

## BOOK REVIEW

### **A Revolutionary Revolt Pre-1857**

*by M R Narayan Swamy*

About half a century before the 1857 Rebellion or the First War of Independence, hundreds of Indian soldiers of the East India Company revolted against the British in 1806 in Vellore in present day Tamil Nadu. It was brutally crushed and hundreds of soldiers were mercilessly slaughtered by the British. In many ways, the uprising had all the ingredients which led to the larger and more deadly 1857, an event that shook the colonial administration. Unfortunately, the Vellore revolt has been mostly forgotten; the present work, a product of extensive research in India and abroad, richly fills a critical faded page in Indian history.

Like it happened in 1857, the trigger for the July 10, 1806 revolt lay in new British military regulations that included a ban on the use earrings as well as ‘vibhuti’ (sacred ash) and other caste marks on the forehead of the sepoys on duty and uniformity regarding the quantity and shape of the hair upon the upper lip. A new turban had a leather (animal skin) cockade, and the front part of the uniform had been converted into a cross, a symbol of Christian faith. This was enough to ignite anger among both Muslim and Hindu soldiers. Racism and poor pay had been dragging problems; a perceived attack on one’s faith was too much. Those who made representations against the new rules ran into a wall, convincing the troops that they could expect no justice from the British.

There was another crucial element to the Vellore uprising. Tipu Sultan had been killed in 1799 in the Fourth Mysore War and his surviving family – his children, wives and relatives besides servants and ‘adherents’ — was sent to live in Vellore, whose fort was considered impregnable. A section of the British promptly blamed the Tipu family – particularly some sons and their attendants – for the revolt. As if to prove the British right, the soldiers unfurled a Tipu Sultan flag bearing his insignia – a sun in the centre and green tiger stripes on a red field — in the fort to thunderous acclamation after bringing down the Union Jack.

The first rebellion in Vellore took place in May 1806 when men from the Second Battalion of the Fourth Regiment refused to wear the new turban. Twenty-one privates (10 Muslims and 11 Hindus) against whom charges were laid went sent to Madras to face trial. Two of them, a Muslim and a Hindu each, refused to apologize were sacked from service after being lashed 900 times each. The others who apologized still got 500 lashes each.

The punishment was a costly mistake. It only hardened the resolve of the soldiers who told themselves that their religious beliefs were under attack, probably to make them embrace Christianity. Early on the morning of July 10, the sepoys went on the offensive, firing at the British guards, European barracks and officers' quarters. The houses of the British officers were set ablaze so that they could be shot when they tried to escape. Some colonial officers were dragged out and killed. One officer was slain because he was mistaken for another Briton who had escaped punishment despite carelessly shooting a four-year-old Indian child; the child's father chased and killed him in front of his wife.

The number of Europeans massacred by the insurgents was put at 113. But when the vengeance came, it was uncivil and illegal bordering on savagery. The forces led by Colonel Robert Gillespie were indiscriminate and brutal. The Indian soldiers were hunted down till the morning of July 12. Upwards of 800 bodies were carried out of the fort. No proof was asked if the Indians being killed were part of the revolt or not; the slightest suspicion rendered them lifeless. "I never in my life experienced such horrid, horrid sentiments and scenes," a British witness to the gore wrote. The exact number of Indians killed was never known.

In contrast, the Indian soldiers were discriminating and even compassionate even as they killed. Sergeant Solomon Frost was murdered but his son James Frost was not. Many European women and children were spared. Frost's Indian wife and Sergeant James Watters' European wife were protected by sepoys of the native infantry. According to a later classification, those who actively took part in the revolt numbered 50 (22 Muslims, 27 Hindus, 1 Christian). Twenty-one men (7 Muslims, 14 Hindus) entered the Vellore fort from outside and took active role in the uprising. On duty and off duty soldiers who deserted and absconded numbered 157 (55 Muslims, 101 Hindus, 1 Christian).

Yet, in a classic case of divide and rule for which they were notorious, the British singled out Muslims officers and soldiers for punishment, with death or dismissal. At the same time, the new military regulations were hastily withdrawn. A section of the British insisted the revolt was not political; others admitted that inept handling of the Indians and the revolt were both at fault. The fact is that foreign domination, leading to oppressive land revenue policies and evangelizing activities, stirred up anti-imperial feelings among the well-informed Indian troops.

Says the author: "Transcending regional, religious, linguistic and caste barriers, the participants in the Vellore Revolt ... were certainly roused by patriotic feelings. The 1806 uprising, albeit confined to cantonments in the south, in its origin and progress, was certainly a forerunner of the geographically widespread Great Rebellion of 1857 and deserves to be included in the mainstream narrative of history and to be etched in the memory of the people."

This is truly a great book.