

## Shaping History: Colonial India and the Development of Military Historiography

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### 1. Introduction

The eighteenth century holds an important place in Indian History as it was a transitional phase in terms of political power, economic setup, social setup, and history writing. This century saw the decline of the Mughal Empire on the one hand and the emergence of local powers.<sup>1</sup> These local powers were in constant conflict with each other, which gave European powers the opportunity to think of the political control of the Indian subcontinent for their economic benefits. Different European powers strengthened their positions by defeating local Rajas. Among all Europeans, the Britishers were the most successful in establishing themselves on Indian soil.<sup>2</sup> The establishment of British power in India resulted in changes in the political, economic, and social setup of India. The credit for writing military historiography in the modern context goes to the Britishers, who initiated this process. The primary step in this context was taken by British officials in general and military generals in particular. Among all the officials who wrote military historiography, G.B. Malleson holds a special position for introducing the “Great Man Theory” paradigm into Indian Military Historiography.<sup>3</sup> Military technological aspects have been widely studied by many historians especially by Jean Deloche and G. N. Pant. The works of Iqtidar Alam Khan and Ranbir Chakarvati help us understand the technological aspects of the army in medieval India. Scholarship by scholars such as John Brewer, Douglas M. Peers, and C. A. Bayly are important for understanding the military historiographical trends in the colonial period. The statistical data were provided by Cive Dewey, Rajit K. Mazumder and R. O. Christensen, Graham Dunlop, and K. N. Reddy is helpful for gaining insights into the expenditure of the armed forces. A new trend in history developed in the 1970s, in which ‘social history’ became a focal point for scholars. Works of scholars such as David E. Omissi, C. A. Bayly, and Kaushik Roy need special mention in this regard. Equally important are the works of Tan Tai Yong and Anirudh Deshpande for understanding the weakening military power of the Britishers during the 1940s, which they opined resulted in the departure of the Britishers from India.

### 2. Colonial Rule and Military Historiography:

The advent of Europeans in general and the establishment of the British Empire in particular marked a new era in the History of India. In this context, E. Sreedharan has rightly remarked that “wars have always acted as a stimulus to history writing.”<sup>4</sup> Enlightenment Historian Edward Gibbon has mentioned, “Wars and the administration of the public affairs are the principal subjects of History.”<sup>5</sup> Military historiography in modern India dates back to the colonial period and has progressed

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significantly. In the late eighteenth century, British military officials wrote modern works on military history.<sup>6</sup> Many of these British officials were influenced by Clausewitz's ideology.<sup>7</sup> They followed the "Decisive battles" paradigm, which is a well-known approach to look at military events. This is an example of the "history from the top" paradigm because the attention is mainly on the commanders. This way of analyzing history has been referred to as the "Great Man Theory" by modern historians. In the context of Indian military historiography, G B Malleson was the first person to use this narrative in 1883.<sup>8</sup> Malleson was influenced by the works of Edward Creasy, who wrote *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World from Marathon to Waterloo* in 1851 to show how Europeans gained military control over Eurasia. He discusses the war tactics, leadership qualities, and racial supremacy as the cause of the British triumph. This 'paradigm' has influenced many Indian historians, but without a racial dimension. Sir Jadunath Sarkar, in his book *Military History of India*, tried to highlight the causes responsible for India's defeat at the hands of the Macedonians and the Turks. He states that "Terrain, 'character, and 'weapons' shape the structure of warfare."<sup>9</sup> The Role of 'topography' and 'tactical moves' in warfare has also been emphasized by B.P. Ambashthya in his book *The Decisive Battles of Sber Shah*.<sup>10</sup>

G. N. Pant is known to be a pioneer in the historical study of military technology. He discusses a variety of weapons used in India from the Stone Age to the 18th century. He has used Sanskrit sources in his research; the book *Indian Archery* is a fine example of this.<sup>11</sup> Robert Elgood surveyed the arms and armour used by the rulers of medieval India, especially the Rajputs. He concluded that arms had ritualistic and aesthetic importance.<sup>12</sup> He emphasized the use of iconography to understand technology in pre-modern India. In this context, French Scholar, Jean Deloche used the friezes of Hoysala temples to study the equipment of the Hoysala dynasty (*Twelfth and Thirteenth Century*).<sup>13</sup> Many scholars have studied the transfer of military technology.<sup>14</sup> They were influenced by the Marxist Archaeologist Vere Gordon Childe, who believed that immigrants helped in the diffusion of technology. Murray B. Emeneau after studying the Sanchi and Ajanta sculptures explained that the 'composite bow' came to India from Central Asia with Kushanas.<sup>15</sup> However, it died out after the collapse of the Gupta Empire in India. Jan Qaisar says that the method of shoeing horses spread from Central Asia to northern India. On the other hand, Jean Deloche states that the technique of shoeing horses grew independently in South India in the thirteenth century.<sup>16</sup> Clifford Edmund Bosworth has shown that the use of elephants in the army was learned by Ghaznavids from Rajputs and they used them against Central Asian counterparts.<sup>17</sup> The Rajputs were unable to face the speed, mobility, and surprise attacks of the Turk cavalry. Therefore, the Rajputs tried to make their forts more defensive. The monograph of Jean Deloche on fortification remains unsurpassable. Deloche notes "Between the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Hindu rulers constructed complex gateways, towers, and thicker walls with embankments in order to make their *durgas* (forts) impregnable."<sup>18</sup> Ali Athar's monograph *Military Technology and Warfare in the Sultanate of Delhi (1206-1398 A.D.)* has shown that Turks were familiar with the art of mining, the construction of *pasbehs* (enclosed passageways for assaulting the forts), and the devastating use of crossbows and ballistas catapults against the *rais*-held forts.

The Mongols introduced gunpowder technology in India in the thirteenth century, which they had learned from the Chinese. Gunpowder was used in pyrotechnic

devices such as *bans* (rockets). Ottomans and Portuguese gunpowder reached South India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Iqtidar Alam Khan's *Gunpowder and Firearms/ : Warfare in Medieval India* is the best-known book on the use of gunpowder. Gunpowder helped the Mughals achieve military hegemony and centralize the bureaucracy. Mughal successor states received Western military technology from European mercenaries. Kaushik Roy and French Historian Jean Marie Lafont have highlighted this aspect in their research.<sup>19</sup> Ranabir Chakravarti's monograph *Warfare for Wealth: Early Indian Perspectives* is the sole work on the economic aspect of warfare. Chakravarti has mentioned that warfare in ancient India was meant for the acquisition of wealth, that is, cows. Later, wars were fought for the acquisition of agricultural land. He also wrote an article on the trade of war horses in Eastern India during the early medieval period.<sup>20</sup>

With the establishment of the British Empire, scholars have put forth their views on the nature of their empire. It includes John Brewer, Douglas M. Peers, and C. A. Bayly all these scholars projected the company as the 'fiscal-military state'.<sup>21</sup> In addition, Douglas M. Peers argued that the Britishers were successful in creating a garrison state during the nineteenth century in North India.<sup>22</sup> In his monograph, Randolph G. S. Cooper contends that the East India Company's superior financial resources enabled them to purchase off the Maratha *sirdars* and other floating military mercenaries in Hindustan during the Second Anglo-Afghan war (1803-05). Sanjay Subrahmanyam while holding a contrasting viewpoint has mentioned that indigenous polities had tried to construct the 'fiscal military' apparatus in order to face the rising expenditure of warfare. 'Mysore' had tried to create a centralized administrative fiscal apparatus to supply money and mules to the security forces.<sup>23</sup>

Military expenditure positively impacted Northwest India. Quoting Cive Dewey, Rajit K. Mazumder notes that the agricultural society of Punjab witnessed the positive impact of the military expenditure.<sup>24</sup> R.O. Christensen showed how military pay and road construction by the army pacified the Indus region. Graham Dunlop, a British Military officer, has mentioned that between 1942 and 1945 Indian economy was fully utilized for military units fighting with Japan in Burma. The higher demand for military stock resulted in the breakdown of equilibrium in the civil sector, which caused the Bengal Famine of 1943. K. N. Reddy has shown in his article that about 43 percent of the total budget was spent on the army during World War II.<sup>25</sup>

### 3. Changes in Military Historiography:

Military historiography is closely intertwined with mainstream history writing because military institutions, conflicts, and strategies are deeply embedded in broader political, economic, and social processes. The study of warfare and armies illuminates state formation, imperial expansion, and governance and reveals patterns of resource mobilization, technological change, and social hierarchy. By situating military history within wider historical narratives, military historiography moves beyond battlefield accounts to contribute meaningfully to debates on power, society and historical change. A new trend of understanding the social aspect of history emerged in the 1970s, titled 'Social History.' This had a direct impact on Military History. The focal point of history shifted from the battlefields to the barracks. Brajadulal Chattopadhyaya's essay on the emergence of the Rajput community is the best work in this field. He has shown how

the leaders of the clan known as *thakurs* attained the status of *rajaputras* and reached the status of warrior community in the landscape.<sup>26</sup> American Political Scientist, Stephen Peter Rosen opines that the army fought well when separated from society. However, such armies were not loyal to the political dynasty because they had developed their own identity. In contrast, when military establishments mingled with society, they became militarily ineffective but remained faithful to the political establishment. The Britishers created an effective army (sepoys) in combat by separating them from society. However, they deserted the leadership. The result was the Insurrection of 1857.<sup>27</sup>

Rudrangshu Mukherjee, following the claims of Eric Stokes, has mentioned that “sepoys were peasants in uniform.”<sup>28</sup> According to their perspective, the mutinous actions of the Bengal sepoys were a manifestation of the pressures and tensions prevalent in the agrarian society of northern India during the mid-nineteenth century, primarily resulting from the interaction between sepoys and the peasant class.<sup>29</sup> In several of his works, Chandar S Sundaram demonstrates that the British failure to properly indianize the officer corps of the British Indian Army, coupled with the rise of nationalism among the Indian middle class, led to the establishment of the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) in 1942.<sup>30</sup> While discussing the Bengal army in the first half of the nineteenth century, Seema Alvi mentions that the ‘Bengal Army’ became the medium for the ‘social mobility’ of some communities in North India such as Bhumihaar Brahmans of Bihar and Muslims of Rohilkhand.<sup>31</sup>

David Omissi and Kaushik Roy have written monographs on the social history of the British Indian Army after the event of 1857.<sup>32</sup> The best way to understand the social makeup of the Indian armies during the post-1857 colonial era is by examining the martial race theory. After 1857 the recruitment base shifted from those areas which have participated in revolt to the Hilly areas of Nepal and north-west India in order to conscript the loyal martial races of Gurkhas, Sikhs, and Pathans.<sup>33</sup> Omissi has defined the martial race as “the product of British ethnic policy geared for state security.”<sup>34</sup> He was influenced by the concept of ‘ethnicity’ by the political sociologist Cynthia H. Enloe. In their latest work, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper have focused on the unravelling of the British Empire in South and Southeast Asia in their book *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-45*. They have argued that British Empire survived because of the collaboration of the native elite class and the white supremacy myth.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand Tan Tai Yong and Anirudh Deshpande emphasize the decline of British hegemony in India. Yong analyses the province of Punjab in British India as a case study. He has mentioned its military importance during World War First and second as the main supplier of soldiers and development of communication, especially the railway for the protection of the Northwest Frontier.<sup>36</sup> Deshpande explains that the beginning of demobilization after August 1945 was the beginning of a serious challenge for the Raj. British failed to fulfil the wartime promises done to the soldiers, which resulted in their turning against the Raj. Deshpande, in an article, demonstrates how the Royal Indian Navy rebellion represented a popular movement of resistance against colonialism.<sup>37</sup>

In recent decades, there has been a growing interest in studying military history in India, both academically and within the armed forces. Scholars and researchers have expanded the scope of military historiography to include aspects such as strategy, operations, logistics, leadership, and the social impact of warfare. Efforts have been

made to incorporate diverse perspectives, including the experiences of soldiers from marginalized communities and women in the armed forces. The use of archival research, oral history, interviews, and interdisciplinary approaches has enriched the study of military history in India. Overall, the development of military historiography in modern India has moved away from a predominantly British-centric narrative to a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of India's military past, recognizing the contributions of Indian soldiers and exploring various dimensions of warfare.

#### 4. Conclusion:

An attempt was made to provide the overview of historiographical trends which developed in Military History during and after the Colonial rule. Imperial narratives, indigenous reactions, and the refining of historical perspectives are still present in today's academic discourse which needs to be further investigation. The article establishes the foundation for further research projects in addition to acting as a historical analysis. Occurring complicated events during the colonial era have provided useful insights into the wider historical consciousness of India and have set the platform for ongoing dialogues on the nature of military historiography. In the greater scheme of India's military history and historiography, the colonial era continues to be an important chapter as researchers peel back the layers of this dynamic field.

#### (Endnotes)

1. Sekhar Bandyopādhyāya, *From Plassey to Partition*, Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004, pp. 1-31.
2. Ibid., pp. 37-62.
3. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed. *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, p. 121.
4. Ibid., pp. 37-62.
5. E. Sreedharan, *A Textbook of Historiography 500 BC to AD 2000*, Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2004, p. 10.
6. Will Durant and Ariel Durant, *The Story of Civilization: Part X. Rousseau and Revolution. A History of Civilization in France, England and Germany*, et al. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1967, p. 807.
7. B. Sheik Ali, *History: Its Theory and Method*, 2nd ed., New Delhi: Trinity Press, 2021, p.193.
8. Carl von Clausewitz, *On War: Introduction by Michael Howard*. Everyman's Library Classics Ser. Everyman's Library, 1993, p. 13. He has defined "War as an act of force to compel our enemy to do our will".
9. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed. *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, p. 121
10. Jadunath Sarkar, *Military History of India*, 1st ed. 1960, 2nd ed., New Delhi: Gyan Publishing Houe, 2022, pp. 2-3.
11. B.P. Ambashthya, *The Decisive Battles of Sher Shah*, Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1977, pp. 9-30. For more details see also Raziuddin Aquil, *Sufism, Culture, and Politics: Afghans and Islam in Medieval North India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 81-113. and *Archery*. in 3 vols, Chandigarh, 1978, 1980, 1983; *Mughal Weapons in Babur-Nama*, Delhi, 1989; *Horse and Elephant Armour*, Delhi, 1997; *Indian Archery*, 1978, rpt., Delhi, 1993

12. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, ed. *Approaches to History: Essays in Indian Historiography*, Delhi: Primus Books, 2011, p. 122.
13. Jean Deloche, *Military Technology in Hoysala Sculpture (Twelfth and Thirteenth Century)*. Sitaram Bharatia Institute of Scientific Research, 1989, p. 31. For more details see, Habib, Irfan. *Technology in Medieval India (c. 650-1750)*. Fourth edition. Tulika Books, 2013, p. 87.; Habib, Irfan. *Medieval India: The Study of Civilization*. National Book Trust, India, 2008, p. 17.
14. Kenneth Chase in his survey of the history of firearms in Eurasian warfare claims that the acquisition of a particular weapon technology by a society is dependent on the nature of threat faced by it.
15. Murray B. Emeneau, 'The Composite Bow in India.', *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, Vol. 97, No.2, 1953, pp. 77–87.
16. Jean Deloche, op. cit. p. 31, for more details see. Irfan Habib, *Technology in Medieval India (c. 650-1750)*, Fourth edition, Aligarh: Tulika Books, 2013, p. 87.
17. C.E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids/ : Their Empire in Afghanistan and Eastern India, 994-1040*, New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1992, pp. 98-128.
18. Jean Deloche, *Studies on Fortification in India*, Pondicherry: Institut français de Pondichéry, 2020. For an archaeologist study of the pre-British Indian forts see F.J. Varley, 'On the Water Supply of Hill Forts of Western India', *Geographical Journal*, Vol.40, No.2, 1912, pp. 178-83.
19. Kaushik Roy, 'Firepower-Centric Warfare in India and the Military Modernization of the Marathas: 1740-1818', *Indian Journal of History of Science*, Vol.40, No. 4, 2005, pp. 597–634.
20. Ranabir Chakravarti, 'Early Medieval Bengal and the Trade In Horses: A Note.' *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 42, No. 2, 1999, pp. 194–211.
21. Douglas M.Peers, 'Between Mars and Mammon; the East India Company and Efforts to Reform Its Army, 1796–1832.' *The Historical Journal*, Vol.33, No. 2, June 1990, pp. 385–401.
22. The term "Garrison state" was coined by the American sociologist and political scientist Harold Lasswell in his book *Garrison State: The Military, Government, and Society in Colonial Punjab, 1849-1947*, published in 1946. He argued that the colonial state in Punjab was characterized by a dominant military presence, with the military assuming significant control over governance and societal affairs. Lasswell used the term "Garrison state" to describe the extent to which the military establishment influenced and shaped various aspects of colonial society and governance.
23. Sanjay Subrahmanyam, 'Warfare and State Finance in Wodeyar Mysore, 1724-25: A Missionary Perspective.' *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* Vol.26, No. 2, 1989, pp. 203-33.
24. Rajit K. Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of Punjab*, Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003, p. 47.
25. K.N. Reddy, 'Indian Defence Expenditure: 1872-1967.' *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* Vol. 7, No. 4, 1970, pp.467-88.
26. B.D. Chattopadhyaya, 'Origin of the Rajputs: The Political, Economic and Social Processes in Early Medieval Rajasthan.' *Indian Historical Review* Vol.3, No. 1, 1976, pp. 59-82.

27. S. Bhattacharya, op.cit., pp. 127-128.
28. This claim has been also endorsed by Úekhara Bandyopádhyȧ a, *From Plassey to Partition*, Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2004, p. 172; Biswamoy Pati, ed. *The Great Rebellion of 1857 in India: Exploring Transgressions, Contests and Diversities*, Routledge Studies in South Asian History Ser. Routledge, 2010,p.7.
29. Rudrangshu Mukherjee, 'The Sepoy Mutinies Revisited', in Mushirul Hasan and Narayani Gupta, eds., *India's Colonial Encounter: Essays in Honour of Eric Stokes*, New Delhi, 1993, pp. 121-32.
30. Chandar S. Sundaram, 'A Paper Tiger: The Indian National Army in Battle, 1944-1945. *War & Society* Vol.13, No. 1, 1995, pp.35-59.
31. Bhattacharya, op.cit., p. 129.
32. David E. Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1994. Kaushik Roy, *Brown Warriors of the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940*, New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2008.
33. Kaushik Roy, *The Army in British India: From Colonial Warfare to Total War 1857 – 1947*, New Delhi: Bloomsbury Academic & Professional, 2013, p. 36.
34. David Omissi, 'Martial Races: Ethnicity and Security in Colonial India 1858–1939.' *War & Society*, Vol.9, No. 1, 1991, pp. 1-27.
35. S. Bhattacharya, op.cit., p. 130.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 130.