



MARGINAL WHITES AND THE GREAT UPRISING

A Case Study of the Bengal Presidency¹

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LET me state from the very beginning that I am rather an intruder in the arena of the rich historiography of the 1857 Uprising. My interest is in the history of the 'low Europeans' and their various derivatives in the colonial era. They played a significant role in the tumultuous events of 1857 and conversely the uprising played a significant role in their lives. This encouraged me to record their role, which has not, as yet, been adequately represented in the history of the uprising. Significantly, Bengal and Eastern India have largely remained on the margins of the history of 1857 and have hitherto been relatively little explored. It is true that this region was not at the epicentre of the upheaval, but, contrary to common perceptions, it was not immune from its shockwaves either, and the uprising had a significant impact on the lives of the ruling elite, marginal Europeans and Indians in this region.

The news of the uprising flew around Calcutta, the seat of the empire, while direct and violent actions took place in different parts of the Bengal Presidency. All these had deep and abiding impact on the administration's mindset, all the more because 'hardly a single district under the Government of Bengal has escaped either actual danger or the serious apprehensions of danger'.² Actual incidents of rebellion occurred in some parts of western, southern and eastern Bengal and Assam, and the dark cloud of fear, distrust and anxiety shrouded the entire Bengal Presidency. This rebellious environment had generated fear and apprehension. The Uprising of 1857 was not an organised affair and the rebels did not have the benefit of modern military organisation, or control over the administrative and communication network that the empire had at its disposal. But if we scratch the surface and read between the lines of the communications among officials, as well as numerous reports and petitions, the most intimate thoughts of the administration and the European population are revealed.

Fear, desperation and a sense of disorientation were part of that mindset. In the mindscape of the Bengal Presidency, 1857 was unfolding in all its menace.

In order to allay their sense of insecurity, the British authorities brought in a large number of European soldiers and sailors who were generally considered almost as outcasts by the core of the ruling community, but who played an important role in saving the fledgling empire. After the outbreak of the revolt imperial military policy changed dramatically, as instead of depending on the sepoys, a greater role for European soldiers, both in terms of leadership structure and number, was emphasised. English labouring classes and poor Scottish and Irish peasantry were the source of this huge intake of mainly British soldiers. The changed situation affected the composition of the European community in India and the attitude of the rulers to its own 'underclass' in the colonial context. Members of the European underclass were no longer viewed as avoidable 'intruders', but counted as a necessary reserve force for protection of the empire. Their increasing presence undermined the aristocratic countenance and the claim of racial superiority of the rulers. On battlefields across India these soldiers and sailors knowingly saved the empire; off the battleground they unwittingly damaged the image of the superior ruling race. This essay will try to highlight how the churning of 1857 accentuated this inherent contradiction and brought it to the fore in an unprecedented manner.

The British imperial authorities used the multifaceted machinery of the state to control the revolt. A series of coercive acts were imposed on the native population, restricting their free movement and disarming them. Indians were not even allowed to keep the 'long knife' used for religious sacrifices. Through the Act XIV of 1857, martial law was introduced. Native officers and soldiers were tried under the Act XVII of 1857 for 'mutiny and desertion'. The Press Act (Act XVI) was introduced by Lord Canning, for the first time restricting the freedom of expression. This act, which was also called 'the Gagging Act', was given 'prominence' and was 'required more for Bengal and Calcutta than for Upper India'.³ This was because Bengal already had an articulate middle class and a nascent modern press that dared challenge the excesses of the empire and its servants.

Another measure adopted by the administration in order to bolster their position was to increase the number of Europeans in the armed forces and the police. The administration was haunted by the thin presence of Europeans, which was identified as a major source of weakness. Charles Metcalf's call to European settlers to 'give us a hold in the country which we do not at present possess. We might now be swept away in a single whirlwind. We are without root'⁴ gained a new importance during the revolt. The commissioner of Patna, Mr Taylor, wrote on 22 August 1857, 'I have told Government that I conceive the present moment to be a war of extermination and that the presence of small bodies of English is an actual source of weakness', as every defeat of these small bodies was counted

as a serious setback to the empire's power and prestige.⁵ The governor-general-in-council on 19 May 1857 had drawn the attention of the Court of Directors to the fact that the relative strength of European compared to Native Infantry in the company's Bengal army was 'disproportionately small'. For each European in the force there were more than nine Indians in Bombay, more than sixteen Indians in Madras and more than twenty-four Indians in Bengal. According to one contemporary magazine, 'In May 1857, the mutiny broke out. At that time the Bengal Presidency contained less than twenty thousand European soldiers, with above ten times that number of Indian troops: the intruding dominant race were not in all above a quarter of a million, while races they had conquered and ruled numbered nearly one hundred millions.'⁶ A proposal was adopted to enhance the proportion of Europeans in the Bengal army to the level of one European for eleven Indians.⁷ While the empire was flourishing, members of the ruling elite had divergent views regarding the place of the marginal Europeans under the imperial sun. The uprising brought everybody around to the view that they were needed, and in large numbers, to suppress the revolt or to take protective measures against apprehended danger.

The European residents of Calcutta feared that the flames of revolt that had spread in upper India might 'soon extend in all their horrors over the yet quiet portions of Bengal even to Calcutta itself'.⁸ On 14 June 1857 Calcutta was firmly in the grip of panic. The Europeans in Calcutta believed a rumour that an uprising had actually taken place in Barrackpore the previous night and that the rebels were marching towards Calcutta. The 'panic Sunday' of 14 June was followed by another panic in July. It was believed that a large amount of arms had been purchased by the natives and concealed in the city. The panic was so pervasive that even the grand jury of the Supreme Court, through its judges, asked the government for the native population of Calcutta and the suburbs to be disarmed.⁹ *Friend of India* commented snidely, 'The people of Calcutta have not forgotten the ridiculous fear shown by men who should have been the first to discountenance groundless alarm and it was to restore confidence, that they deemed it a political measure to deprive the native population of the arms.'¹⁰ While Indians were being disarmed, it was proposed that European planters who were residing in the interiors of north Bengal be supplied with sufficient arms.¹¹

In a situation of panic and anxiety, natives with arms were considered unsafe, and European inhabitants no longer kept faith with the native police. The European residents of Calcutta and its suburbs submitted a petition to the authorities praying for a European police force. They emphatically stated that they had 'no confidence whatever in the Native Police, either of the Muffusil or of Calcutta'. The governor-general-in-council assured 'the inhabitants of Calcutta that in order to keep the peace he will station larger bodies of European troops in various quarters of town.'¹² Immediately, sixty 'able bodied' Europeans were

recruited in Calcutta Police. This process of arming the *sahibs* was not confined to Calcutta alone. The police forces of Howrah and Sulkea were organised 'quietly on the footing of the Calcutta police'.¹³ Similar appeals were coming from Europeans residing in the smaller towns that were centres of commercial and trade activities. European inhabitants of Serampore prayed for 'a company of European soldiers to guard the town'. They even assured the authorities of the possibility of accommodating the troops in 'the lower apartments of Serampore College'.¹⁴ In August, 200 European sailors were sent to Dacca as a safeguard against any possible disturbance. Pubna and Seerajunge also appealed for similar contingents of European sailors, whose presence seemed to be of 'immense use in keeping quiet the line through which they passed'.¹⁵ This spell of fear and doubt also affected the Indian population and a sense of mutual distrust predominated. The administration was so apprehensive regarding the native community that special measures were adopted to confront any disturbance during Mohurram, while, on the other hand, the Muslim inhabitants became so panicked that many had interviews with Lieutenant Governor to express their fears. The administration tried to reassure them, and the police were instructed 'to make it publicly known that they would be permitted as usual to perform without hindrance or annoyance all their ceremonies during the festival which is approaching'.¹⁶ Similarly, a rumour spread in Dinagepore that the government 'were about to make Christians of the children by compelling them to eat pig' and 'many of the boys attached to the government Bengalee school' were quitting.¹⁷

Disbanded sepoy were considered a very great source of danger, capable of disseminating the spirit of revolt to the wider community. To prevent disbanded sepoy from procuring weapons, the villagers in the neighbourhoods of Barrackpore were disarmed. In Calcutta it was believed that Nawab of Chitpore would help the disbanded soldiers in procuring arms to lead another revolt, though an intensive search revealed no significant proof. In Murshidabad a rumour spread all over the city that disarmed soldiers were making secret enquiries and were exploring the possibility of acquiring arms. In Serampore the badmashes and 'disbanded sepoy' were marked together, and it was believed that they would create trouble during the *Rathyatra* festival. The arrested rebels, even while confined in Alipore jail, were a source of concern for the imperial authorities. The superintendent of Alipore Jail stated, 'Militia sepoy, being from the same villages are nearly certain to have friends among those convicts also with whom they are naturally friends ... I have been lately informed that when the men of H.M.'s 59th were sent to guard the jail some militia sepoy were heard openly boasting that their regiment even without arms was more than a match for such a small number of Europeans.'¹⁸

A European force was considered necessary for preventing the spread of the mutinous spirit, but they were more urgently required to confront the rebels in

the theatres of action. In August 1857, the sparks of revolt reached the southern districts of Bengal. The troops of thirty-second Native Infantry had mutinied at Purulia and destroyed the station. The magistrate of Bancoorah (Bankura) informed the government of Bengal that a small troop of Europeans arrived there to 'save the Railway Terminus and the mines of that important place from destruction'.¹⁹ Sensing the possibility of danger, the manager of Raneegunge colliery, Stuart Gordon, pleaded for a 'party of twenty to thirty Europeans for the protection of the Raneegunge Collieries', though the joint magistrate of Raneegunge had already appealed for the one hundred Europeans that seemed to be 'absolutely required'.²⁰ Raneegunge was an important station for the Company because of the newly built railway terminus and the coalfields. The Company administration became alarmed when incidents began to take place in the nearby districts. The state of mind was expressed in the following correspondence: 'The Lt. Governor has for sometime felt great apprehension regarding Raneegunge ... and to solicit the dispatch of even ever so small a number of European troops were it only for a time to save the Railway Terminus and the mines of that important place from destruction....'²¹ Again, in late October and early November, the second and third parties of sepoy from the thirty-second Native Infantry mutinied and destroyed public property. They left Ramporehat and moved towards west without facing much resistance. The government of Bengal felt the urgency of chasing the mutineers, but as Bengal saw fewer violent actions, it was not given priority over north India. This resulted in the unchecked and uninterrupted movement of the mutineers and undermined the imperial authority. The local administration felt that if these districts were 'left without European troops' they would 'see disturbances'. The government of Bengal wanted to mount pressure on the military department of India—charged with emotion it highlighted the 'effects of these repeated progresses of unchecked mutineers through the richest and most valuable districts, the sufferings they must cause to the people and the unavoidable humiliation to which they reduce the authorities of Government'.²²

Revolt at 'the late time' when Delhi and northern India had been pacified and brought back under control, caused the lieutenant governor of Bengal to 'renew his anxiety'. Lt. Governor Halliday wrote in his minutes of 27 October:

The base and brutal murders which they have committed and the impunity so humiliating the authority of Governments had the discouraging effects in the mind of our subjects, illustrated by the taunts recently offered by the representative of one of the greatest and till now most loyal zamindars of Behar at our inability to defend the people from massacre.²³

Halliday honestly stated that it might turn out to be a 'very needless anxiety', but he 'could not suppress' his desire that some precautionary measures should be adopted, given the situation.²⁴ The state of the Jalpaiguri regiment was not

very positive either—the regiment was said to be ‘stationed in a very doubtful and uneasy state, posting of themselves as it would appear extra sentries in their own lines, giving out that disturbance is at hand and at the point of break out’.²⁵ It was apprehended that if the flames of the revolt reached Jalpaiguri it would spread towards northwest like wild fire. From Jalpaiguri they would march towards west through Kissengunge and Purneah, plundering the civil stations and devastating ‘a large extent of rich and populous country studded with Indigo factories and thriving towns and markets’.²⁶ The large stations of Rungpore, Dinagepore, Purneah and Maldah were also considered to be vulnerable in case of revolt at Jalpaiguri. Halliday thought that European sailors could be recruited for the defence of these places: ‘I have found lately that European sailors, who were formerly so few in numbers and in such request as not to be procurable ... can now be hired with much greater ease than formerly and I have actually engaged within these few days in anticipation of my present solicitation to the Government of India.’²⁷

On 18 November, the 34th Native Infantry at Chittagong revolted. They plundered the treasury, released prisoners, burned down their own lines and then left the station along with the whole wealth of the treasury. The European inhabitants of the town were petrified. The ladies of the station were placed on board river vessels for two nights, while the gentlemen slept in the commissioner of circuit’s house. The administration tried to reassure them, but as they barely managed to ‘escape with their lives’, they were ‘consequently in some dread and every rumour tends to increase it’. The Europeans urged the fortification of an emergency shelter and the speedy arrival of European troops in order to ‘settle down’ the area. The administration, which initially appeared reluctant, finally woke up to the seriousness of the situation: ‘The whole Christian residents begged me to allow of one into which they could retreat in case of danger and as the government had sanctioned a fortified place for the Dacca people, I did not see how I could refuse one for the Christians of this place.’²⁸ Local inhabitants worked hard, and the fortification process was finished at the cost of two to three thousand rupees. In the absence of European troops, the mutineers could not be properly dealt with. The local administration confessed that they had no men on whom they could depend, ‘some eleven or twelve understand the musket drill and about thirty probably be able to load a gun’ and such insignificant force was considered to be ‘worse than useless against so much larger a body of men and thoroughly trained’. The movement of the rebels was also quite confusing and misleading. They made a forced march beyond Seetacund where they halted and the following day, instead of continuing on the straight road to Tipperah (Tripura), they entered the Barriah Dholla and crossed the hills. The administration tried to assess their possible route, it was thought that either they intended to visit Nepal, after plundering Sylhet, or would proceed to Tipperah. Immediate administrative action only succeeded in recovering two government elephants and some other property taken by the sepoys and in recapturing thirty

prisoners. European troops were 'greatly needed' for the defence of this frontier station; otherwise it was thought that the hill tribes would take advantage of its defenceless state. The local administration was anxiously waiting in the hope that the government could send a European force, a portion of which could be used to chase the mutineers. The remaining part could be engaged in maintaining peace and order in the frontier station. Without getting any response from the central authority, the commissioner of revenue and circuit, Chittagong division, communicated to the lieutenant governor of Bengal their frustration:

I trust His Honour will approve of my proceedings. I am acting for the best and I must add I feel quite at a loss to understand how so many days should have elapsed without my hearing from the Government or being told what arrangements were proposed in regard to the troops. Some of the natives of this place have received letters saying that the European troops are coming round here. They apply to me to know whether such is the case and I am obliged to confess my total ignorance on the subject.²⁹

Being a remote area with hills and jungles, it was hard to trail the mutineers and lack of communication hindered the receipt of actual information about their movements. The roads through the hills were 'known to few in this Zillah and those who are sent out are generally afraid of getting too near the sepoy; consequently the intelligence received has never been very certain'. However, the information received revealed that the mutineers headed towards Tipperah. A few of the Chittagong convicts whom the administration was able to recapture were questioned, and it was discovered that the mutineers were marching towards Agurtallah and that they would offer Rajah their service; if the Rajah declined their offer they would plunder his palace, and would ill-treat him.³⁰ It was also apprehended by the administration that the rebels would be able to get help from the local Kookie people. The judge of Tipperah corresponded in the same tone, 'I have no idea that the Maharaja, who is as timid as a girl, will communicate with mutineers, but I think his Kookee subjects may give us trouble.'³¹ The Kookies were actually aiding the mutineers by supplying them with food, carrying baggage and cutting paths through jungle. It was further reported by the magistrate of Tipperah that 'the mutineers are marching as rapidly as their route will allow, they are most lavish with their money, but still are short of food. The prisoners with them are daily escaping, for not only are they nearly starved, but in one or two instances they have been bayoneted for lingering with their loads.'³² The report delivered by the magistrate of Tripura added to the anxiety of the administration. Mr Chapman, the commissioner of revenue and circuit division, again explained the gravity of situation in his report:

The mutineers have been trying to conciliate the natives by giving them money and hitherto have been successful in their endeavours to procure food by

paying most liberally for whatever they would get. A small body of troops sent round without delay would at once (to) check all attempts at disturbances, and enable me to keep the part of Bengal quiet, but any delay now in affording aid will in all probability reduce three districts to a state of disorder and confusion; to remedy which a much larger force than is at present requisite would have to be employed.³³

In the northeast region of Bengal, Dacca, Chittagong and Dinagepore were closely linked, and all these districts were hilly and riverine, making physical access problematic for the administration; without the help of local people the British could not think of proceeding into this remote space. This weakness made them even more nervous. However, one hundred European sailors were recruited to defend the Chittagong town and to chase the mutineers. The sailors arrived in the steamer 'Dalhousie', were given proper medical aid and the marine superintendent was ordered to provide 'the best means of conserving them by steamer to their destination'.³⁴

As Dacca had a considerable Muslim population, a band of European sailors had been stationed there since August 1857. The British administration was very suspicious about the Muslim community and marked them as chief conspirators in the whole episode of revolt. In Dacca, too, they were extremely apprehensive of them. The administration wanted to place their apprehension on a logical ground: 'If the Mahommedans of Behar are successful in disturbing even temporarily the peace of that province, the same class of people in around Dacca will thereby be excited, in a moment of madness, to acts of violence and disorder if not of open rebellion against the state.' As the country was in a disorderly state, it would not be difficult for the sepoys to win over many of the disaffected to their side. They could easily raise a force by freeing the prisoners from confinement, and this unruly force would plunder the town and the station, disrupting law and order. The local Christian population anticipated that the 'apprehension' could any day become reality and even they 'look forward towards its probable recurrence, especially during the approaching Muhurram'.³⁵ The commissioner of the Dacca division was quite confident that 'the presence of the party of the seamen would prevent any outbreak',³⁶ but on 21 November 1857, the seventy-third regiment of Native Artillery offered strong opposition when European sailors went to disarm them at Lalbagh. 'The determined resistance of the sepoys, their strong position and the fact of their raising guns at their command prevented unfortunately the complete success to disarm them and enabled a considerable number of them to escape with arms in their hands.'³⁷ The presumption was that they would join the main body of their corps at Jalpaiguri, when probably there would be another mutiny. In Dacca the fortification was approved as an excellent emergency shelter for the European inhabitants. The local Christian inhabitants of Feringee Bazar worked hard to finish the fort within two to three days. An extreme feeling of insecurity engrossed the minds of the Europeans. In the absence of an adequate

force the commissioner of revenue and circuit held the government vessel 'Megna' as a symbol of security. He stated, 'We are so unprotected I have been taken on myself the responsibility of retaining the Government Brig 'Megna' for a short time ... The presence of a Government vessel on the river is of itself likely to cause much good.' A small detachment of seamen proceeded in one of the pinnaces (a small country boat) to Megna (Meghna) to intercept the mutineers. The plan was to stop the progress of the rebels so that they could not cross the river near Dawdkandee. Moreover Indian *peiadas* (strong men, usually wielding bamboo sticks and spears) were recruited for watching the movements of the rebels. Government spent 5 Rupees 8 annas for food for the recruits.³⁸ The administrations of Dinagepore, Rungpore and Rajshahi were keen to ensure the arrival of European seamen before the rebels could reach Jalpaiguri. Mr Stuart, who owned a factory at Kaligunge in Rajshae division, left his place and took shelter in Prosonno Kumar Tagore's House at Gobindagunge when he heard the progress of the Dacca rebels.³⁹ In Barisal too, uneasiness prevailed. The European residents were sending away their families to the interior of the district and burying their valuables. They were 'hastily fortifying a home in the station' to defend themselves 'until a force arrives from Calcutta'.⁴⁰

European sailors were recruited to augment the European component in the armed forces. In December 1857, the governor-general-in-council sanctioned the proposal of the lieutenant governor to raise 'a body of 200 or 250 European Seamen for service at Purneah, Dinagepore and Rungpore on the same rates of pay as those allowed to the men of the Assam Detachments and officers were also employed to command European sailors in the proportion of three to one hundred'.⁴¹ Many parts of east and north Bengal were riverine, remote and inaccessible. Considering the geographical and political situation, sailors were recruited without taking into account their usefulness; the need to give them basic military training was almost an afterthought: 'it is evident that unless to some extent drilled and instructed before they leave Calcutta bodies of seamen picked up indiscriminately out of the merchant ships in the port could not be much relied on....'⁴²

After the upsurge of 1857 the British authorities recognised the need to enhance in the armed forces 'the European element, if their Empire in the East is to be maintained at all'. The immediate effect was that the number of European troops in India became far greater than it had been so far; a development that was considered as the 'first change in the new era of Indian history, lately inaugurated with so great a sacrifice of life'.⁴³ In order to strengthen the empire, the armed forces were extended significantly, which in turn drew more poor men from the British Isles, especially from the labouring classes and the Scottish and Irish peasantry. The harsh lives of the social groups from which they were recruited may have made the hardships of army life a little less severe for these men than they were for some others. During the revolt, a large number of soldiers were

recruited to suppress the rebellion. Poor Europeans of every description from England and India—servants, shoemakers, smiths, tailors, labourers, brick layers, bakers, butchers, carpenters, clerks and farriers—were recruited to the army in large numbers. One contemporary Bengali writer commented that the low Europeans joined the ranks of the army in the hope of getting two square meals.⁴⁴ An interesting limerick published in *London Charivari* on 3 October 1857 perhaps most convincingly explained the situation.

Over the counter, my skippers!
Spurn the effeminate shop,
Kick off the carpeted slippers,
And the cheating yard-measurement let drop,
Sergeants are busy recruiting,
England invites volunteers,
Surely you'd better be shooting
Sepoys, than shaving our dears.⁴⁵

After 1857, 50,000 men from Britain were added to the imperial army in India and, to maintain the strength of the European group, a further 10,000 were recruited every year from Europe, especially from Britain. The navy also was strengthened in a similar way. The military force of 220,000 men did not include the European troops of His Majesty's Indian forces or the large numbers in the navy and in the mercantile marine, who were also withdrawn from the labour force of Britain. It was not easy to make members of a superior ruling race out of these men, scraped from the bottom of their respective societies. In spite of imperial indoctrination in the duties involved in representing a superior race, and preaching by the army and naval chaplains, often these soldiers and seamen were perceived as 'mindless brutes governed only by drink and the lash', who should have been 'banished from responsible historical writing'.⁴⁶

It was only natural that there was debate regarding the recruitment of British men for the Indian army. Sir James Outram, concerned about the 'moral standard' of the British Indian army, advocated the recruitment of soldiers from the 'steady sober moral and intellectual men of a still higher parentage and education'. Unsurprisingly many of his compatriots argued that England 'can not give to the Indian service alone 100,000 of her industrious peasantry and artisans, retaining, instead, the dangerous classes who now enter the Army' who were 'withdrawn from the productive forces of Britain. It were better to recruit, still, from the loose population of the towns and counties, eventually returning a portion to the country as good citizens.'⁴⁷ The labouring poor of Britain were also aware of the consequence of coming to India. After all, the lives of common soldiers and sailors could never be comparable to those of the ruling elites in India. The grievances of the poor whites were expressed

sarcastically, 'We are not to calculate how many are required, whether 50,000 as some think, or only 40,000 for the Bengal Presidency alone, but assuming that there will be many thousands of our countrymen annually brought out to live (perhaps die) in this country!' It was clearly demanded that measures must be taken both to attract more men to the service and to take care of them when they were in it. Proper accommodation, sanitation, clothing, food, permission to marry, etc. were needed to make their service in India more attractive and less harsh. The mechanical, mindless attitude of the authorities to its own underclass was laid bare in the following comments: 'it is true that the soldier is a valuable commodity, we hear him calculated as worth £100 by the time he reaches the country, and very often he is regarded only in this light of £100's worth of bone and muscle, and endeavours are made to preserve him because it will cost that same to replace him.'⁴⁸

Extensive recruitment of European soldiers and sailors in the imperial force, their displays of arrogance and their atrocities against Indians created alarm and insecurity in the mind of the native population. David Kincaid described the scandalous behaviour of the soldiers during the revolt:

Troops were pouring into Calcutta, but while the ardour of the soldiers was inflamed by numerous and often untrue atrocity stories, no one seems to have thought it necessary to tell the soldiers that the war was against certain rebels and not just against the population of India. In consequence of this omission there were some regrettable incidents in the streets of the capital.⁴⁹

Kincaid mentions that the British troops were made up of different nationalities:

[T]he arrival for the first time in a strange country of so many British troops gave rise to as many jokes among the civilian population as in the early months of the last war. Foremost among the heroes of these amusing stories was of course, the Irish soldier, 'worthy son of Erin', who is shocked to find in the Indians a race as loquacious as his own.⁵⁰

The soldiers, whose behaviour contrasted uneasily with that expected of a superior ruling race, were excluded indirectly from the core of the ruling community. To their utter relief they seemed to discover too much of a resemblance between the 'unruly' behaviour of Irish soldiers and that of the Indians!

Eminent writer Amritalal Bose wrote in his autobiography that just after the suppression of the 'mutiny' in north India, Calcutta was crowded with many European soldiers who were called 'highlander Gora' by the local people. When Fort William, Dumdum cantonment and Barrackpur were overcrowded, they were given shelter in the buildings of the Queen's College, Hindu College and

Free School. In places like Sham Bazar Street, Cornwallis Street, etc., these soldiers were often seen doing drills with a band. Most of them were drunkards, and the native populations of those areas were so afraid of their disturbing activities that they used to close the entrances of their residences, even during the day. Sometimes their presence became intolerable. One group of soldiers, for example, forcibly entered the house of Rani Rasmani, a well-known landlady. The gatekeepers and other male members fled in fear. Rani herself confronted them, and the police and Fort William authorities were informed, so that finally the police relieved Rani's residence from these soldiers.⁵¹ The commissioner of Nadia division reported that the troops stationed at Barrackpore were creating a very uneasy feeling amongst the respectable natives by entering *zenanas* and insulting females, whilst in Calcutta some serious affrays took place. On the night of 29 November, a fight occurred in Bowbazar between several hundreds of soldiers and sailors.⁵² In Dacca, sailors openly confronted disbanded sepoy. The government was at a loss to identify a place where the sailors could be kept. They decided, 'The sailors ought to have been removed to the old convent which is at present empty or what would be better still the sepoy removed from Dacca altogether.' The European soldiers engaged in suppressing the revolt often themselves violated law and order. After the outbreak of revolt at Barrackpur cantonment, the native force was disbanded and European troops were recruited for the first time there. It was feared that the European soldiers would have 'opportunities of frequenting the Burra Bazar shops during the Daroga's absence', which led the brigadier to withdraw the licenses of shops selling cheap liquor. Special arrangements were made to prevent the looting and plundering of shops in the Burra Bazar area by European soldiers. An additional *mohurer* was recruited to guard the shops at the cost of approximately ₹100 per month, whereas the withdrawal of the licenses would cause the 'consequent loss of 6000 Rupees'.⁵³ It is interesting that efforts and expenses were needed to save public and private property from the saviours of the empire! In Rangpore the house occupied by the marine brigade was severely damaged by the sailors; for instance 'two fine large marble slabs before the fire places in the Dining and Drawing Rooms [were] broken to pieces, apparently by the butt ends of the muskets having been hammered on them'. Mr Longmore, the owner of the house, presented a long list of damaged items before the government with a humble prayer for repair, which altogether cost 200–300 rupees.⁵⁴ Often these sailors spent their money in grog shops, and their activities put the authorities in an awkward position. In Rungpore, the officiating commissioner stated that 'the sailors have received too much money which they have not spent in a proper way'. It was decided to give these people as little pay as possible, as by keeping them in arrears of wages, greater control could be imposed upon them.⁵⁵ Superintendent of marine brigade wrote to the lieutenant governor of Bengal that a considerable number of petty officers needed to be recruited, otherwise it would be extremely

difficult to control and maintain proper discipline among the sailors. Five petty officers per brigade were sanctioned.⁵⁶

The administration had to admit that 'it was difficult to exercise an efficient control over the troops, scattered as they were'.⁵⁷ The increasing presence of the European underclass was not in tune with the aristocratic mien of the rulers. The desire to make India a land of white aristocrats and swelling the British Indian army with members of their own marginal classes were inherently contradictory projects. Concerns over such issues were not new; even before the Charter of 1813, when the East India Company severely restricted the entry of Europeans into India, the demand for European skills and capital was

often supplied from the most anomalous and suspicious sources—from runaways from the East India Company's ships—from British subjects who had found their way to India by defying the laws—from runaway or emancipated convicts from New South Wales and—French, Dutch, and Danish adventurers from the Indian settlements of these nations: in many instances, persons destitute of the necessary character and education.⁵⁸

The Crown government's modified policy encouraged the presence of a considerable number of Europeans as a necessary reserve force in India. The poor white people who could not go back to their own countries stayed in India and produced subsequent generations. Invalid soldiers from British regiments were permitted to receive their pensions in India without having to report in person to Chelsea Hospital and soldiers and sailors started taking discharge in India.

During the revolt there was a huge intake in the company's army and these men were eventually discharged after the suppression of the revolt and proclamation of the direct Crown rule. The army was amalgamated with the Royal forces and the naval force was disbanded. As a result, a large number of soldiers and sailors who were working under the company lost their jobs and swelled the rank of unemployed and eventually those of the destitute and vagabond. The ex-soldiers or ex-navy men contributed significantly to the crowd of pauper Europeans in Bombay and Calcutta. 'Many, if not most, of the persons who come begging, are discharged soldiers.' The report of the Committee on European Pauperism in Bombay, 1867, showed that the huge intake during the revolt in both the army and the navy was followed by a huge discharge after the revolt was suppressed and the armed forces were reorganised. Between 1855 and 1861, 421 Europeans from army and 3320 from navy were discharged (Table 9.1). Moreover, in 1862, when Indian navy was finally disbanded, a total of 1474 employees lost their jobs.⁵⁹

Most of the discharged soldiers and sailors chose to remain in India rather than join a British regiment or be sent home. Tempted by offers of lucrative and secured employment in India, non-commissioned officers and privates

Table 9.1: Discharge Figures from the Army and Navy, 1855-62

<i>Year</i>	<i>Discharged from Army</i>	<i>Discharged from Navy</i>
1855-1856	25	226
1856-1857	28	147
1857-1858	17	244
1858-1859	22	436
1859-1860	162	1313
1860-1861	122	396
1861-1862	45	558
Total	421	3320

Source: *Report on European Pauperism*, 15 December 1863, Maharashtra State Archives Judicial Proceedings, 1867/Vol. 13/Comp.140.

purchased their discharge. In doing so, they forfeited their entitlement to a passage home. In the words of a soldier who served during the mutiny:

After the Mutiny was over I left the service with a pension of a shilling a day for life. I had been so long in the country that I decided to stay in it, and quite a number of us old John Company soldiers who were entitled to a pension did the same. For six or seven months of the year I wandered about the country, visiting different military stations. I generally stayed a few days with each battalion and when I left a collection was made for me. After living like this for twenty years I thought it was about time to settle down and take unto myself a wife. I married the daughter of a couple of half-castes, who had a bit of money, gave her a dowry of a thousand rupees. With this money I started a piggery in a small way, which soon got much larger.⁶⁰

Unfortunately this happy ending was not common among the other discharged soldiers, and in most cases their situations were pitiable. They were frequently seen loitering on the streets of Presidency towns and also in the *moffussil*, begging from door to door. Some in the administration were anxious that they had become 'a pest to the community at large'. It was felt that '...something should be done to make these men return to Europe as they bring great disrepute to the European character. Many of these men have done good service for the British government, but in their present position they were quite unable to take care of themselves'.⁶¹ The *Friend of India* was also unsparing, noting, 'European vagrancy in India did not assume alarming proportions till the close of the Mutiny campaigns.... The indecision of Lord Canning who declined the responsibility of adopting Lord Clyde's vigorous counsels, led to discharge in India for many hundred soldiers who had fought the company's battles with a heroism which deserved very different treatment.'⁶² European colonisation was

increasingly considered as a remedy to the insecure and unsound foundation of the Indian Empire. William Ewart argued that, with the aid of the railways, British troops stationed in the hills could, in an emergency, 'pour down upon the plains in fewer hours than it had hitherto taken days to assemble them'. When not occupied with military duties the troops might, 'like the Roman soldiers of old, be employed in the cultivation of land'.⁶³

On battlefields across India, lower class soldiers and sailors knowingly saved the empire, but off the battleground, their unruly behaviours eroded the image of the empire-builders. The imperial authority perhaps needed some other ways to exercise their mastery over their own 'underclass', the existence of which otherwise undermined the superiority of ruling race. The ex-soldiers or ex-navy men contributed significantly to the crowd of pauper Europeans in Bombay and Calcutta for the next few years. After the suppression of the revolt the administration made efforts to disarm the overconfident European sailors. Police commissioner of Calcutta S. Wauchope stated, 'Wherever a seaman is discovered with a knife in the bazaars or other parts of Calcutta, when I have a European Police force, he is immediately disarmed under the provisions of section 47, of Act XIII of 1856, and the knife or other weapon be confiscated; of course, the Native Police are not allowed to interfere in such matters.'⁶⁴ The upsurge of 1857 created fear in the imperial mind and a sense of insecurity and distrust of Indians that led the British to trust and depend on their own people instead, including the 'underclass'. Thus the construction of a homogeneous and discrete body of the ruling race had been undermined by the impossibility of restricting the entry of the marginal and hence 'not so desirable' elements into India. These elements had to be accommodated in the imperial project, and the colonial authorities wanted to salvage some amount of usefulness out of them and make them a reserve force for the empire and the buffer between the ruling elite and the ruled.

Notes and References

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12. *Friend of India*, 30 July 1857.
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17. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 10 August 1857, p. 418.
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21. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 10 September 1857, p. 1001.
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30. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 17 December 1857, p. 209.
31. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 17 December 1857, p. 206.
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34. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 10 December 1857, p. 1944.
35. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 3 December 1857, p. 199.
36. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 10 December 1857, p. 164.
37. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 24 December 1857, p. 127.
38. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 4 February 1858, p. 64.
39. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 17 December 1857, p. 153.
40. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 10 December 1857, p. 174.
41. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 3 December 1857, p. 8.
42. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 26 November 1857, p. 29.
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45. *Punch*, or the *London Charivari*, 3 October 1857, cited in *Friend of India*, 19 November 1857.
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52. Buckland, *Bengal*.
53. Bengal Miscellaneous, Revenue Proceedings (6 August 1857), p. 11.
54. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 29 April 1858, p. 106.
55. Bengal Judicial Proceedings, 11 February 1858, p. 61.
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