 1945, we were greeted as liberators. This had been the experience of the Indian soldiers in Italy and Greece, and later in Indo-China, Malaya and Indonesia. In Iran, he had come in contact with the Red Army. This was a bewildering experience for the Indian peasant in uniform. How could he, who was not free himself, liberate others? Was it then true that he was really fighting a war of liberation? Would India be free at the end of the war? All these questions were more vital for the educated young technician, the factory worker, the poor peasant who had witnessed or even participated in some form or other in a class struggle or a political movement.

Then the tide turned. In Greece, Burma, Indo-China, Malaya and Indonesia, the Indian soldier suddenly found himself ranged against those very people who had welcomed him as a liberator. In Saigon he was asked to fight alongside his erstwhile enemy, the Japanese soldier, against the civil population. He expressed his resentment openly. "Soldiers are not meant to fight civilians", he said. "They have committed no crime, they want freedom. Was not this war fought for the freedom of all peoples?" The Gurkhas were brought in and the Indians kept away from actions against the Vietnamese urban guerrillas.

In the meantime there had been disturbances within the Indian armed forces in India. In the early years of the war, 114 members of the 21st Indian Cavalry refused to go abroad to fight an imperialist war. Four were hanged and the rest imprisoned. In 1942, in the wake of the August movement, there were many actions by Indian soldiers which were ruthlessly suppressed. Between March 1942 and April 1945 there were 19 mutinies in the Royal Indian Navy alone. These related to various grievances including racial discrimination. In 1944, nearly 400 soldiers of the Indian Railway Maintenance Company mutinied against unjust disciplinary measures. Contacted by sources of the Indian National Army there was an attempted mutiny in a coastal battery on the eastern coast. All these were drowned in blood; the news carefully hidden from the public. The socialists were often involved.

In Burma the Indian soldier also met his compatriots from the Indian National Army. He could not really accept them as his enemy. It was a confusing experience. Many of the INA sincerely believed that they had been fighting a war of liberation with the help of the Japanese. At the same time they too had begun to realize that the Japanese had treated them no better than the British, using them as expendable cannon fodder. Where lay the truth of the fight for freedom and foreign domination? These multi-faceted and often contradictory experiences gave birth to a ferment that passed unnoticed outside the Indian armed forces. There was a search for a new identity. Were they mercenaries or were they nationalists? The INA had participated in a liberation struggle. Yet, they, who were slaves, had been welcomed as liberators in the very countries where the INA too had fought. Now the slaves who had become liberators wanted to participate in the liberation struggle of their own homeland.

As the Indian soldiers made their war-weary way home they wondered; would the national and revolutionary leadership of the country come forward to give them the necessary guidance? This was the question uppermost in their minds. This vital question remained unanswered.

They returned to an India seething with discontent. The Congress promptly came out in support of the spontaneous political mobilization of the masses in the struggle for the release of the INA leaders. The non-violent leadership of the national movement condoned and absorbed a violent and anti-imperialist struggle by a section of the armed forces. Some "innocents" in the services were foolish enough to believe that if they too struck against the common enemy, the national leadership would stand by them. The situation was indeed ripe for a national revolt of an unprecedented magnitude. The memories of the series of militant peasant struggles of 1942 were still afresh. The post-war strike struggles of the workers had just begun. The prospects had opened up for the coming together of the three streams of the revolution, as convinced by Lenin—the political general strike of the working class, the uprising of the mass of the peasantry and the coming over of a section of the armed forces to the people.

The strike in the RAF followed by the RIAF, led to the beginnings of planned efforts in the navy. From December 1945 there was a stream of incidents in HMS Talwar, a shore establishment in Bombay. As repression began some naval ratings sought guidance from the socialist and communist leaders. There was no opposition, nor was there much of a concrete guidance. It was in such circumstances that the first salvo of the RIN revolt was fired on the morning of February, 1946. From

the very beginning the discontent related to service conditions was linked with the political demands of the national liberation struggle.

The impact of the incidents of 18 February was felt in all the naval establishments in India, on the high seas and in foreign ports. The Indian navy literally passed into the hands of the ratings. Plans to spread the revolt to other wings of the armed forces failed to materialize for lack of contact. Nevertheless, the British dared not use Indian troops and the air force against the naval rebels. The "first general centre of resistance", that Marx spoke of, was becoming active again. The very foundations of the British Empire in India were shaken.

The national leadership hastened to contain the RIN revolt. Such ugly developments could not be allowed to spoil the beauty of the negotiations for the peaceful transfer of power. Even Gandhi declared as such. Mrs. Aruna Asaf Ali tried in vain to secure the support of the national leadership, only to be rebuked by Gandhi in his inimitable sweet fashion. Both the Congress and Muslim League advised surrender and promised that no harm would come to the ratings. The promise was of course never kept.

The leadership of the revolt, lacking in experience and without effective political guidance, wavered and surrendered. Significantly, this happened just when at the call of the Communists, the workers had come out on the streets and put up barricades, and the sailors had given the slogan: "On to the barricades with arms". Two hundred workers and their leaders were massacred in Bombay. The British realized that they had lost the military strength to hold the country in thrall, while the national leadership had acquired the power, and the determination to prevent a total and revolutionary break with the past. And so the deal was struck and was finalized just six months later.

The contribution of the members of the Indian armed forces to the victory of our struggle for freedom remains unrecognized even today. The RIN revolt has only a passing mention in the critical history of our national movement. This is certainly not because of the sedulously nurtured myth of our "unique bloodless revolution". Our petti-bourgeois revolutionaries are remembered with reverence. The revolt of 1857 is recognized as our first "battle of independence". Even the INA has been admitted into the pantheon. Some of its leading lights have been absorbed in the Establishment. A veil of silence has been drawn over the RIN and other revolts in the armed forces. This is really because every ruling class dreads the disloyalty of soldiers, as Gandhi had frankly admitted in February 1946. One can only hope that someday the nation will honour those long denied their due.
