

DEFENDING THE EMPIRE: ANALYZING MILITARY RECRUITMENT IN COLONIAL MIANWALI DISTRICT

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Abstract

This paper brings into focus the military traditions in Mianwali District in Colonial era. Due to its proximity to Salt Range areas of Jhelum, Chakwal, and Shahpur districts, the recruits in this region were considered ideally suited for the harsh military conditions, primarily owing to their physique. An increasingly large number of recruits served in the colonial army in order to supplement their agricultural income derived from haphazard cultivation. Mianwali is a region inhabited by various tribes, kinship or biradaris as it is put in local parlance. The district had overwhelmingly Pathan population along with other communities including Jats, Baluch, Rajputs and Khattaks. Tribes and castes not only symbolized strength and power but also served as the identity marker. Ethnic prejudices and sense of superiority of one clan over another were the defining features among Pathan clans. Economic interests and ethnic prejudices had fostered inter-tribal rivalries and stunted mutual harmony and social cohesion. Tribes lie at the heart of rural identity. Tribal identity itself served as a wedge, precluding unity among the tribes. The British recognized the social and political importance of this tribal structure to strengthen colonial rule in this region. Colonial interests were served by the policy of cooption of rural elite, who served as intermediaries in the colonial hierarchy of power. A class of landowners was created in the district to serve as a nexus between state and people by means of lucrative grants. Hence a tribally based local administration was conjured up. The rural leaders legitimized their authority through their lands, an insignia of power and prestige and their connection with the British officials. The local leaders emerged from the Khawanins of Isa Khel, Nawabs of Kalabagh, landed aristocrats of Piplan, Wan Bhachran, Bhakkar, whereas other tribes faced economic marginalization. This gap subsequently exacerbated the inter-tribal misgivings. The colonial state and rural elite developed a nexus to relegate the district to economic marginalization, as a result enlistment in army was left as the only alternative for subsistence.

Keywords: Colonial military, Mianwali, martial race theory, Pathan, Rajput, Khattak

Introduction

Mianwali was not accorded substantial significance in the colonial system as it had a peripheral location in the Punjab and was essentially located as a recruiting region. The main tribes who were recruited in the army were Bhangi Khels and Khattaks from Isa Khel although small in number, supplied excellent warriors to several regiments of the Frontier Force. Awan tribe living on the fringe of Talagang Tehsil and the Zangeza Balochs in the Dab region joined 15th Lancers in large proportion.⁴⁴ The Bhidwals, another Jat clan, inhabiting the south-east of the Bhakkar Thal had a natural inclination towards military service. The Baloch constituting considerably large part of the population of the Bhakkar

⁴⁴ *Record of the War Services of the Mianwali District, (1914-19)* D. J. Boyd, Esquire, ICS, Lahore, Civil and Military Gazette Press 1922, p 1

Tehsil, joined Cavalry Regiment specially to the 35th Scinde Horse.⁴⁵ Niazi Pathans of Pai Khel, Bori Khel, Musa Khel, Tari Khel and Moch had long been associated with the military service. Baluch who constituted large part of cavalry were known as camel riders. They held pride in their sword and warrior tendencies so they preferred army as their choicest inclination. They had a distinct tribal and political organization and were largely migrated to cis-indus tract in east of Thal under their chiefs and leaders. The eastern Thal region was not agriculturally rich which drove them towards army as only alternative. Bhangi Khels and Khattaks were settled in IsaKhel, were a fine manly race. They had warlike nature and had been involved in feuds for centuries. They were industrious and good cultivators but they possessed stony and unfertile tract with very meager economic resources. This economically marginalized tribe secured economic shelter in army. The Rajput's presence in colonial army could also be seen in the context of their feudal instinct. They preferred pastoral to agricultural pursuits as they despised agriculture and all manual labour was looked upon as derogatory. Military exposed all these warrior tribes to an opportunity to satisfy their martial self-image apart from economic security. In a socially conservative society of Mianwali, the tradition of military service came to be perceived as a mark of social status and not as a career. In the district which was overwhelmingly constituted by Pathan population, the desire to maintain a warrior tradition among certain tribes e.g Rajputs, Baluch and Khattaks was there, however, there were equally important economic factors that motivated enlistment in the army, which can be considered as fundamental push factors. Military service promised a regular pay, pension and land grant too. Many families were dependent on military earnings. According to Tan Tai Yong, "Military service offered an escape route from the ecological impasse."⁴⁶

The Salt Range tract including Mianwali was agriculturally disadvantaged and the people found an easy outlet to seek future in the army. The study also reveals how substantial was the role of rural elite as recruiting agents in war efforts to raise the level of recruitment in the district. The rural elite had developed a nexus with military command to help in enlisting men in the army and also provided economic assistance to the colonial government. The Niazi pathan tribes figured significantly in the district but they had a meager presence in the army which does not corroborate the widely believed British assumption of pathan as a martial race. The reluctance on the part of pathans to join army was seen as resistance against state's authority.

Mianwali District

Mianwali district is located in the north-west of the Punjab and had been most south-westerly district of the Rawalpindi Division of the Punjab⁴⁷. The district comprises of three sub-divisions namely Mianwali, Isakhel, Piplan. Mianwali is a bordering district of the Punjab, having common borders with district Kohat, Laki Marwat and D.I.Khan⁴⁸. Mianwali was sliced away from North West Frontier Province, incorporated into the Punjab and was accorded the status of a district in 1901⁴⁹.

After the annexation of the Punjab, the district was brought under a centralized and elaborate administrative system. It was a time when major districts in the Punjab ushered in an age of modernity, however Mianwali remained distinctively backward. Due to its peripheral location in the West Punjab, it remained quite low in the priority list of the British regarding their imperialist scheme of things. Colonial indifference was reflected quite

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, p. 83

⁴⁷ Gazetteer, Mianwali district 1915, Lahore; Sang-e-Meel 1990, p.1-2

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 42

explicitly on over all state of the district as Mianwali had supposedly no tangible bearing on the politics and economy of the Punjab. Its separation from mainland of the Punjab had made the natives politically inert and virtually ignorant. There was hardly any investment in the education, socio-cultural development, infrastructure and agriculture, although the district had an overwhelmingly agrarian economy. The colonial policy was hinged on the perception that investment must yield economic benefits. The prospects in Mianwali were not in consonance with the colonial ideology. Hence the district was essentially identified as a recruiting region, the social and economic backwardness of the district substantiated the colonial policy enshrined in “Martial Race Theory.”

Martial Race Theory in a historical context

Military remained one of the most distinctive features of the Punjab’s colonial history. The Punjab as one of the last annexed region came into colonial fold as a “non-regulation” Province. With the turn of second half of 19th century, following the events of 1857 the Punjab became the “sword arm of the Raj”. The revolt of the Bengal army in the wake of war of independence(1857) brought a reversal in its policy of demilitarization. The Punjab was once again ready to be rearmed. In the Punjab a strong military tradition existed which subsequently made it “ sword arm of the Raj”. The post 1857 India witnessed a major shift in the imperial Ideology which was engrossed in two central themes.⁵⁰ One was the redefinition of the relationship between colonizer and colonized and second was the redirection of strategy.⁵¹ Post 1857 colonial State looked for new allies with unequivocal loyalty to them. The Traditional elite was restored to its Punjabi position and the recruitment was shifted to newly annexed region of the Punjab.⁵² The Punjab although politically backward,⁵³ proved its loyalty during the crucial hours of 1857 war. That is why the Punjab graduated to a position of priority in the colonial hierarchy, as Mustafa Kamal Pasha states

“Punjab’s rise signaled an ideological retreat for the British from a position of self assured dominance to one marked by mistrust and self doubt.”⁵⁴ The army was now reconstituted on different pattern in which Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Gorkhas, Dogras, Pathans and Jats formed the essential components.⁵⁵ The opening of the Punjab for recruitment was also enshrined in the ”Great Game” against Russia and in the “Martial Race Ideology”.⁵⁶ The popular belief of the 19th century in the British soldiers was that, “Certain clans and classes can bear arms, the others have not the physical courage and skill necessary for the warriors.”⁵⁷

So the full blown theory of ‘martial race emerged as a result of ‘Russophobia’⁵⁸. By the early 1880, a long series of Frontier skirmishes cultivated the Russian fear among the British that they might have foment the trouble in Indian north. In the face of the pressing threat from the north-west, it was imperative to enlist in areas closer to northern border.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ Ibid pp.11-12

⁵¹ Ibid,

⁵² Ibid , p. 12

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid, p.13

⁵⁵ Ibid, pp.68-69

⁵⁶ Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, pp.68-69

⁵⁷ Ibid, pp.59-60

⁵⁸ Ayesha Siddiqi, *Military Inc. Inside Pakistan’s military economy*, (Karachi; Oxford University Press, 2007) pp, 59-60 British India’s uneasy relationship with its western neighbour Afghanistan was now complicated by suspicions of Russian intentions to extend their imperialist designs in to India. The British military authorities in India became obsessed with the “Great Game” with Russia, and were no longer content to maintain the army in India merely as an internal policing force and to stop Russian drive towards warm waters of Indian Ocean.

⁵⁹ Mustafa Kamal pasha, *Colonial Political Economy*, p.36

Lord Roberts the commander in chief of the Bengal army (1885-1893) was the main spokesman of Martial Race theory.⁶⁰

Recruitment in the district

Pathans of the Mianwali district were considered ideally fit for armed services, as the pathan was supposedly inclined to display the cult of masculinity and willingness to bear arms. Even though there existed the military traditions in the district nevertheless we don't see a sizeable increase in recruitment during the world war 1, which could not be associated with any one particular factor. One of a reason that the district had an ample agricultural land which needed manpower and every recruit to the Army meant a serious loss in agricultural power, carried currency.

At the outbreak of the War, 1,159 men were recruited in the army from the district. On the 1st January 1916 their strength was raised to 1,527 combatants.⁶¹

Recruitment process invigorated when depots were setup in the district under the supervision of recruiting officers who were civil officers and rural elite.

2,598 combatants and 299 non-combatants were raised in the district since recruiting was undertaken by civil officers in Jan 1917.⁶² The table shows the respective standing of various tribes of the district in the army.

In the army	Proportion of total males of military age
Pathans 652	1 in 5.3
Biloches 344	1 in 6.3
Jats 969	1 in 19.5
Awans 445	1 in 6.5
Syeds 125	1 in 11.3
Kamins 434	1 in 15.3
Hindus (Arora) 62	1 in 55.7
Total 4,029	1 in 13.5 ⁶³

Among the Pathans, the Bhangi Khels entered the British Army in large number. Out of 1,300 males of military age, 727 joined army that was one in 1.7.⁶⁴

District recruitment figures of Punjab (1914-1918).

District	Number of enlistees during the war
Rawalpindi	31,291
Jhelum	27,743
Amritsar	21,988
Ferozpur	18,809
Ludhiana	18,067
Attock	14,815
Shahpur	14,040
Sialkot	13,376
Gujranwala	12,618
Lahore	10,054
Lyallpur	6,507
Multan	4,636
Mianwali	4,242
Montgomery	2,813
Dera Ghazi Khan	1,012
Jhang	946

Source: M.S. Leigh, Punjab and the war, pp. 59-60

⁶⁰ David Omissi, The sepoy and the Raj, p.25

⁶¹ Record of the War services of Mianwali District, (1914-19) D.J>Boyd, Esquire, ICS, Lahore, Civil and Military Gazette Press 1922, pp 2-3

⁶² Ibid, p.3

⁶³ source ;Record of the War Services Mianwali District (1914-1919) p.3

⁶⁴ Ibid, p.4

The role of rural elite as recruiting agents and the land grants to intermediaries

The period between 1916 and 1919 witnessed the civil and military institutions coalesced in to single machinery to generate recruits. The civil-military nexus and the support of the civil bureaucracy towards the military establishment mobilized the entire province for manpower in war. It also resulted in the emergence of a potent rural military lobby which had its impact on the post war politics of the Punjab as well.⁶⁵ A tremendous amount of donations and investments were extended by landed elite in the districts of the Punjab who served as rural intermediaries between the state and populace.⁶⁶ The British government found it the most effective and convenient way to subjugate the indigenous people through local collaborating groups most importantly, the rural elite. They extended their influence to generate man power as “military contractors”. Those who served in the army were given the highest regard.⁶⁷ The imperial authorities further strengthened their social and economic positions by land grants and inclusion of rural magnates in administrative setup of the Punjab.⁶⁸

The 130th Baluchistan infantry established a forwarding depot in Bhakkar. The 124th Baluchistan infantry set up a depot in Mianwali and enlisted 500 young men from the district in 2-21st Punjabis.⁶⁹ The Local elite were made part of depot who extended their help in recruitment. Generally natives remained reluctant in joining army. ‘Major Sparkes’ of the 54th Sikhs (F.F) wrote that “the effort required to get one recruit in the Mianwali District would have procured three anywhere else.”⁷⁰

During the War days, the district was managed by Deputy Commissioner, Major A.J.O Brien, C.I.E , raised 316 Sarwans and muleteers. The divisional officers, Tehsildars, Magistrates and Zaildars wielded authority among rural population and demonstrated their indispensability to the State in recruitment. Prominent among them were, Malik Zaman Mehdi Khan, Sub-Divisional officer and his brother Malik Sultan Mehmud Khan as Tehsildar.⁷¹ The Assistant recruiting officer of the district was ‘Khan Saifullah Khan’. Among non-officials the most successful recruiters were khan sahib Malik Laddhu khan, Khan sahib Malik Ameer with his son Risaldar Malik Muzaffar khan, Malik Muhammad Qasim of Chakrala and Khan Bahadur Abdul Karim Khan of Isakhel, had tremendous influence in rural society and had been an invaluable support to the administration.⁷² Syed Ata Muhammad Shah of Dher Umeed Ali, belonged to a Syed family and had religious influence among his people. He got 35 near relations enlisted in army. The pir-murid network marshaled people for enlistment in army. He received a jagir of Rs.500 a year in recognition of his services.⁷³

Kin- based solidarity and Biradari identity, the important elements in rural social organization were used by local elite to influence people. British constructed a system in which through grants of land the rural patrons were bound to the colonial state. The district was awarded six rectangles for assistance in recruitment. The British ensured the loyalty through rewards which transformed a military district into a military labour market.⁷⁴ For the services rendered in war, Two rectangles were given to Malik Muhammad Qasim of Chakrala

⁶⁵ Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, p.139

⁶⁶ Ibid, p.125

⁶⁷ Ibid, p.31

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp.130-131

⁶⁹ Record of War Services Mianwali District (1914-1919) p.4

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid, p.5

⁷² Ibid, p.6

⁷³ Ibid, p.6

⁷⁴ Tan Tai Yong, *The Garrison State*, p.96

who raised 100 recruits for the British Army.⁷⁵ Two rectangles were given to Malik Ghulam Haider Khan, Zaildar of Darya Khan, who in addition to producing 76 recruits, rendered great assistance in the matter of transport for the troops operating against the Mahsuds and assisted the camel corps encamped near Darya Khan.⁷⁶ The title of Nawab was conferred on Malik Atta Muhammad Khan of Kalabagh in recognition of his generous contributions to War funds. The title of Khan Sahib was given to Malik Ameer Khan, Zaildar of Wan Bhachran, and Malik Laddhu, Zaildar of Kotla Jam, for their recruiting services.⁷⁷ Khan Rab Nawaz Khan of Musa Khel succeeded his father in Durbar in lieu of his recruiting services.⁷⁸ These rural magnates also contributed to British Army in money and materials.

Rewards distributed in the Punjab during First World War

District	Titles	Sword of honour	Jagirs	Land grants
Hissar	13	-	1500	52
Kangra	2	4	500	85
Jullundar	19	2	750	92
Lahore	39	3	1000	101
Amritsar	17	-	750	176
Gurdaspur	5	2	-	147
Sialkot	4	-	250	83
Gujranwala	6	1	1000	115
Gujrat	5	3	250	72
Shahpur	16	11	200	191
Jhelum	17	6	500	157
Rawalpindi	18	6	1,750	118
Attock	7	7	1500	171
Mianwali	4	1	500	97
Montgomery	1	-	-	30
Lyallpur	10	2	750	15
Jhang	3	-	-	17
Multan	9	2	500	78
Muzaffargarh	3	-	500	101
Dera Ghazi Khan	10	1	-	207

Source : M.S.Leigh, Punjab and the War, pp.140-74

Contributions by rural land holders in the District

First war loan of 1917, was of a staggering sum of Rs 2,91,469-8-0 including one lakh contributed by Nawab Atta Muhammad Khan of Kalabagh and Rs.3,000 by Khan Bahadur Muhammad Abdul Karim Khan of Isa Khel.⁷⁹ Malik Atta Muhammad Khan of Kalabagh also paid for 30 British Cavalry Remounts.⁸⁰

Second war Loan of 1918 had received a subscriptions of Rs 3,11,4438-4-0 up to 31st March 1919, including Rs 50,000 from the Nawab Atta Muhammad Khan and Rs 1,000 each from Khan Bahadur Abdul Karim Khan and Khan Sahib Malik Ameer Khan.⁸¹ This is interesting to note that a handsome amount of second war loan was given mainly by the traders and the money lenders.

The district offered a large contribution to the aeroplane fund. An amount of 1,46,295 was subscribed which included Rs 75,000 from Nawab of Kalabagh and Rs 10,000 from Khan Bahadur Muhammad Abdul Karim Khan.⁸² Rs. 35,000 were specially contributed by

⁷⁵ *War Services Record of Mianwali District*, p.7

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.7-8

⁸⁰ *The Punjab and the War*, M.S.Leigh O.B.E. , I. C. S, (Lahore:Government Printing Press, 1922) p.122

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.8

⁸² *Ibid.*

the Nawab for the purchase of remounts. An amount of Rs. 10,446 was added into the Imperial Indian fund.⁸³ An amount of Rs 46,928 had been subscribed in Red Cross and St.John Ambulance association funds.⁸⁴

Resistance by Native Pathan Tribes

In view of all these facts, it had been observed that generally enlistment of Pathan tribes in the army had been fairly marginal in this district. The reason may be located in the inherent nature of Pathan, who had ethnically an overbearing disposition, declined to accept a subordinate character. Although the Pathans of Mianwali had been much complaisant by the agricultural life of the plains, nevertheless the free life in the rugged mountains accorded them a masculine independence which showed its resilience quite often. Moreover, the Niazi Pathans were mostly settled in the Cis-Indus area of the district, possessing fine agricultural lands which provided them a reliable source of income. Hence enlistment in army was not a desirable option. However, the traditional perception of the British about Pathans as martial race, who possessed military dexterity, martial prowess seemed to be dispelled in case of Mianwali District. Pathans in the district were visibly reluctant to enlist in the British Army. The reluctance is seen as an invisible resistance against the army, a weapon of relatively powerless groups, who avoid any direct confrontation with authority. There was no dramatic confrontation with state in the district as open insubordination might provoke a rapid and serious response by the government than an insubordination which was pervasive and never ventured to contest the hierarchy and power. The method of passive resistance was nearly unbeatable because state had nothing to call into question, provided it was not expressed as open defiance. In a colonized territory the natives lived as exploited groups, accepted the colonial political and social order especially in a situation where exploitation was taking place in the context in which the elite or the state used the coercive force to virtually suppress the open expression of discontent. In such a society covert and pervasive resistance is the only possibility.

However, there were a few attempts of agitation against the government. Some rioters attempted to enter district from Jhang district in 1915, aimed to provoke the natives for an anti-government agitation. The situation was controlled with the assistance of Lambardar of Dhingana in Bhakkar Tehsil.⁸⁵ There were also sign of unrest in the village of “Chidroo” at the beginning of war. It was reported that arms were being secretly collected for uprising against state. Mian Maluk Ali, a religious figure of the district assisted government by using his influence among his disciples and a rigorous process of disarming was undertaken⁸⁶. These facts had vividly demonstrated the discontentment of natives, infused with anti-government sentiments, failed to manifest itself in a patent expression of defiance under a centralized hierarchy of power. The British controlled such acts of defiance against state with the help of religious and political influence of rural leaders. With a secure religious base in the countryside, the religious leaders exploited the pir-murid nexus in the favour of imperial government. Another reason for passivity was that the various Pathan clans when settled in Mianwali kept their tribal customs and traditions intact however their cultural traits coalesced with other cultural and social strands. Hence in the changed social context, the traditions and customs also underwent change, giving rise to a new set of social practices. Such cultural affinity among various tribes and clans, however failed to forge unity among tribes. Their ethno-centric behaviour hinged on the notions of tribal superiority, triggered internecine misgivings. Consequently the pathan tribes could not strengthen themselves in to a cohesive

⁸³ Ibid,

⁸⁴ Ibid, p.8

⁸⁵ Record of War Services Mianwali District (1914-1919), p.10

⁸⁶ Ibid, p.10

whole thus the tribal affinity got diluted and in the absence of inter-tribal unity and social organization, the possibility for joint resistance against state apparatus evaporated. The local elite who were close to the power structure, controlled the ideological sector of society and created a symbolic climate which prevented the marginalized groups from thinking their way free. Hence they developed a conformist mind set vis-à-vis colonial state instead of call in question the suzerainty of the British. However, the covert and passive resistance tried to contend with the State's authority whenever feasible. The district's virtual seclusion from the mainstream of Punjab's politics had accorded its people backward, ignorant and generally indifferent disposition. Society was divided into three groups, one was of rural elite who worked as intermediaries of the imperial government and sustained their colonial rule. They were contemptuously called by natives as toadies. Second group who was in majority did not care who ruled as long as they were allowed to live peacefully. The third, very small group showed interest in self-rule and freedom. In 1919, when Rowlatt Act was passed and a virulent anti-government agitation started throughout the province, an act of agitation was also demonstrated by a few railway employees at Kundian railway station⁸⁷. They disrupted the tele-communication system, the situation was soon controlled by deployment of troops at Kalabagh, Mianwali, Daud Khel, Kundian and Bhakkar to guard railway communication⁸⁸. This indicated that a slight attempt of commotion provoked such a serious response by the government. The disturbance also revealed a fact that the people involved in the act were based in other districts and had an adequate awareness about the political turmoil in the Punjab, where as the natives were politically inert and had no political acumen. There were very few occasional processions carried out by volunteers, chanting anti- war slogans in the streets of the district, who were mostly Hindus⁸⁹. Muslims had a very marginal presence in such political activities , owing to their illiteracy and less affluent status in the town. However, this freedom oriented spirit was never admired by the native employees of the government and tried to dissipate their assemblage, as they did not want to risk their jobs by coming to adverse notice of authorities. It was generally assumed in the district that the "Angrez" ruler though mostly not visible, was watching every movement of native.⁹⁰ Poverty was an overriding factor in the passivity of local populace which arrested their ability to resist and caused insurgence. They developed a mind-set to survival rather than to pose challenge to the state's suzerainty. Where as British perception about Pathan was contextualized, the defiance of Pathan against colonial government was declared as being lethargic, whose fighting capacity had become quiescent.

Conclusion

The configuration of various communities living in Mianwali had given society a tribal pattern. The district faced a subaltern status vis-à-vis other districts of the Punjab owing to its geographically peripheral location. The British assumed that investment in the district did not yield a tangible return on its outlay and so it became a recruiting ground for colonial army. As a result district retained its distinctively backward and essentially tribal status. The study revealed that the economic marginalization of tribes was exploited by British to their advantage and turned them into cannon fodder for colonial army. The process of enlistment was accentuated by developing a nexus between military command and rural landholders, who shared the colonial power structure and thrived themselves at the expense of other tribes , augmented mental division in society. Reluctance of pathan tribes in joining military service

⁸⁷ District and Miscellaneous reports on the Punjab disturbances, April 1919.,

⁸⁸ Ibid

⁸⁹ Harish Chander Nakra, Wichra Watan, p.44

⁹⁰ Ibid, p.45

should actually be seen in the context of marginalized tribes having no political clout in the district resented their status, traditionally dominated by land holders.

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