

BOOK REVIEW

Kate Imy. *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army*

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Kate Imy's *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army* is a fascinating account of military policy and psychology in South Asia from 1900 to 1940. Imy demonstrates that the British were deeply concerned about the loyalty of the Indian army as the empire struggled to cope with escalating geopolitical and economic competition. The British understood that their rule in India ultimately depended upon the loyalty of the armed forces and that this essential political resource could easily erode as it had in 1857–8. The difference was that in the 1900s the threats to that loyalty came from the region's political awakening, the advent of mass politics, and the increasingly clear sense that British power was waning.

The British strategy, brought out lucidly by Imy, sought to ensure the loyalty of the Indian military through three broad policies. First, the idea of the *loyal* and *honorable* Sikh and Muslim soldier, untouched by the subversive and unmanly proclivities of Bengalis and Biharis (who had rebelled in 1857) was fiercely propagated and reinforced. Second, within the context of colonial economic scarcity and enforced underdevelopment, the soldiers were a pampered class—with land allocations, priority in rations, medical care, and (eventually) educational opportunities available to them on terms far more favorable than the rest of the subject population. And third, as demands for reform intensified, and local leaders demanded Indianization of the officer corps, the British responded with periodic concessions.

It is, of course, a matter of some postcolonial embarrassment and more than a little amnesia, that the territories that presently comprise Pakistan along with the Sikhs, proved immensely helpful in crushing the 1857–8 rebellion. Indeed, without the support of the Muslim and Sikh notables of the Punjab, the British would probably have lost in 1857–8 and been driven out of large parts of South Asia. In the years after the British victory, major changes to the recruitment policy were made, built around the flattering myth of the naturally martial Sikh and Muslim soldier. This was, of course, complete nonsense given that the British had conquered India using primarily Hindu soldiers from Bengal, Bihar, and Madras, and that these men had bested the martial northwesterners in the Anglo-Sikh wars. But that didn't matter as the loyalty of the soldiery of the Punjab needed to be rewarded. This set the stage for concentrated recruitment of the post-1857 Indian army from select communities in and around the Punjab. The Sikhs were, proportionately, the greatest beneficiaries, as while they accounted for less than one percent of British India's population they became about twenty percent of the enlisted men in the peacetime Indian army. The Muslims came second after the Sikhs, accounting for about half of the enlisted men, with other communities making up the remaining one-third. Of the

remainder, the Nepali Gurkha contingent was an elite force—a distinctly foreign legion set apart from the rest of the army including other Hindu soldiers.

This laudable exercise in affirmative action had tangible benefits as well. Other than the regular pay and pension, benefits like land allocations were to be had. But perhaps the greatest advantage was that the soldiers were often recruited from families who already had servicemen. Thus, the soldiers were able to protect their status along intergenerational lines, becoming a hereditary military caste of sorts. As Imy explains, the implications of loyalty to the salt, or, conversely, disloyalty, were severe. This was especially true of military families who had been on the state payroll for generations. For them, it was a matter of an almost personal loyalty to the British sovereign, whose salt they and their families had consumed for generations, to serve when called upon. To avoid doing so would be against family tradition and personal honor. The fact that the British went the extra mile to accommodate the cultural and religious sensitivities of their Muslim and Sikh soldiers (while bemoaning the fussiness of the Hindus) further reinforced this sense of loyalty.

While it was remarkable that the British were able to build an organizationally modern army using semi-feudal means of ensuring their soldiers' loyalty, things were changing from WWI onwards. Nationalism, mass-communalism, democracy, socialism, and liberalism, were all words that would have meant little to South Asians in 1860. But, by 1920, millions of South Asian had become sufficiently riled up in adherence to one or more of these concepts, that it was inevitable that the soldiers would be affected. Demands from local leaders for a broader-based recruitment and allowing Indians into the officer corps on equal terms could no longer be ignored. Imy explores in detail the debates around the Raj's responses to these demands and the policy adopted of slowly accommodating the pressure in a manner intended to extend for as long as possible overall British control of the Indian military.

Where Imy's *Faithful Fighters* truly shines is in how it combines the micro with the macro. Without losing sight of the big picture, the details of soldiers' lives, their aspirations, and responses, are brought forth in vivid detail. In achieving this, Imy has made an enduring contribution to the historical literature on colonial South Asia. One hopes that Imy finds a wide audience and continues to excavate the colonial period.