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When the Vellore sepoys rebelled



Site of awakening: The Vellore fort today. Photo: Curator, Government Museum, Vellore

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Though it preceded the First War of Independence by almost 50 years, not much is known of this brief act of valour by the sepoys of the Vellore fort.

In the late-18th Century, the fakeers played a key role in spreading the message of unity amongst Indians and the need to throw out the British.

AT three, in the stealth of the dawn, on July 10, 1806, when it was still very quiet and the calm enveloped the Vellore fort, the doors of the native barracks suddenly flung open. Five hundred brave Indian sepoys were on the threshold of a mutiny they had so carefully plotted. Armed with muskets, they tiptoed out, dragging in their midst two heavily muffled six-pounder guns. They reached the European barracks, briefly halted, lifted the muskets to their shoulders and waited expectantly. The signal they anticipated was issued presently. It was at once fire works that shattered the still and the quiet. Windows and glass crashed while the English inmates woke up to their peril. Either they were killed in their beds whilst in deep slumber or were put down while running out in night robes trying to make sense of the pandemonium that had broken out so suddenly.

Losing direction

The Vellore War of Independence against the East India Company occupation was now well on its bloody course with all the trappings of romance associated with mutinies manifesting itself on that fateful morning. Underdogs defying authority, secretive planning, courage against intimidating authority, bravery and fearlessness towards death - all moved by a deep sense of right being on their side. By the time the smoke cleared and the guns became quiet by 5 a.m., about 15 British officers and about 100 English soldiers had been killed. Col. Fancourt, the Commander of the Fort and Garrison was the first to be shot. Jamaidar Shaik Cossim, one of the principal leaders of the rebellion, had arranged to hoist Tipu's Mysore flag over the fort signalling that the fort had been taken over. As the flag was fluttering proudly, the course of the mutiny floundered and lost its sense of direction and purpose. Some of the sepoys started looting the houses of the Europeans, whilst others were busy abusing sepoys who did not take part in the mutiny. Yet others were conducting inconclusive discussions with Tipu's sons, who were held captive within the fort, to come out openly and lead. Tipu's princes hesitated and vacillated. Though this rebellion preceded the First War of Independence (Sepoy Mutiny of 1857) by over 50 years, it has not been given the importance and significance it deserves as a determined early attempt to throw out imperialism and alien rule from Indian soil. We will take a brief pause from the fast-paced events of that fiery morning and analyse the causes for and significance of this rebellion before coming back to July 10, 1806 once again to complete our story.

Key influence

At the time of the Mutiny, the Vellore fort was station to the following Infantry Military units. Battalions of the 69th Regiment and 23rd Regiment with 1,500 native troops and about 370 white officers and men present inside. And great dissatisfaction was brewing amongst the Indian troops on various counts. And this had a good deal to do with the Fakeer Movement of the late 18th Century. These *fakeers* were mystic mendicants (at times doubling up as mercenaries!) commanding the respect and affection of both Hindus and Muslims. In large numbers, they went from town to town conducting discourses, prayers and even puppet shows. They played a key role in spreading the message of unity amongst Indians and the need to throw out the British. They often got in touch with sepoys and native officers and instigated them to rebel. Their methods were secretive and the appeal powerful. These *fakeers* fanned all over the South and hence one can see that in the early 19th Century, there were several rebellions in the South. The Chittoor polygors fighting the British between 1804 and 1805, the Travancore Mutiny in the same period and the Madurai outbreak of 1804 are examples to cite. The famous valiant Wayanad hero, Pazhassi Raja gave the English anxious times till his capture and death in 1805. There was a ground swell of nationalism and a strong undercurrent of hope. And the *fakeers* sure had a significant role to play. Cantonments from Wallajahbad to Palayamkottai had been caught up in this freedom fervour. The *fakeers* had a simple and enduring message: "we are many and they are few". Like the gunpowder in the cartridge that needs a spark to ignite, the spark for the Vellore uprising came in the form of new uniform regulation announced by John Cradock in March 1806. Cradock was the Commander-in-Chief the Madras Army. A new cap was prescribed in place of the turban and caste markings on the face were prohibited. The beard was to go. The hair over the upper lip was to be regulated and the wearing of earrings

abolished. The troops saw this as the first step to Europeanisation and conversion to Christianity. Hindu and Muslim soldiers resented the regulations. Muslim soldiers expressed solidarity with Hindu sepoy's who despised the use of cow leather in the new cap prescribed in the revised uniform regulation issued by the office of Cradock. Hindus and Muslims together rose as one in the name of religion and liberty. Yet another factor that helped shape events in Vellore was the presence of Tipu's family in the fort. They were confined and housed in the palaces and *mahals* formerly of the Nawabs of Arcot which lay within the precincts of the fort. After his heroic death on May 4, 1799, Tipu's 12 sons and six of his eight daughters were brought to Vellore along with a retinue of servants and the party totalled 1,378. In Vellore town itself a number of people had settled down following Tipu's heirs. A certain Lt. Col. Marriott (pay master of Stipends) and his brother Capt. Marriott (the assistant paymaster) were in charge of the privileged prisoners.

Ironic twist

The presence of Tipu's princes undoubtedly inspired the sepoy's. Ironically, the princes perhaps did not provide decisive and inspiring leadership to the uprising. Prince Moiz-ud-Deen is reported to have conducted some parleys with the leader of the uprising and Prince Fetta Hyder offered support in the early phase of the planning, albeit not too openly. Prince Moiz is said to have met key leaders like Subedar Noor Mohamed, Subedar Shaik Hossain and Jamaidar Shaik Cossim prior to July 10. After assuming control of the fort, when Sheik Cossim and the others asked the princes to come out and openly lead them, the princes were insisting that they see the body of Lt. Col. Marriott first. This response did not help the course of the uprising which was already beginning to lack organisation. At that point and at about 9.30 am on July 10, 1806, Col. Gillespie of the 19th Dragoons, commanding the Cavalry Cantonment 16 miles away at Arcot, reached Vellore to put down the Mutiny. One Major Coates of the 23rd Regiment had earlier dispatched a letter through an officer at around 6 a.m. to the Arcot Cavalry unit seeking help. Gillespie arrived with an advance force. Lt. Col. Kennedy from the same cavalry reached a little later with heavy guns.

Swift end

The dislocated mutineers did not regroup in proper defence. The gates were blasted open by the 19th Dragoons and they stormed in. The rebelling native sepoy's were mercilessly hounded and killed. It is reported that around 800 of them were found dead at the fort alone. More lives were evidently lost. By 2 p.m. in the afternoon the rebellion had not only been completely silenced but had come to be a brief pale memory of heroism - a flicker that was sadly extinguished. As was expected, the British ordered a Court of inquiry into the events. It was also considered risky to keep the Tipu's family in Vellore, so close to the seat of their former glory. They were taken and resettled in faraway Calcutta. The news of the Vellore War of Independence had sent shockwaves in England. The Governor, William Bentinck and Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army, Sir John Cradock both were recalled on this count. Historians should do more to research this not so well documented act of heroism, to inquire into questions like the impact of this event on the 1857 great rebellion. Commemorating this unique rebellion, the State Government on the Bicentennial Anniversary held a function on July 10, 2006 with the Chief Minister participating and releasing a special volume on the Vellore uprising. Voluntary groups and students are planning cycle rallies to Vellore to take home to the people of India the message of sacrifice behind these sepoy's who dared to rebel so that we may live in a free country.

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