Administrative Changes in the British Indian Army after 1857 Revolt

By Puja Mondal

After 1857 revolt, there was a systematic reorganisation of the Army since, as Dufferin warned in December 1888; “the British should always remember the lessons which were learnt with such terrible experience 30 years ago.”

To prevent the recurrence of another revolt was the main reason behind this reorganisation. Also, the Indian Army was to be used to defend the Indian territory of the empire from other imperialist powers in the region—Russia, Germany, France, etc.

The Indian branch of the army was to be used for expansion in Asia and Africa, while the British section was to be used as an army of occupation—the ultimate guarantee of British hold over India.

To begin with, domination of the European branch over the Indian branches was ensured. The commissions of 1859 and 1879 insisted on the principle of a one-third white army (as against 14% before 1857).

Finally, the proportion of Europeans to Indians was carefully fixed at one to two in the Bengal Army and two to five in the Madras and Bombay Armies. Strict European monopoly over key geographical locations and departments, such as artillery, tanks and armed corps, was maintained.

Even the rifles given to Indians were of an inferior quality till 1900, and Indians were not allowed in these high-tech departments till the Second World War. No Indians were allowed in the officer rank, and the highest rank an Indian could reach till 1914 was that of a Subedar (only from 1918 onwards were Indians allowed in the commissioned ranks). As late as 1926, the Indian Sandhurst Committee was visualising a 50% Indianised officer cadre for 1952!

The Indian branch was reorganised on basis of the policy of balance and counterpoise or divide and rule. The 1879 Army Commission had emphasised—“Next to the grand counterpoise of a sufficient European force comes the counterpoise of natives against natives.” An ideology of ‘martial races’ and ‘non-martial races’, which assumed that good soldiers could come only from some specific communities, developed particularly from the late 1880s, under Lord Roberts, the commander-in-chief from 1887 to 1892.

It was used to justify a discriminatory recruitment policy directed towards Sikhs, Gurkhas and Pathans who had assisted in the suppression of the revolt and were relatively marginal social groups—therefore less likely to be affected by nationalism. The soldiers from Awadh, Bihar, Central India and South India who had participated in the revolt were declared to be non-martial.

Moreover, caste and communal companies were introduced in all the regiments and Indian regiments were made a mixture of various socio-ethnic groups so as to balance each other. Communal, caste, tribal and regional consciousness was encouraged to check the growth of nationalist feelings among soldiers. Charles Wood, the secretary of state for India, said, "I wish to have a different and rival spirit in different regiments, so that Sikh might fire into Hindu, Gorkha into either, without any scruple in case of need.”
Finally, conscious efforts were made to isolate the soldiers from life and thoughts of rest of the population through measures such as preventing newspapers, journals and nationalist publications from reaching them.

On the whole, the British Indian Army remained a costly military machine.

**Public Services:**

Just as their systematic exclusion from law and policy-making bodies, the Indians were mostly kept out of the institutions responsible for policy implementation such as the Indian bureaucracy and other like spheres of administration. European supremacy was assured in the civil service also. This was done in mainly two ways.

Firstly, although Indians had 'started' making it to the coveted ranks of the Indian Civil Services ever since Satyendranath Tagore became the first Indian to do so in 1863, entering the civil services was still extremely difficult for the Indians.

The entrance examination for ICS was held in London in English medium only, and the subjects included classical Greek and Latin learning. Moreover, the maximum age for appearing at the examination was reduced from twenty-three in 1859 to nineteen in 1878 under Lytton.

Secondly, all key positions of power and authority and those which were well-paid were occupied by the Europeans.

Despite slow Indianisation after 1918 under nationalist pressure, key positions continued to be occupied by Europeans. But gradually, the Indians came to realise that Indianisation of civil service had not, in any way, transferred effective power to Indian hands.

The Indian members of the civil service continued to serve imperialist interests of their British masters.

**Princely States:**

Relations with princely states were to be guided by a two-point policy—using and perpetuating them as bulwark of the empire and subordinating them completely to British authority (the policy of subordinate union).

To cultivate these states as a buffer against future political unrest and to reward them for their loyalty during the revolt of 1857, the policy of annexation was abandoned. The new policy was to depose or punish but not annex. Also, territorial integrity of states was guaranteed and it was announced that their right to adopt an heir would be respected.

The subordination of princely states to British authority was completed when the fiction of Indian states standing in a status of equality with the Crown as independent, sovereign states ended with the Queen adopting the title of Kaiseri-i-Hind (Queen Empress of India) in 1876, to emphasise British sovereignty over entire India.
It was later made clear by Lord Curzon that the princes ruled their states merely as agents of the British Crown. With paramountcy, the British Government exercised the right to interfere in the internal affairs of states through their residents or by appointing and dismissing ministers and officials.

The British were helped further in their encroachment by modern developments in communication—railways, roads, telegraph, canals, post offices, etc. The motive for interference was also provided by the rise of nationalist, democratic sentiments in these states, the suppression of which, the British realised, was essential for their survival. As a positive side to these modern political movements, the British helped these states adopt modern administrative institutions.

**Administrative Policies:**

Contrary to their pre-1857 intentions of trying to modernise India on progressive lines, now the administration adopted blatantly reactionary policies on the pretext that Indians were not fit for self-governance and needed British presence in their lives.

**Divide and Rule:**

Determined to avoid a united mass action challenging their authority, the British rulers in India decided to practice a naked policy of divide and rule, by putting princes against states' people, region against region, province against province, caste against caste and Hindus against Muslims.

After an immediate spell of repression against Muslims, following the 1857 revolt, the authorities decided, after 1870, to use the middle and upper educated classes among Muslims against the rising tide of nationalism, using conflicts over scarce resources in education, administrative jobs and later political spoils (which were inherent in the very logic of colonial underdevelopment) as a tool to create a split along religious lines among educated Indians.

**Hostility to Educated Indians:**

The emerging middle class nationalist leadership was analysing the exploitative, colonial character of British rule and demanding Indian participation in administration. At a time when the nationalist movement was born (Indian National Congress was founded in 1885), the British interpreted the moves as a challenge to their authority and adopted a hostile attitude to such leadership. In fact, from then onwards, they opposed all those who stood for modern education.

**Attitude towards the Zamindars:**

In their pursuit of reactionary policies and hope to expand their social base, the British looked for alliances with the most reactionary of social groups—the princes, Zamindars, etc. The British intended to use them as a counterweight against nationalist-minded intelligentsia.

Now, the Zamindars and landlords were hailed as the ‘natural’ and ‘traditional’ leaders of people. Lands of most of the Awadh taluqdars confiscated prior to 1857 were restored to them. The interests and privileges of Zamindars and landlords were protected in opposition to those of the
peasants; the former in turn saw the British as guarantors of their very existence and became their firm supporters.

**Attitude towards Social Reforms:**

Having decided to side with the reactionary elements of Indian society, the British withdrew support to social reforms, which they felt had aroused the wrath of orthodox sections against them. Also, by encouraging caste and communal consciousness, the British helped the reactionary forces.

**Underdeveloped Social Services:**

A disproportionately large expenditure on army and civil administration and the cost of wars left little to be spent on social services like education, health, sanitation, physical infrastructure, etc. a legacy which still haunts this country. And whatever facilities were established catered to the elite sections and urban areas.

**Labour Legislations:**

As in the early stages of industrial revolution in Europe, the working conditions in factories and plantations in nineteenth-century India were miserable. Working hours were long—for women and children as well as for men—and wages were low. In overcrowded, poorly ventilated and poorly lighted working places, the safety measures were practically non-existent.

Ironically, the first-ever demand for regulation of the condition of workers in factories in India came from the Lancashire textile capitalist lobby. Apprehending the emergence of a competitive rival in the Indian textile industry under conditions of cheap and unregulated labour, they demanded the appointment of a commission for investigation into factory conditions. The first commission was appointed in 1875 although the first Factory Act was not passed before 1881.