CHAPTER FOURTEEN

ARMY, ETHNICITY AND SOCIETY IN BRITISH INDIA

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“The Sikhs have many religious customs; we see that they keep them whether they like it or not.”
A British wartime officer on the training of Sikh troops

Colonial armies occupy a paradoxical political position, as both guarantors of and threats to imperial rule. “There is no doubt that whatever danger may threaten us in India,” remarked the nineteenth century soldier and administrator Henry Lawrence, “the greatest is from our own troops.” Considerations of imperial control play a significant role in the military organization of colonial society. Questions of loyalty directly confront officers and administrators, and are often addressed with some forthrightness. A classic imperial response, as for many states, is to recruit soldiery from minority populations, establishing bonds of sentiment and interest with specific communities which then can be relied upon to suppress others. “The Raj could only coerce one section of the Indian population because it had won the active support of another.” But this was not as simple as it seemed, as Lawrence knew. Imperial power risked dependence on the chosen minority, to whose demands it would be hostage. Were recruitment expanded to some delimited set of groups, a further danger loomed: military service would bind together soldiers from different communities, creating an armed ‘bloc’ out of what had been but mutually suspicious groups in ‘native’ society.

3 Henry Lawrence, Essays on the Indian Army and Oude (Serampore: 1859), 25.
Lawrence, who died of wounds during the Siege of Lucknow in 1857, was a clear-sighted thinker in matters of army, society and imperial power, which for participants too easily become caught up in the racial and ideological context of empire. The British understanding of their situation in India, and of the Indian populations they governed, was burdened by their evolving sense of superiority and corresponding account of Indians as backward, as the culturally and racially determined products of primitive conditions and states of mind. The contemporary shorthand for these knowledges of self and other, colonizer and colonized, is ‘Orientalism’, or more specifically ‘colonial discourse’: the institutionally authorized and historically changing knowledges through which colonial governance was conducted, and which informed the exercise of imperial power more generally.\(^5\)

Ethnicity in the British led Indian army cannot be conceived separate from imperial power politics, on the one hand, and the Orientalist discourses that informed military recruitment and organization on the other. After Britain formally took over the East India Company’s sovereign responsibilities and reorganized the army in the wake of the 1857 Uprising, Indian society was increasingly conceived in ethnographic and communal terms, as inherently divided by caste, region and religion. The root meaning of communalism as a colonial discourse, as Gyanendra Pandey argues, is religious bigotry of a fundamentally irrational character.\(^6\) In official terms, the mutiny and rebellion were conceived as having resulted from Western interference in indigenous belief, from missionary efforts to convert Indians, and more generally from a lack of understanding of Indian custom and religion and from too much ‘modernization’ too quickly for a non-Western people. This way of understanding the events of 1857, as well as of later anti-colonial unrest, deprived them of political and economic meaning and placed them under the sign of ‘culture’, of the unreasonable reactions of ‘natives’ to a well-intended civilizing mission. It meant also that effective colonial rule was conceived as requiring adequate ethnographic knowledge of indigenous culture. Consequently, the latter half

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