A HISTORICAL STUDY ON THE VELLORE MUTINY

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ABSTRACT
Vellore was the capital of erstwhile North Arcot district in Tamil Nadu. At present, this district is named after its capital Vellore. It is a well fortified and beautiful city. Mutiny war against the British on July 10, 1806, by sepoys at Vellore. When the sepoys broke the wall of fort where the sons and daughters of Tippu Sultan of Mysore and their families had been lodged since their surrender at Seringapatam in 1799 during the fourth Mysore War. Though encouraged by the Mysore princes, 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 reassu...
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 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.

CAUSES OF VELLORE MUTINY

Several causes are attributed to the Vellore Mutiny. Indian sepoys had to experience numerous difficulties when they went to serve in the Company’s army. The sepoys were forced to serve under the Company since their earlier patrons (the native chieftains) were all disappearing from the scene.

The strict discipline, practice, new weapons, new methods and uniforms were all new to the sepoys. Anything new appears to be difficult and wrong for a man who is well-settled in the old way of life for a long-time. Sir John Cradock, the commander-in-chief, with the approval of Lord-William Bentinck, the Governor of Madras, introduced a new from of
turban, resembling a European hat. Wearing ear rings and caste marks were also prohibited.

The sepoys were asked to shave the chin and to trim the moustache. The sepoys felt that these were designed to insult them and their religious and social traditions. There was also a popular belief that this was the beginning of a process by which all of them would be converted to Christianity. The English treated the Indian sepoys as their inferior. There was the racial prejudice.

This was the psychological base for the sepoy mutinies in India during the Company’s rule. The sepoys once served the local chieftains (either Hindu or Muslim). The chieftains were their own kinsmen but now they served under the foreigners. They can never forget their original loyalties. The Vellore uprising was preceded by a series of protests by the Indian troops. In May 1806, the 4th Regiment rose in revolt against the new turban. The Commander-in-Chief took severe action the sepoys who were found guilty were punished with 500 to 900 lashes.

Before the mutiny secret associations were formed and meetings held in which Tipu’s family took part. On June 17th 1806 a sepoy of the 1st Regiment named Mustapha Beg, secretly informed his commanding officer, Colonel Forbes, that a plot had been planned for the extermination of the European officers and troops. But this was not taken seriously.

On the eve of the Mutiny at Vellore Fettah Hyder, the first son of Tipu, tried to form an alliance against the English and sought the help of the Marathas and the French. Fettah Hyder received secret information through one Mohommed Malick. Besides, princes
Fettah Hyder and Moiz-ud-Deen in particular were active in planning the execution of the Mutiny. Thus, there was the desire to revive the old Muslim rule in this region.

The sepoys were aware of the tragic end of Puli Thevar, Khan Sahib, Kattabomman, Marudu Brothers, Tipu Sultan and others. Hence there were ill-feelings about the British in the minds of the sepoys. All these led to the rebellion.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

At the time of the revolt, the fort a late 14th century Vijayanagara construction of European design encased by a crocodiles-infested moat, captured by Sivaji in 1677, and garrisoned by the East India Company in 1768 -- comprised four companies of His Majesty's 69th Regiment, six companies of the 1st Battalion, 1st Regiment, and the whole of the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Regiment, accounting for 1500 Indian sepoys and 370 Englishmen.

On July 10, 1806, as the moon shone over the ramparts of the Vellore fort, at 2 a.m., Indian sepoys rose in a bloody revolt against the East India Company's garrison. As shrieks and gunfire pierced the quiet, the sepoys shot at English officers, fired into the European barracks and massacred the sick in their hospital, leaving 14 British officers and 100 soldiers dead. In the counterattack unleashed at 9 a.m. by Colonel Robert Rollo Gillespie's men, who rushed from Arcot 14 miles away, 350 Indians sepoys were put to death. Some British accounts place the figure at 800. This little documented event was the first major rebellion against the emerging British Empire in colonial India. It cost the governor of Madras, Lord William Bentinck, his job.
Though discontent had been brewing among the Indian soldiers drawn from various parts of the Deccan over poor treatment, loss of erstwhile status, and poor pay, the immediate provocation for the unbridled outburst of aggression was apparently the introduction of a controversial new turban, viewed by Indians as a *firangi topi* (hat), and the implementation of new regulations over the sporting of caste marks on foreheads, earrings and facial hair. This Code of Military Regulations was given approbation on 13 March 1806 by Sir John Cradock, commander-in-chief of the Madras Army.

Lending political and historical weight to the cause of the rebels was the presence of a huge contingent of Tipu Sultan's family -- twelve sons and eight daughters -- stationed in various mahals within the fort precincts since the fall of Srirangapatnam in 1799. The entire retinue, with servants and followers numbering a few hundreds, lived in privacy and palatial comfort though stripped of their former princely glory. According to S.S. Furnell, the first historian to document the mutiny in his *The Mutiny of Vellore*, whose fragments survive in the Madras Archives, more than 3,000 Mysoreans (mostly 'Mohammedans') had settled in Vellore and its vicinity after it became the abode of the princes. After the English drubbed the French in the Carnatic wars, several 'native soldiers' were employed by the East India Company. Of these, a sizeable number were Tipu's former soldiers, especially of officer rank. They had reason to make common cause with their former masters -- Tipu's legatees stationed in the Vellore fort.

A few months prior to the mutiny, Mohammedan fakirs from Mysore were spotted roaming the streets and bazaars of Vellore raising slogans against the firangis. The nomadic fakirs have had a historical association with various Indian armies-the Holkars, the Scindias, the kings of Jaipur -- since the 18th century, sometimes acting as mercenaries, joining forces with whoever hired them.
But in the regulations-driven English army they had little place and were seen as troublemakers. Sighted in Vellore since 1805, they acted as agent provocateurs. Under the leadership of Abdullah Khan and Peerzada, former associates of Tipu, the fakirs staged puppet shows in Vellore lampooning the English and proclaiming their impending doom. Mocking the Hindus and Muslims in the army for accepting the new regulations, for sporting the turban which comprised a leather cockade -- thus inviting caste and religious 'pollution'-- and a turnscrew resembling a cross to be worn next to the heart, the fakirs proclaimed that these would lead to the eventual conversion of all sepoys to Christianity. Ostensibly, the Mohammedan soldiers, being the erstwhile ruling class, resented the idea of conversion more than their Hindu counterparts.

According to Maya Gupta's research based largely on sources in the India Office library, London, on 6 May 1806, 29 sepoys of the second battalion of the 4th Regiment who were ordered to wear the new turban refused. Continuing their defiance the following day, placing handkerchiefs on their bare heads, they abused the English officers as 'dogs'. The insubordinate sepoys were confined to Madras and court-martialed. While punishment was spared to sepoys who regretted and relented, two defiant havildars -- one Muslim, one Hindu -- were subjected to 900 lashes. In June, a similar anti-turban agitation rocked Wallajhabad in the vicinity of Vellore.

On 17 June, Mustafa Beg, a sepoy of the 1st Regiment, leaked news of the brewing conspiracy to his commanding officer Lt. Col. Forbes. The officer sought the opinion of the native officers who dismissed the plot and declared Beg to be insane. Beg was transferred and placed in confinement only to be later rewarded with 7,000 rupees and a subedar's pension. Volumes of *Secret Sundries* (British military records), believed, in hindsight, that the mutineers, especially those of officer rank, seeking to reinstate the rule of Mysore, were in touch with the Poligars (feudal chieftains in the Deccan), the Holkars,
the Marathas, the deposed rulers of Hyderabad and even the French in Pondicherry. They had set July 14 as the common date for mutiny, but Beg's treachery had hastened them.

Fatteh Hyder, Tipu's first son, was perceived to be of one of the key architects of the rebellion, besides Mohiuddin and Moizuddin, the third and fourth sons. Soon after the rebels took control of the Vellore fort on 10 July, they hoisted the flag of Tipu Sultan on the fort and Moizuddin promised to double the salary of the sepoys when the rebellion was completed. While Colonel Fancourt, commanding officer of the Vellore garrison, and Lieutenant Kerras, commanding officer of the 23rd Regiment, were shot at pointblank range, several officers escaped and hid themselves and passed word to the nearest British military station at Arcot. Once the massacre ended and the fort was taken, the sepoys indulged in plunder -- ransacking the English quarters and paymaster's office -- losing focus of their larger goal. By 7 a.m., several civilians had also entered the fort. According to one British estimate, 5,48,429 pagodas were plundered in the mutiny. As the sepoys and civilians pillaged, Col. Gillespie from Arcot led the 19th Dragoons and the 7th cavalry quite easily since three of the four outer gates of the fort were left unattended. With Col. Kennedy arriving with more reinforcements and the Indian sepoys running out of ammunition, the fort was as easily taken back as had been won by the mutineers. In under eight hours, the entire drama was over. Gillespie and his men spared the princes and others of Tipu's family; the entire princely retinue was shifted to faraway Calcutta by January 1807.

British military records say that 787 soldiers escaped and 446 were recaptured largely from areas such as Salem, Madurai and Tirunelveli. According to Secret Despatches, Vol 33, "Six convicted mutineers were blown away from guns [canons], five were shot with musketry, eight were hung." These executions took place in the western part of the fort. In the Manual of the North Arcot District (1898) magistrate Arthur C. Fox notes with
unrestrained glee that the execution by blowing away from the guns "produced the profoundest impression. A spectator describes how numbers of kites accompanied the party to the place of execution, flapping their wings and screeching as if in anticipation of the bloody feast, till the fatal flash which scattered their fragments of bodies in air, when, pouncing on their prey, they caught in their talons many pieces of quivering flesh before they could reach the ground. At sight of this the native troops employed on duty, together with the crowd assembled to witness the execution, set up a yell of horror." Such horrors perhaps left a devastating impression on the south for it to bypass 1857.

According to K.A. Manikumar, professor of history at Manonmaniam Sundaranar University, who is compiling a volume on the mutiny for the unofficial Vellore Bicentennial Commemoration Committee: "The Vellore mutiny can be understood in terms of what historian Eric Hobsbawm characterises as 'proto-nationalism', where resistance arises from differences in language, race, customs, dress etc."

On why this incident has remained on the fringes of the national imagination, A.R. Venkatachalapathy, associate professor with the Madras Institute of Development Studies, says: "Tamil Nadu has always been on the margins of nationalist historiography, dominated as it has been by the north and Bengal. The 'anti-nationalist' trajectory that TN took even by the late 1920s under Periyar and subsequent phenomena like the anti-Hindi agitation and the rise of the DMK, seemed to justify such marginalisation. The silence over Vellore must be understood in this background." He reckons that Vellore was a mutiny in the strict sense of the word. "It started in the barracks and lay confined to it, whereas 1857 began as a mutiny and spread over large parts of north India as a civil rebellion."

END RESULT
Tipu Mahal in Vellore fort, the seat of conspiracy, is under unsupervised renovation. It is now part of a Police Training College where sub-inspectors of the TN Police used to train -- bathing and defecating where royalty once lived. The sub-inspectors made way for the mahal to be rendered a high-security prison for LTTE cadre. Another day, another rebellion. On 15 August 1995, 43 LTTE cadres lodged in Tipu Mahal escaped after digging a 153-foot tunnel through the moat. Shamefaced, the TN police has since barred access to the mahal. As a muted commemoration of the historic rising begins, the Tamil public may well be denied a peek into the place where history was made.

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