The Vellore Mutiny –1806

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ABSTRACT

Vellore Mutiny, outbreak against the British on July 10, 1806, by sepoys (Indian troops employed by the British) at Vellore (now in Tamil Nadu state, southern India). The incident began when the sepoys broke into the fort where the many sons and daughters of Tippu Sultan of Mysore and their families had been lodged since their surrender at Seringapatam (now Shrirangapattana) in 1799 during the fourth Mysore War.

The July 10 outbreak, though encouraged by the Mysore princes, was basically caused by resentment at new British regulations that ordered changes in headgear and shaving style and the prohibition of ornaments and caste marks for the Indian troops. 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. There were also complaints about the sepoys’ pay. About 130 British troops were killed in the initial assault, but the fort was recovered within hours by a relief force of British soldiers and sepoys under Colonel Robert Gillespie from nearby Arcot. Hundreds of mutineers were killed, either in the fighting or in subsequent executions by the British.

The affair alarmed the British because of its connection with the Mysore princes, who were thereupon removed to Calcutta (now Kolkata). Lord William Bentinck, the governor of Madras (now Chennai), and Sir John Cradock (later John Caradock, 1st Baron Howden), the commander in chief at Madras, were both recalled. It is believed, however, that the severity of punishments meted out by the British—which included tying some of those convicted of mutiny to the barrels of cannons and then firing them—deterred sepoys in southern India from joining the Indian Mutiny of 1857–58.

Keywords: Mutiny, Freedom Struggle, Vellore.

1. INTRODUCTION

The mutiny at Vellore in 1806 A.D. has been termed by some historians as “The First War of Indian Independence”. It was the first major uprising by the Indian troops during the British Raj in India, resulting in the was the death of over a 100 Europeans, including over a dozen British officers. The mutiny was quelled as quickly as it flared up, thanks to the prompt response and resolute leadership by the commanding officer of a British battalion at Arcot, 16 miles away. Several hundred Indian soldiers were killed in the fighting, the rest being put under arrest. Justice was swift and severe, with several mutineers being executed or sentenced to long terms of imprisonment. The disaffected units were disbanded and both the governor of the Madras Presidency as well as the commander-in-chief were recalled. The mutiny brought home to the British authorities the dangers of hurting the religious susceptibilities of Indian troops and disregarding the significance of caste. Unfortunately, these warnings were not heeded, leading to an even greater conflagration that almost ended British rule in India half a century later in 1857.

2. CAUSES OF THE VELLORE MUTINY

In 1799, the British attacked and captured Seringapatnam, the stronghold of Tipu Sultan, who died in the battle. Tipu’s family, including his four sons and their retinue, was interned in the fort at Vellore, where a large complement of the Madras Army was maintained. The garrison comprised two Indian battalions and a detachment of a British Crown regiment, having about 1,500 Indian and 370 European soldiers respectively. On 13 March 1806, Sir John Craddock, the commander-in-chief of the Madras Army, issued a new set of dress regulations, with a view to smarten up the soldiers.
According to the new regulations, Indian soldiers of the Madras Army could no longer display caste marks on their foreheads or wear earrings. Beards were forbidden and moustaches had to be in accordance with a regulation pattern. They were also required to wear a new type of headgear. The orders were issued with the approval of the Madras government and the Governor, Lord William Bentinck, who was then only 32 years old.

The wearing of caste marks by Hindus was de rigueur for Hindus, while most Muslims wore the earring as a charm, given to them at birth and dedicated to some patron pir (saint). While beards were common in both communities, there was considerable difference in their shape and size. Muslims wore the beard but not the moustache, which was popular among Hindus. Another controversial regulation concerned the new headgear that troops were required to wear—a stiff round hat with a flat top, a leather cockade, and a standing feather. Resembling the topi worn by Europeans and Eurasians, it was no longer called a turban, but a topi. In the phraseology of the natives, a topi-wallah or hat wearer was synonymous with a feringhee (white man) or Christian.

The promulgation of the new dress regulations caused considerable resentment among both Hindus and Muslims, who felt it was a direct attack on their religions. British officers, who had been in India for long and realized the grave consequences of the new orders, did not communicate them to their troops and made representations to the authorities in Madras. One of them was the commanding officer of the subsidiary force at Hyderabad, Lieutenant Colonel Montresor, who decided in consultation with the Resident, to suspend the execution of the orders. Montresor’s foresight prevented any untoward incident such as the one that occurred at Vellore, and he was later commended for his judicious measure.

The garrison at Vellore comprised two Indian battalions, the 1st/1st and the 2nd/4th Madras Infantry. The orders regarding the new dress were received in Vellore in late April or early May. Here too, the commanding officer of the 1st/1st, Lieutenant Colonel M. Kerrs (who was later killed in the mutiny) decided not to communicate to his men the paragraph that he considered offensive, which ordered: “a native soldier shall not mark his face to denote his caste, or wear earrings, when dressed in his uniform; and it is further directed that at all parades, and on all duties, every soldier of the battalion shall be clean shaved on the chin. It is directed also that uniformity shall as far as is practicable, be preserved in regard to the quantity and shape of the hair upon the upper lip.”

However, it was not the orders concerning caste marks, earrings, beards and moustaches that caused the trouble, but the new headgear. On 7 May 1806, a company of the 2nd/4th Madras Infantry, respectfully but firmly declined to wear the new headgear. The news was immediately conveyed to Madras, and shortly afterwards, Sir John Craddock visited Vellore. In the meantime, a Court if Inquiry had been held and 19 men arrested by the commanding officer. Craddock ordered the guilty men sent to Madras for a court-martial, which sentenced two of the arrested men to 900 lashes each while the rest were awarded 500 each. The sentence of 900 lashes was carried out on the first two, but the rest were pardoned after they apologised.

The 2nd/4th was moved from Vellore to Madras and the unrest appeared to have been subdued. However, reports of objections to the new headgear came in from several other stations, and in June Craddock wanted to rescind the orders. But the governor and his Council did not agree since a Brahmin and a Syed had been consulted before issuing the new dress regulations. On 17 June 1806, a Muslim sepoy at Vellore, Mustafa Beg informed his commanding officer that a mutiny was in the offering. His report was referred to a committee of Indian officers who declared it false. This was only to be expected since most of the Indian officers were themselves part of the conspiracy. However, the European officers at Vellore were out of touch with their men and failed to read the signs. Mustafa Beg was declared insane and imprisoned. (When the mutiny broke out, he escaped, but later returned and was given a reward of 2,000 pagodas and a subedar’s pension).

The favor shown to Mustafa Beg caused bitter resentment among the sepoys. “The disposition of the gentlemen of the Company’s service,” they said, “and the nature of their government, make a thief happy, and an honest man afflicted”. According to a paper transmitted to Adjutant General Agnew from the Hyderabad Subsidiary Force: “In the affair at Vellore, when the mutiny first commenced, it was on account of Mustapha Beg; and the gentlemen of the Company’s Government have bestowed upon him a reward of two thousand pagodas, with the rank of Soubahdar. The same Mustapha Beg, Sepoy, was the man who gave the signal for the revolt to the people at Vellore, and this is the man whom the Company has distinguished by their favor.”

3. COURSE OF THE VELLORE MUTINY

The mutiny at Vellore broke out on the night of 9 July 1806. At about 3 am the sepoys attacked the barracks of the European soldiers of the 69th Regiment, killing over 100 and wounding many more. Over a dozen officers were shot down as they emerged from their houses to find out what was going on. The survivors managed to barricade themselves in a bastion above the main gateway where they held out, the mutineers soon dispersing in search of plunder. After looting the houses of the officers many of them left the fort. A British officer, Major Coats, who was outside the fort rushed to Arcot, 16 miles distant, where a British cavalry regiment and some Madras cavalry were located. Within 15 minutes of getting the news, Lieutenant Colonel Rollo Gillespie, commanding the 19th Dragoons, galloped off to Vellore with one squadron; the rest, with the Madras cavalry squadron and some galloper guns (horse artillery), followed shortly afterward.

Gillespie reached Vellore shortly after 8 a.m. fortunately, the outer gates of the fort had been left open and only the inner gate was shut. Gillespie had himself hauled up to the ramparts by a rope let down by the beleaguered survivors and immediately assumed command. At about 10 a.m. the galloper guns arrived, the inner gate was blown in and the cavalry poured into the fort. The mutineers offered little resistance and in ten minutes, the fort was again in British hands. Between 300 to 400 mutineers were killed on the spot, with several others being made prisoner. Many of the mutineers who escaped by jumping down from the walls were rounded up later. A few of them
were tried and executed, six being blown from guns, five shot, eight hanged and five transported. Most of the remainder were discharged, and the units were disbanded. Other than Vellore, there was some unrest at Hyderabad, Nundydroog, and Pallamcottah. In Hyderabad, Lieutenant Colonel Montresor had recently taken over command of the Hyderabad Subsidiary Force. He had imposed several local restrictions, such as banning the use of drums and tom-toms in the bazaar, which were commonly used in marriage and religious processions. Immediately after the outbreak of the mutiny at Vellore, he decided to revoke the orders regarding the new dress, in anticipation of instructions from the Madras government. The new dress regulations were canceled on 17 July 1806, and this seemed to remove the immediate source of anger. However, the troops in Hyderabad were not satisfied and reiterated their old grievance of the leather stock, which some of them threw on the ground during a parade. On 14 August 1806, the troops were paraded under arms, with a British regiment—the 33rd—along with some artillery and cavalry were drawn up on both flanks. Four subedars who were believed to be the ring leaders were called to the front, arrested and marched off under a guard to Masulipatam. This nipped the problem in the bud, and there was no further sign of trouble.

The native troops at Nundydroog planned to rise against and massacre their British officers at midnight on 18 October 1806 and quietly sent their families out of the fort. At about eight in the evening of the fateful day, a British officer galloped to the house of the Commandant, Colonel Cuppage and told him about the planned mutiny. Shortly afterward, an old and distinguished native officer came with the same intelligence. Cuppage immediately dispatched a messenger with an urgent appeal for reinforcements to Colonel Davis commanding the 22nd Regiment of Dragoons in Bangalore. One of the officers’ houses that were considered suitable for defense was selected, into which all officers congregated and took the post. Davis received the news soon after daybreak and by three o’clock his troopers were clattering into Nundydroog.

Pallamcottah was located in the southernmost part of the peninsula. Major Welsh, with six European officers, commanded a native battalion that had many sepoys whose relatives had been killed at Vellore. In the third week of November 1806, intelligence was received that the Muslim soldiers had met in the mosque and planned to rise and kill all the Europeans. Welsh immediately arrested and confined 13 native officers, and turned about 500 Muslim sepoys out of the fort. He also sent a letter by country boat to Ceylon, calling for European troops. Two days later, Colonel Dyce, who commanded the Tinnivelly district, arrived in Pallamcottah and addressed the Hindu troops, who were asked if they wanted to serve the Company or leave. All the men went up to the Colors, presented arms and took the oath, following it up with three unbidden cheers. Major Welsh was later severely condemned as an alarmist and had to face a court-martial, but was honorably acquitted.

The large number of Europeans killed in Vellore set alarm bells ringing throughout British India and in London. The Governor, Lord William Bentinck quickly ordered a Commission of Inquiry to investigate into the circumstances connected with the mutiny. The president of the commission was Major General J. Pater, the other members being Lieutenant Colonel G. Dodsworth; Nathaniel Webb, Senior Judge of the Appeal Court; J.H.D. Ogilvie, Second Judge of Circuit; Major W. Douse and J. Leith, the judge advocate general, who also functioned as the secretary. The commission assembled at Vellore on 21 July and submitted its report on 9 August 1806. It found two major reasons for the outbreak of the mutiny: the changes in dress and the presence of the family of Tipu Sultan at Vellore. The officers of the two units who were examined confessed that they had no inkling of the resentment felt by the men because none of them had expressed any dissatisfaction with the issue of the new headgear. However, examination of other witnesses confirmed that they found it highly offensive.

The commission went to great lengths to investigate the involvement of the sons of Tipu Sultan, especially the youngest, Prince Moizuddin. While the family of Tipu was interned in the palace in the fort, under the care of Colonel Marriott, a large number of followers had settled down in the vicinity at Pettah. The residents of the Pettah intermingled with the Muslim sepoys of the regiments in the fort and were suspected to have conspired with them in the mutiny. On the night of the 9 July, the wedding of one of Tipu’s daughters, Princess Noor-ul-Nissum, was being celebrated in the palace, and a large crowd had assembled to watch the proceedings. It was reported that many of the followers from the palace helped the mutineers as soon as the fring started. The flag of Tipu Sultan was also brought out and hoisted on the garrison Flagstaff by the sepoys and the followers. Though the commission could not find any concrete evidence of the direct involvement of any of Tipu’s sons in the mutiny, it relied on the statements of Colonel Mariott, who suspected Prince Moizuddin, due to certain events that occurred in the days preceding the mutiny, such as his request to purchase a horse, and to permit one of his cousins to spend the night with him in the palace. Though Mariott refused both requests, he thought they were enough evidence of the evil intentions of Prince Moizuddin.

The Madras government initially advanced the theory that the Vellore mutiny was part of a widespread plot to expel the British and restore Muslim authority. Bentinck supported this view in his first report to the governor-general at Fort William. Based on Bentinck’s report the council at Fort William wrote to London on 30 July 1806, clearly stating: “We deem it highly probable that the insurrection was instigated by one or more of the sons of Tippoo sultan confined in the Fort”.

However, Bentinck modified his views after the Commission of Inquiry was unable to find any evidence to support this theory. The next report to London dated 26 August 1806, stated: “No attempts appear to have been made by the sons of Tipoo Sultan to excite revolt in Mysore and that no appearance on commotion exists or has existed in that country”.

In spite of finding no direct evidence of the involvement of Tipu’s sons, the British authorities could not seem to get it out of their heads. A subsequent report to London dated 1 October 1806 stated: “With regard to the second point we have decidedly formed the following conclusions – That the strongest assumption and even positive evidence exists in proof that Sultan Moozoodeen, the fourth son of the late Tippoo Sultan, was actively concerned in the insurrection. That scarcely any ground of suspicion is established against the Prince Mohieudeen, the third and only legitimate son and that the rest of the sons and relatives of the family are entirely free from guilt”.
There was a divergence of views between Fort William and Fort St. George with regard to the treatment of the sepoys. The former wanted all “men who did not side with the British or were absent” to be sent to other regiments and the two units disbanded, the men sent to Cape Prince of Wales Island Battalion and Malacca. The Madras Council did not agree with this view, arguing that discharging all men will aggravate the situation and was dangerous, as it may spread disaffection. However, the Governor General’s Council at Calcutta insisted on exemplary punishment to the majority of men and banishment from India for the rest.16

Apart from the family of Tippu Sultan and the sepoys, the action was also taken against the Governor of Madras, Lord William Bentinck and his Commander in Chief, Sir John Craddock. Both were considered responsible for the outbreak and were recalled. A year later, Lord Minto came out to India as Governor-General. He was struck by the mutual ignorance of each other’s motives, intentions, and actions in which the Europeans and natives seemed content to live in India. “I do not believe that either Lord William or Sir John Craddock had the slightest idea of the aversion their measures would excite. I fully believe that their intentions were totally misapprehended by the natives.”17

The controversial dress regulations were canceled on 17 July 1806. This was followed by a general order on 24 September 1806, according to which “interference with the native soldiery in regard to their national observances was strictly prohibited”. Another measure taken by the Court of Directors in London was downgrading the position and authority of the commander-in-chief. Craddock’s successor, Lieutenant General Hay McDowell was not included in the Governor’s Council, as his predecessors had been. The directors’ reason for doing this was Craddock’s error of judgment that caused the Vellore Mutiny. However, the measure caused considerable resentment in the Madras Army and was partly responsible for the serious unrest among officers in 1809.18

4. CONCLUSION
The mutiny at Vellore was the first major mutiny by Indian troops after the establishment of British rule in India, in which a large number of Europeans were killed in an attempt to overthrow the British and reestablish Muslim rule in Mysore. It was a warning to the British that Indian soldiers could rise if their religious sensibilities or caste prejudices were hurt. Unfortunately, the British authorities in India could not read these signs and had to face their greatest challenge 50 years later, when the greased cartridges were issued to Indian troops, leading to the holocaust of 1857.19

5. ENDNOTES