



ORIGINAL RESEARCH PAPER

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MONUMENTS CONNECTED WITH 1806 VELLORE REVOLT AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE WITH HISTORY OF VELLORE DISTRICT

KEY WORDS:

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to analyse to what extent the British colonial narrative is limited in its chronicles, especially through the establishment of monuments for 1806 revolt. Further, this paper strives to revisit some of these narratives to bring about the native side of the story. This paper is divided into three parts: the first section contextualizes the historical background and chain of events and its importance in the history, especially Vellore district; section two analyses the various monuments established and records created by the British colonial authorities about 1806 revolt; and the third section deals with the counter or neglected narratives of 1806 revolt and the conclusion in the end of the same section.

INTRODUCTION

Before the advent of Moderates to free India from British colonial rule through petitions, meetings and memorials, later Gandhi's non-violence, the natives had attempted to overthrow the British twice. The first one was the Vellore Sepoy Mutiny of 1806, and the other being the Rebellion of 1857. The Vellore Revolt that took place on 10 July 1806 was the first instance of large scale revolt by native soldiers against the East India Company. The revolt took place in Vellore was a brief one, which spanned over a day. Although it was a short encounter between the natives and the British, it marked an important epoch in modern Indian history as the first sign of defying the colonial rulers and efforts to bring back the native rulers.

Causes for the Mutiny

The disaffection against the colonial rule and exploitation started brewing a while ago, but they were disparate and disunited. However, the immediate cause of the mutiny revolved mainly around resentment felt towards changes brought about in the sepoy dress code, which was introduced in November 1805. Hindus were prohibited from wearing religious marks on their foreheads; Muslims were required to shave their beards and trim their moustaches; forego their ear rings which were worn as charm, and it was given to him at his birth and dedicated to some patron saint. In addition, General Sir John Craddock, the Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army ordered the wearing of a round hat resembling with both Europeans in general and with Indian converts to Christianity in particular. The new headdress included a leather cockade which was intended to replace the existing turban. These measures offended the sensibilities of both Hindu and Muslim sepoys. Moreover, that order went contrary to an earlier warning by a military board that sepoy uniform changes should be "given every consideration, which a subject of that delicate and important nature required". Little effort was made by the British to reassure the men or listen to their grievances, which included the belief that the regulations were detrimental to the religious practices of both Hindus and Muslims. Besides, there were also complaints about disparities in the sepoys' pay.

Although these minor changes intended to improve the "soldierly appearance" of the sepoy, they created strong resentment among the Indian soldiers. But the British reaction was severe. In May 1806, the sepoys who protested the new rules were sent to Fort Saint George (Madras then, now Chennai). Two of them Anantharaman, a Hindu, and Sheik Abdul Rehman, a Muslim, were given 900 lashes each and dismissed from the army. Nineteen sepoys were punished with 50 lashes each and forced to seek pardon from the East India Company.

In addition to the military grievances listed above, the rebellion was also instigated by the sons of the defeated Tipu Sultan, who were confined at Vellore since 1799. Tipu's wives and sons, together with numerous retainers were pensioners of the East India Company, and lived in a palace within the large complex comprising the Vellore Fort. One of Tipu Sultan's daughters, Noorul-NissamBegaum was to be married to Syed Nizamuddin of

Mysore on 9 July 1806, and the plotters of the uprising gathered at the fort under the pretext of attending the wedding. The objectives of the civilian conspirators remained obscure, but by seizing and holding the fort they may have hoped to encourage a general rising through the territory of the former Mysore Sultanate. However, Tippu's sons were reluctant to take charge after the mutiny arose. Consequently, the mutiny fell.

The Mutiny

The mutiny unfolded quite dramatically. On 10 July 1806, early in the morning, the native sepoys of the 1st and 23rd Regiments stormed the fort. Lt. Colonel Fancourt, who commanded the garrison, was their first victim. Colonel Me Kerras of the 23rd Regiment was shot down on the parade-ground. Major Armstrong was the next officer to be killed during the mutiny; about a dozen other officers were also killed.

Captain Stevenson rushed to Arcot 14 miles away, and informed Colonel Gillespie at 7 a.m. Col. Gillespie reached the Vellore fort at 9 a.m. In the meantime, the rebels proclaimed Futtah Hyder, Tipu's first son, as their new ruler and hoisted tiger-striped flag of Tipu Sultan. But the uprising was swiftly crushed by Col. Gillespie and his troops. About 800 native soldiers were found dead in the fort alone, and 600 native soldiers were taken as prisoners and more than 600 soldiers fled from the fort. After court martial some rebels were blown away by canon, some hung, some shot dead. The uprising was thus brought to a bloody end.

Tipu's sons and family members were sent to Calcutta. The Commander-in-Chief and the governor were recalled. Vellore Mutiny failed, there was no proper leadership, the rebellion was also not well organized, and the sepoys' attention turned towards plundering instead of securing the fort but it is the starting point of a new era of the resistance of the sepoys against the British rule.

The Colonial Narrative

The rebellion shocked and stirred the British. Contrary to their beliefs, the natives turned on them, especially the soldiers. The reprisal was brutal. A number of native soldiers were fired from cannon's mouth or shot by firing squad, depending upon their degree of involvement in the mutiny. Once recovered from the shock, the British interned their dead officers and soldiers with elaborate tombs making their death in the mutiny, and subsequently several accounts about the mutiny and their plight in the course of it. For example, the British officers and soldiers who died on 10 July 1806 at Vellore fort were given proper burial at CSI Church, Vellore, and their tombs were properly built to mark their death and sacrifice. There are some prominent tombs which stand till date, and the most notable one is of Lt. Colonel St John Fancourt. The other tombs dedicated to Lt. John Popham, John Eleyand, 5 sergeants, 4 corporals, 1 drummer and 70 privates of H.M's 69 regiment were erected on 1863-64. Major James Armstrong, Sergeants James Walter Lapidis, Solomon Frost, John Michael Tichbourne, James Issac Miller are some of the other prominent cemeteries in Vellore town.

Apart from erecting tombs, the British recorded every possible detail of the soldiers in the following gazetteers, books, speeches systematically: Madras District Manual: North Arcot by Arthur F Cox, Macfarlane's *Our Indian Empire, Twelve Years of Military Adventure in these Quarter of the Globe* by John Blackistan, Memorials were addressed to the honourable Court of Directors by Lord William Harvey Cavendish Bentinck.

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6. William Harvey Cavendish Bentinck, (1810). *Memorials Addressed to the Honourable Court of Directors* Printed by John booth
7. John Blackstone, *Twelve years of Military Adventure in these Quarter of the Globe*, printed by Henry Colburn Vol.2 .

In addition, there were many private accounts of the mutiny written by the British. For example, Amelia Farrier, the wife of a dead officer, Lt Col. John Fancourt, published her experiences and of her family during the mutiny in the Sydney Gazette years later. However, such narratives have only highlighted one side of the story, and the native version of their involvement in the mutiny was rarely attempted.

The Forgotten Natives

Despite the valour displayed by the native soldiers, and their sacrifice, there is hardly any account or signs to attest their participation in the mutiny. On the other hand, the military officers who were present at the time of mutiny wrote most of the accounts of the mutiny. And also, they ran the Court of Inquiry after the revolt and they might have tried to cover their wrong doings and short comings that led to the revolt. Further, most of the native soldiers who were involved in the revolt were killed; and some fled from fort; and others languished in prisons in different parts of the country. So the narratives of those native soldiers never saw the light of the day. Commonly, it is attributed to the limited literacy of the native soldiers and their supporters. But it is far from truth.

Most importantly, to quell any idea of further revolt or dissent, the British ensured that no narrative of natives was written. With this view, they removed every possible account of the rebels kept in any official records. The British neither created any record about the disposal of natives nor marked the burial of the dead rebels.

However, one Mustafa Baig, informed about the brewing conspiracy to his commanding officer, Lt.Col.Forbes prior to the mutiny. The said officer sought the opinion of the native officers, who dismissed the conspiracy and declared Mustafa Baig as insane and kept him in confinement. But, after the 10 July 1806 he was rewarded with 2000 pagodas, a Subedar's pension and a medal for his loyalty to the British. Nonetheless, almost two centuries later, the Government of Tamil Nadu erected a small pillar to commemorate the mutiny at Makkan Junction, Vellore, on 10 July 1998. This, perhaps, is the only symbol or monument that marks the event from the point of view of the natives.

Conclusion

Although the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 shared similarities with the Rebellion of 1857 in terms of intent, modus operandi, and outcome, it had many distinctive characteristics. Unlike 1857, which was led by native rulers and their lieutenants who were affected by British rule, the Vellore Mutiny of 1806 was largely led by of the soldiers. Further, apart from the multiple accounts of native soldiers who were involved in 1857 are available, there exist various symbols to mark their contribution. The systematic destruction of any evidence of native voices during and after the 1806 Mutiny signifies the hegemonic intent of the British rule. Yet, the available fragmentary evidences and inferences that can be drawn from other sources help us only to construct a limited or partial picture of the native narratives. In 2006, the then Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu, Mr. Karunanidhi, while participating in the government function held at Vellore to mark the bicentenary celebration of the event, promised to establish a full-fledged memorial (manimantapam).

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