The Keys to British Success in South Asia

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“God is on everyone’s side...and in the last analysis he is on the side with plenty of money and large armies”

-Jean Anouilh

For a period of over one hundred years, the British directly controlled the subcontinent of India. How did a small island nation come on the Edge of the North Atlantic come to dominate a much larger landmass and population located almost 4000 miles away? Historian Sir John Robert Seeley wrote that the British Empire was acquired in “a fit of absence of mind” to show that the Empire was acquired gradually, piece-by-piece. This will paper will try to examine some of the most important reasons which allowed the British to successfully acquire and hold each “piece” of India. This paper will examine the conditions that were present in India before the British arrived—a crumbling central political power, fierce competition from European rivals, and Mughal neglect towards certain portions of Indian society—were important factors in British control. Economic superiority was an also important control used by the British—this paper will emphasize the way trade agreements made between the British and Indians worked to favor the British. Military force was also an important factor but this paper will show that overwhelming British force was not the reason the British military was successful—Britain’s powerful navy, ability to play Indian factions against one another, and its use of native soldiers were keys to military success.

Political Agendas and Indian Historical Approaches

The historiography of India has gone through four major phases—three of which have been driven by the prevailing world politics of the time. Indian history provides a clear example of how history can be used to justify the actions of government. The first major approach was Orientalism. Orientalism arose as the British began to gain firm political control in the subcontinent. Employees of the East India Company became interested in the culture of the Indians and began to learn Sanskrit and Persian; with this knowledge they were able to read traditional historical texts written native Indian historians. With this knowledge, scholars began to form their own interpretations of Indian history and started to publish academic journals dedicated to research on India. These British scholars both at home in England as well as those stationed in India, quickly established their own conception of India as an entity fundamentally different from England. India was perceived as deeply spiritual and sensuous while England was perceived as materialistic and rational. This conception of India as an “other” helped to justify British colonization—the English were there to
promote science and innovation to a culture sorely lacking these “critical virtues.” The Orientalists also represented India as static and unchanging throughout its history, thus a dynamic European influence was necessary to assist India if it ever hoped to achieve modernization. These facets of Orientalism remained relatively stable but as time progressed, an important an important shift in interpretation occurred. Scholars like William Jones showed an appreciation for the unique differences that existed in Indian culture and defended Indian culture. For example, Jones observed that Sanskrit seemed similar to Latin and Greek thus suggesting similarities between Indians and European. But soon other historians such as James Mill and his History of India, which blamed many of India’s problems on the caste system, arrived on the scene and began pointing to cultural differences as a cause of India’s “backwardness.” Thus the Orientalists suggested that the British takeover of India was beneficial to the native Indians.

In the 1920s, a powerful nationalist movement had swept across many countries, including India. This movement spawned nationalist history, which also carried a strong pro-India political message. The nationalist historians emphasized India’s great past and achievements. These historians argued that early Hindu India had achieved artistic, political, and religious triumphs and it was only the invasions by Muslims and other groups that set India onto a downward slide. The political message was clear—as an independent state, India would be able to move back to its triumphant roots. Thus these historians viewed the British colonialism as a negative, another foreign invasion that hurt the Indian people. After India achieved independence, a new movement sought to paint a picture of “the real” India. Many anthropologists came to India and studied the people. They became fascinated with the caste system and wrote histories that defined India in terms of interactions between the different castes.

A historical interpretation of India through a series of caste struggles was a precursor to the Marxist interpretation that arose in the 1960’s and 1970’s. The Marxist historians focused on India’s political economy and how it had failed in achieving a capitalist system and that the capitalist British had in turn failed India. The Marxist approaches often blamed the British for India’s modern political or economic problems. Again, this approach considered British colonialism as exploitative and damaging to the Indian people.

The last major approach was a social history. Unlike the previous three methods, the Social History of India doesn’t perceive India as one distinct entity—it instead focuses on how the different regions interacted with each other. This paper is rooted in the Social History approach—its guiding philosophy is that no single factor completley accounts for British a position of power in India, instead the British rise to power involved a complex of interactions and agreements between both Indians and British.

Preconditions in India

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The British did not enter the world with political power in India—it was a gradual process that took more than two hundred years to entirely consolidate. In the year 1600, Queen Elizabeth I granted a charter to the predecessor of the East India company which would eventually lay the foundations for British colonial control of the entire subcontinent. Part of the East India Company’s (and eventually the British government’s) success in colonizing India depended on conditions that existed in India long before the British arrived. The British did not cause these conditions—they simply took advantage of a favorable political climate.

As the British began interactions with India, the Mughal Empire, the Empire in control of India before the arrival of the British, was in a state of decline primarily because of internal problems. The eventual decline of the Mughal Empire led to an increase in regional power. The lack of a strong central power meant that the British would face less of a unified opposition and would have room to rise quickly to a position of power in the subcontinent. The presence of that power vacuum, as well as infighting among the other principalities, gave the British a perfect opportunity to emerge as a strong central power in India.

**Decline of the Mughal Empire**

The Mughals originally came to India from Central Asia and were related to the Mongols that had conquered much of Asia in the thirteenth century. The Mughals first established an Empire in India under the Timurid prince Babur in 1526 and enjoyed periods of expansion under Akbar and Shah Jahan. The Mughal Empire was one of the greatest dynastic Muslim empires of the Medieval Period. Until the late seventeenth century, the Mughal Empire was still considered one of the most powerful political entities in the entire world. In 1707, the year of Emperor Aurangzeb’s death, the empire was at its largest size, including almost the entire subcontinent. Despite its impressive size, the empire was already beginning to slip into decline. In order to achieve its great size, Emperor Aurangzeb fought an almost constant series of wars against the last remaining independent kingdoms as well as campaigns to put down resisting provinces. While these conflicts were successful, the constant warfare significantly drained the finances of the Empire. The empire also was experiencing growing tensions from nobles over appointments of jagirs, or tax collectors who further exacerbated the problem.

However, the primary reason for decline in the Empire was a gradual shift of power from a centralized imperial authority to a decentralized local rule of various principalities. As happened so many other times throughout history, the decentralization of Mughal India began due to clashes between the old military elite, mansabadars, and the new local gentry called zamindars. The Mughal government provided more opportunities for tax-collection and participation in the government bureaucracy to the local zamindars as a way to keep the power of the mansabadars in check. Unfortunately, for the imperial government, jealous conflicts between the two groups quickly led to destabilizing

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conflicts, local wars, raids, and revolts. These conflicts escalated in number and began to occur in so many different areas that the imperial government was unable to react effectively. The emperor attempted to give regional governors more powers and controls in order to more firmly maintain control throughout the regions but this greater concentration of authority in the local officials simply led to a further increase in decentralization of imperial authority. Because the Imperial government was unable to respond to the problems of the regional territories, elites or former regional bureaucrats were forced to establish independent rule and thus broke away from the empire.

One example of a particularly destabilizing revolt was the revolt of Shivaji, a Maratha warlord that led his armies to sack the major port of Surat. While Shivaji’s military victories were embarrassing, even more humiliating was the fact that the emperor was never able to punish or discipline Shivaji in a meaningful way. This embarrassment had important repercussions. Only members of the Mughal Empire with direct patron ties to the empire were several thousand manabadors, thus in order to maintain control over the rest of the people subcontinent it was absolutely critical that the people living under the Mughal respected and feared the Mughal military and its ability to crush dissenters. Shivaji’s revolt shattered the Emperor’s authority and proved that the imperial military could be defeated, leading to more and more revolts. When the East India Company began to push for greater political control across India, they encountered a subcontinent lacking a strong central power capable of effectively resisting British advances. They also encountered many newly independent regions that could be played against one another to prevent a large part of India working together in order to retaliate effectively.

**Competition with Foreign Powers**

The British faced competition from other European powers also interested in reaping the benefits of trade with India. The East India Company most likely entered India without intentions to exert significant political control in the subcontinent. The company was more concerned with turning a profit and thus pursued policies that maximized these earnings. Faced with intense competition from other European nations, the British found that by obtaining political control of parts of India they could obtain favorable trade agreements as well as exclude foreign powers from trade.

The Portuguese were the first European power to dominate trade in the Indian Ocean during the sixteenth century. Even after the Portuguese lost influence in the seventeenth and first half of the eighteenth century, British merchants were faced with constant competition from Dutch and French. These other European powers were, understandably, less than willing to let the English easily take a stake in the profitable Indian trade. Because nations such like Portugal and The Netherlands had been involved in direct trade in India longer than the English, these countries initially had certain advantages because they

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had already contacted Indian merchants and set up agreements and were experienced with the way trade was conducted in India.\textsuperscript{ix}

In order to compete against these trade advantages, the East India Company attempted to obtain political influence in order to directly affect who the Indian merchants would sell their goods. For example, when the East India Company received the right of *diwani* in Bengal in 1765, they were able to influence to whom the Indian merchants and producers would sell their goods. They used this control to prevent textile weavers from selling their products to the Dutch or the French.\textsuperscript{v} This type of direct control over production (as well as the occasional military defeat) stymied the commercial activities of other foreign powers. The Dutch were never able to establish this kind of political control because they always concentrated on trade and adhered to the philosophy that “those who can sell the best commodity cheapest will always command the market.” \textsuperscript{xi} The French, on the other hand, did attempt to gain political favor in the same way the British did but the British did a better job of diplomacy (as well as arming) and tended to side with princes that won the frequent regional conflicts. For example in 1755, the British opted to support the Alaungpaya dynasty while the French supported the Talaiangs who suffered a crushing military defeat—thus the French lost their political “investment” when the princes they supported were defeated by British backed forces. The British received trade benefits from the princes they supported and used these advantages to further out-maneuver the French across India.\textsuperscript{xii} With these British advantages, foreign powers quickly reevaluated the wisdom of fighting a losing trade war with the British and eventually packed up, and left the subcontinent. This political control initially established by the British to best their European rivals started in port cities but eventually led to greater and political influence across most of India. Had there been a complete lack of European competition, perhaps the British would not have felt it was necessary to begin the process of political control in India. If that had been the case, the British may have only operated out of the port cities instead of moving inland and acquiring territory.

*Merchants and Mughals*

Another important precondition in India was the way power was organized under the Mughal Empire. The Mughal base of power was concentrated in the interior of the subcontinent and the government was not effective when it came to making decisions that affected the coastal regions; in general though, the Mughal government was not concerned with this ineffectiveness because most emperors didn’t particularly care about the affairs of merchants and the ocean.\textsuperscript{xiii} Mughal elites that held a *jagir* gained revenue from taxation. Thus it was more


\textsuperscript{v} Prakash, “Cooperation and Conflict among European Traders,” 21.


advantageous to obtain vast land holdings and to tax the peasants who worked the land. The peasants were taxed heavily and effectively in Mughal India—which provided enough revenue for a high standard of living. The only exception to this general rule was those elites that held a jagir over a port city. These elites received tax revenues from taxing the merchants who operated in the port cities and it was thus advantageous for these elites to promote trade to the best of their ability. Examples of elites attempting to protect trade interests are the attempts to remove the British from Surat after they had begun to monopolize trade out of that city.\textsuperscript{xiv}

The fact that the Mughal government could have had little involvement with the merchants had important repercussions when European powers began to trade in India. The Europeans were able to aggressively insert themselves into the Indian Ocean trade; it was often more advantageous for the Indian merchants to work within the trade structure established by the British rather than the lack of support they received under the Mughal empire which was kept busy putting down revolts from groups like the Marathas. Because trade was a relatively low priority for the Mughal rulers, they did not act assertively to stop the British from gaining a foothold and alliances with Indian merchants in port cities such as Surat.\textsuperscript{xv}

\textit{Urban/City Structures}

As the traditional power structure of Mughal India began to decline, the urban areas of the subcontinent and new groups of native Indians began to grow in power. With a less centralized government there was a greater importance for movement and redistribution of resources. No longer would an imperial bureaucracy decide on what resources would be allocated where—new groups had to emerge to help facilitate trade. Merchants, gentry, and to a lesser degree, warriors, gained power in the later parts of the eighteenth century. The establishment of these trade links amongst the different principalities was important for British control. The British quickly found that it was much easier to operate within these trade routes and to use the merchants and gentry to help facilitate trade.\textsuperscript{xvi}

\textit{The Economy}

Colonial India was known as the “Jewel of the British Crown,” appropriately because of the great wealth it brought to Great Britain. The British were able to fundamentally alter the economy of India to better suit its own needs—this provided a deep-seated level of control as India became dependent on Britain for shipping as well as a market for it exports. Even more significant was the numerically disproportionate balance of trade that constantly drained money from the Indian economy making it more reliant on the British. Another important British advantage was the ability to control the flow of hard

\textsuperscript{xiv} Das Gupta, “Indian Merchants and the Western Indian Ocean,” 481-450.
\textsuperscript{xvi} C. A. Bayly, Riders, Townsmen and Bazaars (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992).
currency into India. While the British obtained significant economic advantages, this section will emphasize how all of these advantages arose out negations and deals between British and Indians.

**The Drain Effect**

A very clear method of control employed by the British was “The Drain Effect.” The British followed the mercantile system that held that the prosperity of a nation depended on the amount of capital, in particular hard currency, which was available in a country. The best way to achieve this was to achieve a positive balance of trade, or simply, to have more exports than imports. The British achieved an enormous favorable of trade with India. Conservative estimates put the 1880 Balance of trade at around 400 million rupees in favor of the British while larger (and arguably more accurate) estimates put the difference in trade at around 1,335,000,000 rupees in favor of the British. The “drain effect” had an enormous effect on India and would be considered “crippling for any economy.” xvii One possible reason for Britain’s economic success might lie in the fundamental differences in the ways the governments of the two nations dealt with trade. The British, of course, were fundamentally capitalistic. Many members of Parliament were merchants themselves or strongly represented the interests of merchants. To that end, they enacted policies that would help to encourage trade and enacted few restrictions that might dissuade merchants from engaging in trade.xviii The Mughals on the other hand did not encourage trade nearly as effectively as the British. India was not by any means a poor country but the Mughals tended to spend money on frivolous projects, a prime example being the Taj Mahal. Also, merchants did not have the same kind of political support in India. They tended to be exploited and taxed heavily under the Mughals instead of supported, as in Britain.

**Trade Advantages**

The British also engaged in a much more purely capitalist system than the Indian merchants. To that end, the East India Company would employ every possible tactic to obtain lower prices. For example, in Tellicherry East India Company representatives would primarily trade peppers. They knew that dealing with multiple merchants would cause competition and a rise in prices. In order to receive the lowest prices possible, they relied on a single, trusted Indian merchant (who consequently made little from the agreement) to procure peppers.xix Working in the Indian context of trade with a greater concentration of economic purpose allowed the British to make money without causing significant upsets among the Indian merchants.

Indian shipping drastically decreased at the beginning of the nineteenth century because of a fundamental change in Indian exports. Before the Napoleonic

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xviii Pearson, *Merchants and States*, 87-94.

Wars, finished cloth from India was a huge export all across Europe. During the Napoleonic Wars, Indian merchants were unable to export their goods to continental Europe because of a Royal Navy blockade around most of continental Europe. At the same time, England had begun to industrialize which tipped the scales of trade further in favor of the British. After the blockade ended, Europeans imported from the British instead of from the Indians. In order to continue to trade, Indians began to produce and export raw materials instead of finished products. As the nineteenth century progressed, the primary Indian exports were cotton, jute, tea, and wheat; these products were used as raw materials of luxury items in Europe and were subject to sharp decreases in demand in times of economic strain.

British industrialization also drastically changed Indian imports. The Charter Act of 1813 ended the East India Company's monopoly of trade with India. This opened India to receive imports from mainland England. India began to receive imports of yarn and cloth. This led to what is known as "de-industrialization" in India. Indian weavers were unable to compete with the cheap yarn and finished cloth goods being imported from England. England was able to dominate the important European markets where Indian cloth was once heavily imported. Industrialization gave the British such a huge production advantage so that they were even able to edge out Indian cloth producers within the subcontinent. The substantial decline in the Indian weaving industry led to a dependence on manufactured European cloth goods.

**Surplus and Scarcity of Silver**

The British also controlled a key import good for India—hard currency. England, Portugal, France, and the Netherlands used silver to pay for many of the goods they imported from India. When Europeans first entered India, they were interested in obtaining silk, opium, and spices. The Indians on the other hand, had no interest in any of the goods the British or other Europeans had to offer for trade. So in order to obtain these goods, the British paid for those goods in silver. Between 1757 and 1760, East India Company military and political advances led to direct control of Plassey, Bengal, Burdwan, Midnapore, and Chittagong. With these new possessions, the East India Company was able to collect huge territorial revenues and pay for their trade items with this revenue and thus stopped exporting silver into India. The constant flow of silver had led to inflation and the sudden cease in the surge of currency caused a huge shortage of cash in the Mughal Empire and was an important factor in its eventual collapse. The sudden cease in cash flow hurt the Mughal emperors largely because it impacted their lifestyles. The Mughal emperors were wealthy and had been accustomed to purchasing luxury goods and making vast expenditures on lavish projects such as the Taj Mahal. They had also been accustomed to enforcing their rule across their

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xiv Bayly, Townsmen, 226-27.
empire through almost constant warfare. The sudden cash shortages meant that
the it became impractical for the Mughals to continue making large expenditures.
The decrease in bullion occurred so quickly that the Mughals were unable to
meaningfully change their style of government before much of their territory had
crumbled.xxiv

British Military Power in India

The use of force began early in the East India Company's interactions with
India and armed conflicts were common until the second half of the nineteenth
century. In fact, the first armed conflicts arose only a few years after the British
first began trade negotiations on the subcontinent. The British first gained the right
to trade in Mughal India in a treaty negotiated by Sir Thomas Roe and Prince
Khurram in the port of Surat in 1624. As soon as the treaty giving the British the
right to bring their own ships to the port to trade was signed, the merchants of
Surat immediately realized that this new English competition would threaten
their own trade to the Red Sea. In order to protect their own trade interests, they
quickly resolved to stop selling all goods to the English and wrote a petition to
Prince Khurram to revoke the British trade privileges. In response to this boycott,
the English employed "Gun Boat Diplomacy" which consisted of well-armed
British ships plundering Indian ships on their way to the Red Sea ports. The
English vessels were much better armed than the Indian ships; Indian merchants
were unable to stop British piracy and were faced with the choice of either
keeping their ships at port or face the dangers of the open sea.xxv

After such a blatant act of hostility, the Mughal government responded by
arresting Englishmen in Surat. This led to a further escalation of hostilities as
the English threatened to continue pirating Indian vessels. At this point, faced
with a difficult decision, the Mughal government must have regretted dealing
with the English in the first place. The Mughals could keep the Englishmen
imprisoned and attempt to remove them from India all together but they knew
they would face British piracy as a response. The Mughals opted to appease the
British and allow them the concessions they desired. These concessions gave the
English permission to trade in Surat, freedom from English judicial retaliation,
and the ability to acquire property. These concessions opened the door for the
British and the accumulation of these sorts of rights in ports across the
subcontinent to establish such an enormous shipping advantage as to completely
eliminate trade competition from Indian merchants.xxvi

The English trade quickly expanded throughout the middle of the
seventeenth century and was marked by a period of relative peace between the
East India Company and the Mughal government. This changed in the last
quarter of the century. Growing tension between the new emperor Aurangzeb and
the British arose over customs duties in Bengal, the refusal of the British to
refund money paid by the Emperor for ammunition, and of particular annoyance to

xxiv Bayly, Seven Hundred Years, 592.
xxv Phanindra Nath Chakraborti, Rise and Growth of the East India Company, (Calcutta: Pinthi Pustak,
1994).
xxvi Chakraborti, Rise of the East India Co 120-142.
the new emperor—the attempts of the British to fortify Bombay and to attract settlers to the island. The final straw was an incident of piracy in 1688 in which British pirates attacked the ship Gunj-I-Suwaee which belonged to Aurangzeb and held aristocratic pilgrims who were returning from a pilgrimage to Mecca. The pirates stole almost £180,000 and raped some of the women on board. xxv The Emperor was furious and launched a full-scale war between the British and Mughals in 1688 in which Aurangzeb’s forces emerged victorious. Despite his temporary advantage, Aurangzeb was more concerned with his war against the Marathas in the Deccan. Instead of attempting to kick the English out of India, the emperor reinstated all of the trade privileges the English had before the war began. xxviii

This of course was not the end of British military actions in India; these merely serve as examples of force used in the early stages of colonization. The British fought many battles to establish dominance across the subcontinent. A detailed list of these conflicts is not necessary for this paper; other sources have examined the detail of specific military conflicts in detail. Appendix I shows a list of the most important military campaigns during the process of British colonialism. What is significant about these conflicts is that the British almost always worked with another Indian faction to emerge victorious. Despite their superior weapons, a strong, united alliance from several Indian princes could have defeated the British forces because of their small numbers. The British almost always made some sort of agreement to prevent this from happening. For example in the Battle of Plassey, the British had offered Mir Jafar the throne of Bengal if his forces did not fight in the battle, he agreed and what might have been a difficult fight for the British became an easy victory. These types of agreements prevented the British from facing strongly united Indian forces. xxix

Naval Superiority

Another important aspect of the British use of military force in India was the navy. As mentioned above, emperor Aurangzeb commanded a formidable army and was able to defeat the British on land. Unable to defeat the Imperial forces on land, the East India Company was able to retreat to the relative safety of the open seas. Without a navy, Aurangzeb was unable to respond to British piracy. Eventually, the British agreed to pay an indemnity and agreed to provide “protection” for Indian vessels for a yearly fee. This example characterizes the importance of the navy throughout the period of colonialism—the British navy was always absolutely dominant, the Indians had no choice but to defer to the British when it came to matters of the sea.

As the Mughal Empire decayed, power was steadily distributed from a central authority towards a decentralized power invested in the different regions. The newly independent regions, in particular in rural northern India, lacked the same political stability that they had enjoyed while under direct control of the Mughal Empire. The East India Company and its military forces were quickly

seen as one possible option for political stabilization in these regions. The East India Company then recruited from these regions, which provided a non-agrarian way to make a living. Those Indians who did join the Company army learned about and participated in western culture and helped the British to establish a foothold before obtaining control of the entire population of the region.

The Invalid Thanahs

One specific method used by the British was the creation of Invalid Thanahs. Invalids were native Indians soldiers that had served for more than 10 years and had been discharged from the army because of old age or some other sort of disability. Because of their loyal service, they were given plots of land to retire on. These communities tended to be grouped together and were known as Thanahs. The Thanahs served several important functions. The invalids were often influential for recruiting purposes—young men heard about and saw the success enjoyed by the invalids because of military service under the company and were thus encouraged to enlist. Thanahs were not subject military laws, not the same kinds of political and judicial laws that guided other communities—thus these communities were seen as unique and special. The Thanahs were granted independence from many laws that governed civilians further increased the social desirability of becoming a part of the army.xxx

The Thanahs were also located in the more remote parts of the country. These regions had never been firmly controlled even by the Mughals—putting former sepoys (native soldiers given European style military training) that had proven themselves loyal to the British provided a degree of political control in regions in which many of the Mughal institutions had failed to take hold. The Thanahs were also an important method of undermining the power of the different principalities not controlled by the East India Company. By inserting loyal native Indians, the British were able to destabilize some of the political control that the local principalities had built.xxxi

A European Army in India

One of most unique characteristics of the British military in India was the composition of its armed forces. The East India Company needed a large military force to keep civil order in the subcontinent but knew that it would have been far too expensive for the to maintain an army of native Britons. Another unique problem faced by the British in India was the presence of two British armies, a regular army run by the British government and an army run by the East India Company. The East India Company encountered many difficulties in recruiting because they lacked the ability to officially punish their soldiers under a court-martial system, the ability to provide the same sorts of material compensation, an inability to recruit as widely as the regular army. The government also restricted the size of the company army because no government would be

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xxxi Alavi, The Invalid Thanah, 147-178.
comfortable with a corporation that possessed a military force that might rival its own.\textsuperscript{xxxii}

The East India Company’s solution was to recruit native Indians and give them European-style military training. These native soldiers were known as \textit{sepoys} and were crucial factor in British control over the subcontinent. They allowed the British to protect the borders of the subcontinent from possible invasions as well as maintain civil disorder. The \textit{Sepoy} system was so effective because it also benefited the Indians that served as \textit{sepoys}, in fact, service in the British army was a highly sought after position in particular among some of the higher castes.\textsuperscript{xxxiii}

Service in the British military by native Indians was entirely voluntarily. This was an important source for its success—conscripted soldiers are less effective than soldiers who serve out of their own will. Indians often enlisted in the army for economic reasons. A typical enlistee came from an agrarian background and joined the army because of crop failure or other inabilities to make a sufficient living through agriculture. The army guaranteed its soldiers good clothing, food, and shelter, which is often more than they had in their civilian lives. Career soldiers also had the opportunity for advancement in rank and pay and to earn themselves a fairly decent living, the older career soldiers were even granted good pieces of land, which was an extremely proposition for many young, poor men.

The British army was also sensitive to the culture of the \textit{Seopys}. In peacetime, soldiers were given the opportunity to go on leave to participate in religious ceremonies. The army also was always particularly careful when it came to religion and gave the \textit{sepoys} adequate freedom and leave to practice their religion. One of the most important qualifications for any British officer in charge of a \textit{sepoy} unit was a firm understanding of the cultural background of his soldiers. All officers were expected to tour the region from which they recruited to learn about the religion and culture of the men that would serve in his unit. British officers might also participate in religious ceremonies to develop an understanding of his soldiers’ beliefs.\textsuperscript{xxxiv}

Indians were also encouraged to foster an “espirit-de-corps,” a sense of identity and pride that each soldier felt for his individual unit. Developing this spirit made the Indians more loyal, if not directly towards the British colonial government, than towards their own particular units. The British actively fostered this sense of pride through competitive games and sports or a drill competition between the different \textit{sepoy} regiments. The different divisions of the \textit{sepoys} were purposefully organized so that soldiers from the same region, religion, and caste served together in the same unit. This also helped the various companies form a sense of identity and sense of pride.\textsuperscript{xxxv} The soldiers tended to unite because of their common backgrounds and worked and fought harder because they thought of themselves as representatives of their given community.

\textsuperscript{xxxiii} David Omissi, \textit{The Sepoy and the Raj} (Houndsmill: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1994).
\textsuperscript{xxxiv} David Omissi, \textit{The Sepoy and the Raj}, 76-112.
\textsuperscript{xxxv} David Omissi, \textit{The Sepoy and the Raj}, 76-112.
Dividing the different units into common also lessened the potential tensions that could arise when members of different religions were put together.

While the sepoy were generally efficient and reliable soldiers, the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857 served as a stark reminder of the fact that the native soldiers were by no means docile subjects. The Sepoy Rebellion also illustrates how critical it was that the British understood the culture and societal divisions of their soldiers. The sepoy in the Bengal army had been made up of primarily high-caste Indians until the Punjab was conquered in 1849. After the region was conquered, many of its former soldiers were absorbed into the Bengal army partly because the British had been impressed with the way they fought and partly to avoid the potential dangers of allowing nearly a hundred thousand unemployed former soldiers roam across the countryside. The new additions were over half Sikh and were highly resented by the high caste members of the army. xxxvi Thus tension over the mixing of the two religious groups was an important underlying tension that contributed to the revolt.

A more immediate cause was a new shipment of guns. The East India Co. had just issued new Enfield rifles to the sepoy in Bengal. In order to load the new rifles, the cartridges had to be greased so that each bullet could be pushed all the way inside of the cartridge. Rumors (which very well may have been true) began to circulate that the cartridges were being greased with cow and pig fat. Cows were considered sacred to Hindus while Muslims believed that because pigs were unclean and could defile anyone that came into close contact with them. xxxvii All things considered, the resulting revolt could have been worse for the British. It was localized almost entirely within the army and did not spread to the surrounding countryside. It was put down quickly and stability returned relatively easily.

The revolt had few serious consequences but it made a permanent mark on the minds of British authorities. The fact that the forces the British relied on to create stability in India had the potential to rise up and threaten to overturn that stability was absolutely terrifying. It also changed the British mindset towards the Indians—they no longer believed the Indians were content or at least passive citizens—post-revolt, the many British believed the Indians were constantly scheming and planning further civil discord. xxxviii The British thus resolved to reform the sepoy ranks to minimize the possibility of revolt.

The British knew that they were providing the native people with the knowledge and technology that could be used to potentially overthrow their own rule. The constant fear of revolt in the sepoy ranks was foremost on the minds of British authorities when making any decision in regards. After 1857, British military authorities acted with the lessons of the Sepoy Rebellion in mind to reform the army in order to minimize the possibility of a future mutiny.

The first step enacted by the British was to remove the East English Company from power over military forces in India and to put control of the armies directly under the British government. This was step was enacted so that the government would be able to establish direct oversight over the military operations in India and to avoid blunders such as the rifle incident. The British

xxxvi David Omissi, The Sepoy and the Raj, 1-5.
xxxvii Heathcote, Military in British India, 103-110
xxxviii Judd, The Lion and the Tiger, 70-90).
also moved to rearrange the proportions of native to European soldiers present in India. In 1857, sepoy ranks had numbered 226,000; the Peel Commission, a body created to recommend changes to prevent a repeat of The Sepoy Rebellion, recommended a reduction to 190,000 sepoys. From this point on, the British attempted to maintain a 2:1 sepoy to European soldier ratio. The Peel Commission believed a lower ration of sepoys to British soldiers would give the British more of a guarantee of victory in the event of another revolt. xxix

The British attempted to minimize the possibility for revolt amongst by recruiting soldiers that were both effective but lacked rebellious tendencies. The basic guideline for this recruitment process was the “Martial Race Theory.” The theory stated that some ethnic groups were physically better suited for war. The British went about trying to determine which of the many different ethnic groups of India would best fulfill these qualifications. The British tried to find ethnic groups with potential soldiers who were manly and would not fail to throw themselves into the thick of a battle, possible recruits that were physically powerful, and that were somewhat less intelligent and thus more likely to unquestioningly follow orders. xl

While it is unlikely that certain races are imbued with more “martial” qualities than others, the recruiting strategy worked for the British primarily due to social and cultural factors. For example, the British tended to recruit from the more rural agrarian parts of India, so many of these recruits tended towards illiteracy but were not unintelligent because of some sort of ethnic deficiency. The British also recruited from castes that were traditionally made up of warriors and were thus more likely to act with valor on the battlefield so as not to disgrace their caste. xli

The British maintained an active army even after they had established firm control of the subcontinent. Its purpose was two-fold: the army was a force used to protect the borders of India from possible attacks from other foreign nations, Russia in particular, was believed to be a dangerous threat. The army’s second purpose was to maintain the civil order and to prevent uprisings such as The Sepoy Rebellion from occurring again.

The British armies had two primary purposes after the mid nineteenth century—to protect the borders and occasionally putting down the occasional riot or minor civil disturbance (after the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, there were few instances of civil disorder that required military force). Throughout the history of India, a constant threat to those that held political power was invasion from the north. The British were not concerned that they would face an invading barbarian horde from Central Asia, instead they believed they would face armies from Afghanistan or Iran that had received European-style military training from the Russians, who were also perceived as a significant threat to the British holdings in India. Thus in 1839, the British army marched from India into Afghanistan and deposed the ruler Amir Dost Muhammad and replaced him with Shah Shuja-ul-Mulk. Despite their initial success, harsh winters and the Afghan peoples’ refusal to Shuja-ul-Mulk’s rule led the British to abandon the occupation.

xxix Heathcote, Military in British India, 105-123.
xl Omissi, The Sepoy and the Raj, 16-35.
xli Omissi, The Sepoy and the Raj, 47-74.
of Afghanistan. This was the most significant military operation involving the British Indian army and a foreign power—generally the army simply patrolled the borders and served as a deterrent to possible foreign incursions from the Russians, French, or other foreign powers.

When I set out to write this paper, I asked the question, “How could such a tiny island control such a large landmass so far away?” History never has a simple, definitive answer to such questions. The fact that what I discovered many answers to my questions is heartening, a somewhat complex answer seems more correct than a simple one. Hopefully many factors and their interactions listed above, the conditions of India before the British arrived, economic agreements, and a military that relied on native peoples as allies as well as soldiers, provide an answer as satisfactory to the reader as they are to the author.

Appendix 1

The Battle of Plassey (1757)
The Battle of Buxar (1764)
The First Mysore War (1767-1769)
The First Anglo-Maratha War (1775-1782)
The Second Mysore War (1775-1782)
The Third Mysore War (1790-1792)
The Fourth Mysore War (1799)
The Second Anglo-Maratha War (1803-1805)
The Anglo-Gurkha War (1814-1816)
The Pindari War (1817-1818)
The Last Anglo-Maratha War (1817-1819)
The First Anglo-Burmese War (1824-1826)
The First Anglo-Sikh War (1845-1846)
The Second Anglo-Sikh War (1848-1849)
The Second Anglo-Burmese War (1852)

References


Heathcote, Military in British India, 81-82.


