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*Cultural Collisions Surrounding the Sepoy Mutiny*

Colonization has been a major theme in the history of Great Britain, and one example of this is seen through the controlling of the powerful country of India. Starting in the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century, Britain had a firm hold on this large country until the late 1940s when they had to relinquish control due to economic struggles. However, while they occupied India, several mutinies against the British troops occurred based on inhumane conditions, salary disputes, and other areas that seemed unfair to the Indian troops. One of the most well-known mutinies took place in 1857 and was known as the Sepoy Mutiny. This was between the Sepoy troops and the British soldiers, both of which did not fully understand the customs and traditions of the other. When facing this mutiny, one has to ask, “How did cultural collisions between the British and the Indian troops lead to the Sepoy Mutiny?” The rest of this paper will answer this question by looking at the history of the British in India, the road to mutiny, treatment of the sepoy soldiers, and the mutiny itself.

British control over India has a somewhat rocky history. During the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, a trade route opened up between the British and India where the British traded wool and textiles in exchange for spices and other various commodities. The group responsible for this trade was a British chartered company known as the East India Company. When they began working with India, their focus was not on owning and occupying land, but rather it was simply on trade

alone<sup>1</sup>. Even though they were already able to import spices from other countries like the Netherlands, they viewed East Indian spices with exceptional zeal. In return for the wool and other various textiles that the British gave to the Indians, they received not only spices, but silk and clothing that was adored by the wealthy as well. This led to competition with the English companies, and it later became illegal to wear Indian clothing<sup>2</sup>. Although this was a set-back for the East India Company, they still continued their trade, and by the 17<sup>th</sup> century they had a firm hold on the trading industry. By 1612 they had trading posts in Surat, by 1641 they were in Madras, by 1665 they were in Bombay, and by 1690 they were established in Calcutta<sup>3</sup>. As time went on and the Company began losing money, they went in a different direction than their originators had intended. Historian Reginald Coupland stated that, “[The Company] was intended to acquire territory and to establish on it 'plantations' of English colonists who would themselves exploit its mineral and agricultural resources”<sup>4</sup>.

During the mid-eighteenth century, the East India Trading Company began conquering India against English orders<sup>5</sup>. Although they did not want to take over India, per say, they did end up taking quite a bit even though the English government was trying to make them stop. Historians Maurice and Taya Zinkin stated that, “What [the Company] wanted was an obliging Nawab [(or Indian provincial governors)], who would let the Company trade in peace, and who would pay the Company's servants large bribes and let them conduct their private trade, the trade from which they hoped to make their personal fortunes, on the most favourable possible terms”<sup>6</sup>.

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1 Maurice & Taya Zinkin. *Britain and India : Requiem for Empire*. Bloomington: Chatto & Windus, London, 1989, 11.

2 Zinkin, 14.

3 Zinkin, 12.

4 Reginald Coupland. *Britain and India, 1600-1945 (Longman's Pamphlets on the British Commonwealth)*. New York: Longmans, Green, 1946, 4.

5 Zinkin, 14.

6 Zinkin, 16.

Some time after the British took over Southern and Northeast India, the young ruler of Bengal sought to challenge the British rule. In 1756, he sent troops to the British controlled area of Calcutta and killed everybody in the settlement. Lord Robert Clive then took a small army of sepoys (Indian soldiers that are paid by Britain to fight for them) and tracked down the Bengal prince. This army caught up at the city of Plassey, and although they were hopelessly outnumbered, they destroyed the Indian army<sup>7</sup>. Due to the fact that the British already ruled much of the East and West coasts by this time, they almost inadvertently took control of India after wiping out this massive army<sup>8</sup>. Nobody was left to oppose the British, and if they did not take control and protect the borders, India could have been invaded at any time by the surrounding countries. Realizing this new power, other smaller provinces in India began to give their allegiance to Britain in order to avoid war and ensure safety. The British suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves ruling another new colony.

By 1820, The East India Company ruled almost all of India, and were content to remain where they were. Since they did not want to expand in the first place, they had no incentive to continue pressing their borders for several years. However, by 1843, a new view towards India began to grow ever more prevalent. A British officer named Sir Charles Napier wanted the British to play a more aggressive role in India. In a diary entry he stated, “We have no right to seize Sind, yet we shall do so, and a very advantageous, useful, humane piece of rascality it will be”<sup>9</sup>. This moved the British in the direction of an outright war where they *wanted* to forcefully take land from the Indians, which was very different from the beginning where land was practically given to them.

After this move toward war, England's control on India began to slip and the native

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7 Coupland, 6.

8 Coupland, 6.

9 Coupland. 10.

Indians began moving in the direction of mutiny. There had already been several mutinies in India prior to 1843 (Vellore Mutiny of 1806, Barrackpore Mutiny of 1824, the Assam Mutiny of 1825, and the Sholapur Mutiny of 1838), but they eventually lead to an overwhelmingly large mutiny in 1857 known as the Sepoi Mutiny<sup>10</sup>. The sepoy mutiny began over the implementation of greased cartridges for the new British rifle called the Enfield. In order for this rifle to shoot properly, part of the greased cartridges had to be bitten off to release a powder that would prime the rifle<sup>11</sup>. While the British could not care less about this fact, the Indians were appalled by the very thought of biting off part of a greased cartridge in order to prime a rifle. The problem was the fact that the grease used on these cartridges was made from pig and cow fat, which was then rubbed all over the cartridge so it would fire smoothly. Many of these indians were either Hindu or Moslem, both of which the English had little to no understanding of. They did not understand that if a Hindu even touched cow fat, their souls would be polluted. Likewise, if a Moslem touched pig fat, they would be committing a major sin<sup>12</sup>. The first time the sepoys heard about this was in January 1857 when a low-caste (or class) Hindu asked a higher-caste Hindu for a drink of water from a pitcher that the latter was carrying near the Dum-Dum arsenal in Calcutta. The higher-caste Hindu refused to give water to the lower-caste Hindu, and in his anger, the lower Hindu stated, “You think much of your caste; but wait a little. The *Sahib-logue* [European officers] will make you bite cartridges soaked in cow's fat, and then where will your caste be?”<sup>13</sup> Sure enough, a few months later the greased cartridges were introduced and the Indians were forced to use them or they would be thrown in jail for disobeying orders.

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10 Muriel Evelyn Chamberlain. *Britain and India: The Interaction of Two Peoples (Library of politics and society)*. Hamden: Archon Books, 1974, 89.

11 Chamberlain, 88

12 Alfred E Knight. *India, From the Aryan Invasion to the Great Sepoy Mutiny*. Delhi: Swati Publications, 1988, 278.

13 Knight, 278.

Another problem that came about because of the greased cartridges was not related to religion, per say, but the fact that if these sepoys touched the fat of the pigs and cows, they would be socially ostracized<sup>14</sup>. Community was essential to these men, and the very thought of not only being “polluted” religiously because of these acts, but culturally as well, was almost too much for some of them. There was then a rumor that spread throughout the armies that the British *wanted* the sepoys to be ostracized, because then they could be used outside of India to fight other battles for the British<sup>15</sup>. Many sepoys were upset by this because the very thought of being removed from their communities was deplorable, and that was simply something that the British could not understand about the Indian culture. Many Indians viewed their communities as their lifeline, and there were stories that Indians radiating from Delhi would enter into a town and offer the ruler two *chupattis* (small cakes of unleavened bread). He would then say, “These cakes are sent to you; you will make six others and forward them to the next village”<sup>16</sup>. The British did not think much about this, but it ended up being a very efficient way for the Indians to communicate with every village in the country without raising an alarm. All of these communities knew what was going on through this communication, and they all banded together, even though they did not always agree on every issue. This sense of community was foreign to the British, and the Indian's steadfastness took the British off-guard.

Another way the Indian and sepoy community was misunderstood by the British was through *esprit de corps*. This is defined as, “the common spirit existing in the members of a group and inspiring enthusiasm, devotion, and strong regard for the honor of the group”<sup>17</sup>, and showed their sense of pride that the British thought they could take away from them by forcing

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14 Knight, 280.

15 Chamberlain, 89.

16 Knight, 277.

17 Merriam Webster Dictionary

them to use greased cartridges. The honor of these men far surpassed anything that the British could have expected, to the point where they would hide in shame for years until they regained lost pride. This is seen in a story told by Indian Historian Philip Woodruff that tells of a sepoy regiment that lost a battle that they should have won. Instead of simply picking themselves up like the British would have attempted, they hid their colors in shame for thirty years. Finally, after thirty years of shame, they exacted their revenge from the original battle and raised their colors once more<sup>18</sup>. Woodruff commented that, “Of all this, the officers had known nothing; the men of the regiment formed a close hereditary corporation, knit together by blood, religion and a deep emotional feeling for their colours”<sup>19</sup>. This sense of honor was unknown to the British, and the conflicts that arose from this played a major role in the start of the Sepoy Mutiny.

One more misunderstanding that the British had about the Indian culture was the importance of a person's caste. Most of the Sepoy were of higher-caste, which was something that the British prided themselves in. They knew that they had the highest class of citizens serving in their armies (although caste does not necessarily refer to money or power in the Indian society like the British assumed), but they viewed this structure from a Western standpoint. The British class system was hereditarily based and difficult to lose, whereas an Indian's level of caste could be taken away if they performed certain tasks. One of these tasks that led to a great amount of tension in the British and Indian ranks was the fact that the British wanted the sepoys to cross over the Indus River located in Northwest India<sup>20</sup>. They wanted the sepoys to help fight in the wars going on in Afghanistan, but the sepoys refused to leave. In a book written one year after the Sepoy Mutiny, the author wrote, “[They are unwilling] to go on foreign service because

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18 Chamberlain, 90.

19 Chamberlain, 90.

20 Chamberlain, 89.

their caste would be lost in crossing the waters”<sup>21</sup>. Again, the British simply could not comprehend why the Indians stood so firm on the fact that they could not cross over into the other countries, and this unwillingness to leave led to more and more tense situations between the British and the Sepoys.

Sort of the “final straw” that led to the Mutiny was the fact that the sepoy—although they were of high-caste and could lead their men well—were always looked down upon by the British, and even their highest ranking officers would be trumped in power by the lowliest British officer. The British did not show the sepoy any respect, and placed them on the same level as semi-advanced barbarians for the most part. One historian wrote, “In the view of the colonial military historians, the Indians... were unable to construct professional military machines and stable state structures. The assumption was that the Indians were neither capable of self-defense nor had been able to organize themselves for self-rule”<sup>22</sup>. The author then goes on to cite a primary source from India that was one British person's description of the Sepoy Army. He wrote, “Indian military forces were not armies, but armed mobs characterized by continuous treacheries on the battlefields”<sup>23</sup>. Although the Indians were not as advanced as the British, this view of them was definitely skewed, and the disrespect that the sepoy soldiers had to endure made an uncomfortable situation even more tense, until they banded together and decided to do something about their situation.

On May 9, 1857, the Mutiny officially began. Although there were far more sepoy in India than British troops, the Mutiny did not involve everyone, and the British were able to contain and eliminate it with some effort. In 1857, there were approximately 45,000 British

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21 Rev. Hollis Read. *India and Its People: Ancient and Modern. With a View of the Sepoy Mutiny: Embracing an Account of the Conquests in India By the English, Their Policy and Its Results*. Ma: J. & H. Miller, 1859, 69.

22 Kaushik Roy. *War and Society in Colonial India 1807-1945 (Oxford in India Readings: Themes in Indian History)*. New York: Oxford University Press, USA, 2006, 5.

23 Roy, 5.

soldiers in India, compared to the 130,000 sepoys that were employed by the British government to fight<sup>24</sup>. These numbers suggest that the sepoys should have been able to overwhelm the British easily, but in all reality, many sepoys were still loyal to the British government despite all of the hardships they had been put through. Approximately 30,000 sepoys remained loyal to the British and fought their own kin as opposed to abandoning their honor, another 30,000 deserted because they did not want to fight one way or the other, and 70,000 sepoys actively participated in the revolt (although all 70,000 did not participate at the same time)<sup>25</sup>.

This drastic difference in numbers, along with the explanations above, led to a very tense environment. Although he knew this was a tense time, British Colonel Carmichael-Smyth ordered his men (the 3<sup>rd</sup> Light Cavalry) to parade for firing practice near Meerut in April of 1857. Again, related to the greased cartridges, 85 sepoys refused to take part in the practice because they did not want to lose their honor. These men were then court martialled, publicly disgraced in a parade on May 8, then sent to jail. The day after the punishment parade (May 9), the remainder of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry—followed by civilians—rushed the jail and freed their comrades<sup>26</sup>. Following the 3<sup>rd</sup> Cavalry's lead, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Regiments joined in and, altogether, approximately 50 British were killed including five officers, women, and children.

In response to this mutiny, British Colonel Neill marched his troops from Allahabad to Cawnpore and burned Indian towns and people the entire way<sup>27</sup>. “Sepoys” (as Neill claimed, even though many were innocent bystanders) were hung from trees along the road as a warning to anybody that thought about revolting against the British Empire. A British reporter from *The Times* was in India at the time, and wrote, “In two days forty-two men were hanged at the

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24 Chamberlain, 89.

25 Chamberlain, 95.

26 Ramesh Chandra Majumdar. *The Sepoy Mutiny and the Revolt of 1857*. [2d ed.] ed. Lanham, Md: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1963, 77-9.

27 Chamberlain, 94.



roadside.... All the villages in his [Neill's] front were burnt when he halted. These 'severities' could not have been justified by the Cawnpore massacre<sup>28</sup>, because they took place before that diabolical act<sup>29</sup>. Both sides were committing atrocious crimes, and often did not take their aggression out on the soldiers of the opposing side, but rather on the innocent who had little or nothing to do with the situation at all.

Cultural differences were evident all throughout the Sepoy Mutiny, and by not understanding these differences and making no effort to meet on mutual ground, hundreds of lives were lost on both sides. By looking at the way that the British first entered into India and how they gained power, the lack of cultural understanding on the British part concerning the greased cartridges, *esprit de corps*, and the sepoy's need to keep their caste and community intact, the treatment of the sepoy officers, and the Mutiny itself, it is clear that cultural differences not only influenced the starting of the Mutiny, but could almost be considered the Mutiny's sole cause.

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28 The Cawnpore Massacre took place when a group of mutinous sepoys attacked a town and killed all of the British inhabitants including unarmed men, women and children. (Herbert Alick Stark. *The Call of the Blood: Anglo-Indians and the Sepoy Mutiny*. London: British Burma Press, 1932, 58.

29 Chamberlain, 94.

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