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ARTICLE

# 'Beastial Communications': Race, Friendship and Factionalism in the Madras Army, 1832–1837

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## Abstract

Historians of empire have long been interested in how interpersonal relationships between coloniser and colonised did or did not conform to imperial ideologies. Yet, the relationships that developed between European and Indian officers in the East India Company's armies remain underexplored. This is an important omission, because the armies employed thousands of people and represented a significant point of cross-cultural contact, while also being governed by a distinct set of rules and conventions. This article uses the variety of materials generated by a controversy in the Fifth Light Cavalry, Madras Army to understand the nature and limits of what contemporaries called friendships. Both interested parties and neutral onlookers testified to the existence of friendships and factions that bridged race and rank. Indian officers sought the goodwill of their superiors to ensure their professional security, while British officers looked to Indian allies for information and legitimacy. Although existing scholarship has often assumed that British and Indian officers led largely separate lives, the scandal in the Fifth Light Cavalry demonstrates instead that British and Indian officers could, and did, form parties defined by shared objectives. When disputes broke out between rival British officers, however, Indian allies risked becoming collateral damage, while British officers who sided with Indian friends were punished for violating social codes. Through this controversy, we see how and why hierarchies of race and rank were contested, as well as the mechanisms whereby they were ultimately preserved intact.

**Keywords:** army; Britain; East India Company; empire; race; South Asia

## Introduction

In 1835, a British officer was dismissed from the Madras Army for gossiping with an Indian non-commissioned officer (NCO). These 'beastial communications' (to quote the prosecution) concerned allegations of sodomy against another British officer.[1]

[1]John Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman, Deputy Chairman and Court of Directors of the United East India Company: The Respectful Memorial of John Watkins, Late a Major in the 5th Regiment of Light Cavalry, Madras Establishment* (1835), xxx.

In a profession governed by rigid codes of honour, prosecution for gossip was not unusual; courts martial were frequently assembled to investigate defamatory exchanges between European officers.[2] In this case, however, the defendant, Major John Watkins, insisted that he was being punished for 'attempting to treat a native as a friend'.[3] Watkins's story exposes the institutional racism of the armies of the British East India Company (EIC), while also suggesting that affiliations along racial lines were not preordained. Watkins had assumed that European and Indian officers could be 'friends', a relationship which, during this period, was understood predominantly in terms of reciprocal obligations.[4] As historian Naomi Tadmor explains, 'the moral duty of "friends" was to stand by each other, and, if necessary, "serve" each other as best they could'.[5] This article uses the print and manuscript material generated by this case to explore the nature and limits of these friendships. In the process, it shows how boundaries of race and rank were constructed, reproduced and contested in imperial armed forces.

European colonisers commonly exploited the military labour of the colonised, but the scale of the EIC's recruiting made it distinct. From the mid-eighteenth century, the number of sepoys (South Asian soldiers) in the EIC's service increased rapidly, from 9,000 in 1765, to 155,000 in 1808, to 200,000 in 1856, on the eve of the EIC's demise.[6] At its height the EIC commanded some of the largest standing armies of its time, wherein, according to its own calculations, the proportion of South Asian to European troops reached 5,110 to one by 1830.[7] Given their numbers and strategic importance, the possibility of a sepoy mutiny was a recognised threat to the EIC's survival. One commonly proposed method for securing sepoys' contingent loyalties was to build rapport between them and their European officers.

Despite the importance invested in these relationships in the nineteenth century, historians have not examined how they worked in practice. Douglas Peers has analysed contemporary discourses about EIC officers, arguing that racial and ethnographic thinking led to the early adoption of a paternalistic officer ideal in the EIC's armies.[8] More recently, Christina Welsch has shown how European officers used their purported influence over sepoys to justify the EIC's system of 'stratocracy', or rule by the army.[9] Still, histories of army life have emphasised disconnection, noting that sepoys lived separately from their European counterparts.[10] The Indian officers who mediated between sepoys and European officers, meanwhile, have not been taken seriously as cultural brokers. Despite many studies on go-betweens in other branches of the

[2]Arthur N. Gilbert, 'Law and Honour Among Eighteenth-Century British Army Officers', *Historical Journal*, 19 (1976), 78.

[3]Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xliv.

[4]Harold Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society 1780–1880* (1969), 46.

[5]Naomi Tadmor, *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship, and Patronage* (Cambridge, 2001), 213.

[6]David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860–1940* (Houndmills, 1994), 3.

[7]Edward Hyde Villiers, *Report from the Select Committee on the Affairs of the East India Company* (8 vols., 1832), v, xxx.

[8]Douglas Peers, '"The Habitual Nobility of Being": British Officers and the Social Construction of the Bengal Army in the Early Nineteenth Century', *Modern Asian Studies*, 25 (1991), 545–9.

[9]Christina Welsch, *The Company's Sword: The East India Company and the Politics of Militarism, 1644–1858* (Cambridge, 2022), 6.

[10]Peers, '"The Habitual Nobility of Being"', 552.

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EIC's service, the armies have not received this treatment, meaning that Indian officers continue to be understood in terms of nineteenth-century stereotypes. In a representative refrain, Peers writes that 'they possessed little influence and were given barely any respect from either their officers or the sepoys beneath them'.[11] This is certainly the impression conveyed in British military memoirs. Yet, as James Hoover demonstrated in his study of the Vellore mutiny, the military justice archive can be mined for information about labour relations within the regiment.[12] Here, we find evidence of interaction, negotiation and alliance-making.

To capture these dynamics, this article examines a lingering scandal that rocked the Fifth Light Cavalry (LC) between 1827 and 1835, when Lieutenant Colonel Edward Lloyd Smythe, after being acquitted of sodomy, promptly sued Major John Watkins, his prosecutor. Unfortunately, the controversy reveals little about sodomy in the army. The alleged assaults are perhaps surprisingly marginal to the dispute, because Watkins claimed never to have doubted Smythe's innocence. Instead, the two debated the extent to which Watkins had propagated rumours of sodomy in the regiment. While no single case study can capture the diversity of relationships that existed in the Madras Army, the variety of evidence generated by this case (including petitions, pamphlets, trial transcripts, official correspondence and newspaper coverage) illuminates an aspect of life in the EIC's armies that is often elided in official records or European officers' personal correspondence.

This article uses the scandal in the Fifth LC to show how and why British and Indian officers formed friendships, and with what consequences. The first section reviews existing scholarship on friendships in colonial India and identifies the features that make military friendships distinctive and worth studying. The second section provides basic historical context by introducing the EIC's native regiments and describing the ambivalent social dynamics within them. The third section recounts the scandal that erupted in the Fifth LC, focusing on the porosity of the boundaries between officers' bungalows and native lines. The fourth section analyses the scandal, tracing how these relationships worked and identifying when and why they broke down. As this article shows, these friendships could be risky, even for the European officers involved. Gentlemanly status conferred privileges but also entailed obligations. Although European officers were instructed to conciliate Indian officers, they were also expected to preserve hierarchies of race and rank. Officers who broke these codes faced potentially serious sanctions; the fact that officers still sometimes did so reflects, not so much their commitment to equality, but rather the illegibility of the EIC's protocols. As we shall see, social life within the cantonment was more diverse, complicated and contentious than previously thought.

## Imperial friendships

Historians have long been interested in how imperialism shaped interpersonal relationships and vice versa, though friendships formed in the cantonment have not featured prominently in this literature. Ann Stoler has established the importance of

[11] Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in India 1819–1835* (1995), 85. See also Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj*, 156.

[12] James W. Hoover, *Men without Hats: Dialogue, Discipline and Discontent in the Madras Army 1806–1807* (New Delhi, 2007).

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intimacy and affect to histories of empire, emphasising colonial states' preoccupation with affiliation and desire.[13] Imperial institutions might promote particular 'emotional regimes' designed to create and sustain divisions between coloniser and colonised, but individuals did not always respect these conventions.[14] Perhaps the most well-known example of this is Leela Gandhi's study of friendship's subversive potential, which shows how, in the late nineteenth century, friendships between British and South Asian radicals engendered an atmosphere of 'affective cosmopolitanism' within utopian-socialist circles that contravened imperial hierarchies of race and gender.[15]

In contrast to the intimate exchanges described by Gandhi, the relationships featured here may not seem like friendships at all. In the early nineteenth century, friendship was not necessarily conceived as a relationship between equals; instead, the term commonly referred to vertical relationships of service and obligation as well as to affective ties between like-minded people.[16] Peter Robb has highlighted how vital these 'useful friendships' were to European expatriates seeking to obtain capital, manage debt and otherwise mitigate risk in eighteenth-century Calcutta.[17] Relationships with South Asians were particularly necessary to British commercial ventures and imperial administration. Miles Ogborn, among others, has traced how these relationships changed across the EIC's history. In the seventeenth century, British traders established a foothold in the subcontinent by partnering with South Asian brokers. In the eighteenth century, new responsibilities associated with colonial governance, particularly the administration of law, led British jurists to collaborate with Hindu and Muslim scholars.[18] Colonial society thus comprised a web of patronage relationships encompassing Europeans and non-Europeans alike.

Precisely how these cross-cultural relationships differed from intra-European relationships is difficult to gauge. Peter Robb notes that Europeans and South Asians formed part of the same networks of 'obligation, trust, and sociability', but envisages these networks as 'concentric circles of diminishing attachment and loyalty, in which Indian colleagues and acquaintances, though clearly ahead of some Europeans, were consistently more distant than European friends'.[19] According to Robb's analysis, relationships between Europeans and South Asians were, in the aggregate, less trusting than relationships between Europeans. This article, however, suggests that the distinctions were not always so clear-cut. Obligations could pull in different directions, at times upholding the status quo, at times undermining it. Different friendships could come into conflict, and people sometimes disagreed about how to evaluate competing claims to friendship. Understanding these dynamics can help us understand both the resources available to Indian military personnel, and the obstacles they faced in negotiating the EIC's institutional culture.

[13]Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, CA, 2002), 12.

[14]Will Jackson, 'The Private Lives of Empire: Emotion, Intimacy, and Colonial Rule', *Itinerario,* 42 (2018), 2.

[15]Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (Durham, NC, 2006).

[16]Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, 213.

[17]Peter Robb, *Useful Friendship: Europeans and Indians in Early Calcutta* (New Delhi, 2014), 12.

[18]Miles Ogborn, *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800* (Cambridge, 2008), 19.

[19]Robb, *Useful Friendship*, 174.

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The distinctive social life of the army is worth studying because here the intimacy and violence characteristic of imperial encounters was particularly acute. While Stoler identified colonial households as 'intimate frontiers' where 'racial classifications were defined and defied', the public spaces of army camps and cantonments also fit this description.[20] The EIC's armies enabled sustained cross-cultural interaction on a large scale by requiring thousands of Europeans and Indians to live and work in relative proximity. As Durba Ghosh, Erica Wald, Kenneth Ballhatchet and Sarah Hodges have shown, a spectrum of intimate relations between European men and Indian women proliferated within the army, from prostitution to cohabitation.[21] Though less well studied, armies were also important sites for the development of relationships between men. The Indian memoirist Dean Mahomet, for example, joined the household of Anglo-Irish officer Godfrey Evan Baker as an eleven-year-old; Dean Mahomet remained in Baker's circle until Baker's death eighteen years later, even following Baker to Ireland when the latter resigned from the army in disgrace.[22] As we shall see, the controversy in the Fifth LC also revolved, at least in part, around a decades-long friendship between a European officer and an Indian NCO.

Friendships formed within the regiment differed from civilian relationships in several respects. Contemporaries invested these relationships with special importance because discipline and *esprit de corps* were considered essential to a regiment's viability as a fighting unit. As historian Scott Hughes Myerly reminds us, it was by fostering feelings of solidarity within the army that soldiers were transformed into manageable 'tools of war'.[23] Shared combat experience was believed to forge bonds that superseded differences of race and rank; according to one Madras Army officer, 'there is nothing so efficacious in destroying the feelings of mutual prejudice as the sense of mutual dependence'.[24] Still, as a rigidly hierarchical institution the army was an important site for the institutionalisation of racial difference in colonial India. From the late eighteenth century, South Asians were excluded from positions of authority and spatially segregated in camps and cantonments.[25] In the process, men from diverse backgrounds, speaking different languages, were grouped together and categorised as 'Indian', a term that is used in this article to reflect their institutional status rather than their personal identification.[26]

[20]Ann Laura Stoler, 'Tense and Tender Ties: The Politics of Comparison in North American History and (Post) Colonial Studies', *Journal of American History*, 88 (2001), 831.

[21]Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge, 2006), 206–45; Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780–1868* (Basingstoke, 2014), 24–44; Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and Their Critics, 1793–1905* (1980), 2; Sarah Hodges, 'Looting the Lock Hospital in Colonial Madras during the Famine Years of the 1870s', *Social History of Medicine*, 18 (2005), 379–98.

[22]Michael H. Fisher, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India* (Berkeley, CA, 1997), 18–26.

[23]Scott Hughes Myerly, *British Military Spectacle: From the Napoleonic Wars through the Crimea* (Cambridge, MA, 1996), 11.

[24]H. Bevan, *Thirty Years in India: Or, A Soldier's Reminiscences of Native and European Life in the Presidencies, from 1808 to 1838* (2 vols., 1839), I, 89.

[25]David Arnold, 'Race, Place and Bodily Difference in Early Nineteenth-Century India', *Historical Research*, 77 (2004), 262.

[26]Welsch, *The Company's Sword*, 6.

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As Elizabeth Kolsky and Jordanna Bailkin have demonstrated, interpersonal violence was prevalent within the army; indeed, at the heart of the scandal discussed here were allegations of assault.[27] Across the nineteenth century, European officers were repeatedly instructed in General Orders to 'use your best exertions to check … this offensive, and in some cases, inhuman behaviour'.[28] As this article will show, violence coexisted alongside exchanges of information and services that contemporaries described as friendly. Using the evidence generated by the scandal in the Fifth LC, we can glimpse the largely lost encounters that occurred on the parade ground or the threshold of officer's bungalows. For this scandal to make sense, however, it is important first to introduce the EIC's native regiments and the practical and conceptual problems that they posed.

## Regimental relationships

The EIC began forming regular sepoy battalions in the mid-eighteenth century, depending first on local contractors, then on the friendship and familial networks of those already in their service.[29] The composition of these so-called 'native' regiments varied regionally. The EIC had three armies, corresponding to the three administrative divisions of Bengal, Bombay and Madras. Each possessed its own recruiting base. Whereas the Bengal Army consisted primarily of high-caste Hindus from Awadh, Bihar and Rohilkhand, the native regiments of the Madras cavalry, the focus of this article, were originally inherited from the nawab of Arcot and continued to be comprised of Muslim noblemen from the Carnatic during this period.[30]

Historians have advanced different explanations for why these men entered the EIC's service. The phenomenon is not unique to South Asia. Around the world, colonised populations joined the British empire's armed forces to make claims upon the colonial state. In India, access to reliable lines of credit gave the EIC an advantage within the military labour market; they were better positioned to pay wages promptly and could supply pensions to soldiers who grew old in their service.[31] Sepoys could also channel the EIC's influence when needed; in the allied state of Awadh, for example, sepoys from the Bengal Army appealed to the EIC's agent in the capital for legal aid.[32] Finally, the EIC's expanding political influence meant that alternative options were limited. Through the establishment of an asymmetrical alliance system, the EIC had drained many Indian kingdoms of the necessary wealth and even denied them the right to maintain large standing armies. Consequently, serving the EIC was sometimes the only way for military men to retain their status and occupation.[33]

[27]Elizabeth Kolsky, *Colonial Justice in British India* (Cambridge, 2010), 22; Jordanna Bailkin, 'The Boot and the Spleen: When Was Murder Possible in British India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 48 (2006), 463.

[28]George E. Cochrane, *Regulations Applicable to the European Officer in India* (1867), 1095.

[29]T. A. Heathcote, *The Military in British India: The Development of British Land Forces in South Asia, 1600–1947* (Barnsley, 2013), 46.

[30]E. G. Phrythian-Adams, *Madras Soldier* (Madras, 1948), 132–8.

[31]Channa Wickremesekera, *'Best Black Troops in the World': British Perceptions and the Making of the Sepoy, 1746–1805* (New Delhi, 2002), 128–9.

[32]Michael H. Fisher, *A Clash of Cultures: Awadh, the British, and the Mughals* (New Delhi, 1987), 185.

[33]Barbara N. Ramusack, *The Indian Princes and their States* (Cambridge, 2004), 48–50.

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Some parallels can be drawn between the relationships that sepoys formed with European officers in the EIC's armies, and those they might otherwise have cultivated in the armed forces of precolonial states. As in the British military, patronage and personal relationships of obligation were an integral part of the military culture of the Carnatic, the Mughal successor state where most of the Madras native cavalry originated. According to J. F. Richards, the 'basic units' of Mughal society were 'clusters', 'tightly organized and controlled by nobles', which could include kin, unrelated senior officers, servants and cavalry troopers.[34] In the eighteenth century, troops were raised by military contractors (called jemadars) as well as by nobles (mansabdars), but in both cases the system was characterised by loyalty to individual patrons.[35]

What made the EIC distinct, however, was that opportunities for advancement were circumscribed by the racial logic according to which its armies were organised. From 1784, non-Europeans were barred from positions of command.[36] Indians could still become commissioned officers, but only through seniority, after long years of service. Promotion within the EIC's European officer corps operated according to strict seniority, too, but there were differences that disadvantaged Indian officers. Whereas Europeans entered the officer corps directly as cadets, Indian officers had to work their way up from the ranks. Consequently, experienced Indian officers had to defer to new arrivals from Britain, and, to quote soldier and author John Malcolm, could find themselves subject to 'the harshness of a European officer, a boy, perhaps, who has just joined that corps to which he, the native officer, has perhaps belonged for thirty or forty years'.[37] Meanwhile, the British rank and file belonged to a distinct European branch of the service, meaning that, as one memoirist summarised it, 'in no case does a native command a European'.[38]

The EIC also made separate arrangements for sepoys' accommodation and subsistence. Whereas European private soldiers lived in barracks provided by the EIC, Indian soldiers were supplied with materials to build their own huts and prepare their own food.[39] Indian soldiers lived at a distance from the barracks, and from European officers' bungalows. The principle of segregation was informed partly by the desire to insulate sepoys from the unruly European rank and file, but also by medical theories that associated Indian habitations with dirt, disorder and disease.[40] Investing Indian soldiers with control over their own living conditions had the added advantage of reducing trouble and expense for the EIC, while mitigating the possibility of ritual pollution.[41] In short, Indians and Europeans were separated, except for when they met on parade for discipline and drill. As Douglas Peers interprets it, 'once their duty was

[34]J. F. Richards, 'Norms of Comportment among Imperial Mughal Officers', in *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam,* ed. Barbara Daly Metcalf (Berkeley, CA, 1984), 258–9.

[35]Wickremesekera, *'Best Black Troops in the World'*, 50.

[36]*Ibid.*, 114.

[37]John Malcolm, *The Political History of India from 1784 to 1823* (2 vols., 1826), II, 233.

[38]Bevan, *Thirty Years*, 91.

[39]Peers, '"The Habitual Nobility of Being"', 552.

[40]Douglas Peers, 'Imperial Vice: Sex, Drink and the Health of British Troops in North Indian Cantonments, 1800–1858', in *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers c. 1700–1964,* ed. David Killingray and David Omissi (Manchester, 1999), 28, 30.

[41]Christopher Cowell, 'The Kaccha-Pakka Divide: Material, Space and Architecture in the Military Cantonments of British India (1765–1889)', *ABE Journal* 9–10 (2021), para. 24.

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complete, and they returned to their own lines, colonial authority quickly receded, and with it the possibility of making a more significant cultural imprint on the sepoy'.[42]

Given these circumstances, one would assume that a limited role was envisaged for European officers; in fact, the opposite was true. European officers were seen as the vital link in the chain binding sepoys to the EIC, an idea which, as Christina Welsch has shown, officers themselves were keen to exploit.[43] European officers were expensive to maintain but justified this expense on the grounds that Indian regiments could not function without them. The assumption was that Indians responded best to active management and authoritarian styles of rule, and that they required a European officer to mould them into fighting men.[44] A correspondent of *The Oriental Herald* claimed that '[n]o people are so malleable', such that '[w]hatever the Native troops have been, are now, or will be, has depended, and must ever depend, not upon them, but upon ourselves'.[45]

The Company's outsider status made the establishment of this influence even more important. Sepoys had no reason to love a conquering power; if they developed affective ties to the army, it was, so British contemporaries believed, more likely to be because of personal connections formed in the service. During an 1831 parliamentary inquiry, expert witnesses emphasised the importance of European officers in securing sepoys' contingent loyalties.[46] This assumption was not unique to military personnel; Holt Mackenzie (1786–1876), a civilian and EIC administrator, concurred that a sepoy's loyalty 'seems to rest rather upon the personal character and conduct of the individual officers than upon anything that might be called an attachment to the nation generally'.[47] Though pessimistic about sepoys' commitment to the EIC, contemporaries surmised that they might remain loyal to a good officer.

By the 1830s, however, a rash of mutinies and desertions had led contemporaries to suspect that the relationships between sepoys and officers were not what they should be. Seema Alavi has attributed this 'crisis of control' in the 1820s to military retrenchments and tensions surrounding caste, the latter precipitated by the EIC's long tradition of promoting high-caste identity among its recruits.[48] As Douglas Peers demonstrated, the early reversals of the First Anglo-Burmese War (1824–6), coupled with the bloody repression of a mutiny at Barrackpur (1824), prompted fevered speculation about the condition of the army. While the preponderance of high-caste recruits was advanced as one problem, the attenuation of the bonds between officer and sepoy was identified as another.[49] History was invoked to support this interpretation. One anonymous pamphleteer recalled the role that earlier generations of sepoys played in the conquest of Bengal, arguing that 'their descendants of the present day, would follow with unabated ardour, and undeteriorated qualities, any commander who

[42]Peers, 'Imperial Vice', 32.

[43]Welsch, *The Company's Sword*, 6.

[44]Wickremesekera, *'Best Black Troops in the World'*, 166–8.

[45]'Considerations on the Present State of the Native Army by an Indian Officer', *Oriental Herald,* 6 (1825), 67.

[46]'Minutes of Evidence', in Villiers, *Select Committee Report*, V, 1, 155.

[47]*Ibid.*, 165.

[48]Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India 1770–1830,* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 90–91.

[49]Peers, '"That Habitual Nobility of Being"', 547.

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understood their character, respected their prejudices, or regarded their affections'.[50] Historical precedent suggested that European officers could lead sepoys to victory; if they failed, it was because they had failed in their duty as officers.

Conciliation formed an important part of that duty. British officers were repeatedly instructed to cultivate good relations with their Indian counterparts. In one directive published to the army, the EIC's directors emphasised 'the absolute necessity that must ever exist of conciliating the minds of the native officers and soldiers, and particularly of the former, by the most mild and considerate treatment'.[51] While sepoys had good reasons for enlisting in the EIC's armies, military authorities understood that to secure a sepoy's allegiance, they had to treat him well and compensate him accordingly. Deeply embedded theories of Asiatic despotism predisposed some British officers to see Indians as naturally suited to the army's hierarchical structures, but recurring mutinies demonstrated that sepoys' compliance could not be taken for granted.[52] As one officer described it, 'the government has at all times felt convinced that its existence depended upon the excellence of the army, and its fidelity to the state, and has therefore adopted every measure which was likely to lead to its improvement, or to conciliate the affections of its native soldiery'.[53] From the beginning, then, the tension between conciliation and imperial domination was built into the EIC's military culture; events like the mutiny at Barrackpur simply brought the problem to the forefront of public consciousness.

Officers in the 1830s were more likely to comment on change than continuity, however; from their perspective, the early nineteenth-century army was very different from what had gone before. Bureaucratisation, they complained, had made it harder to cultivate vertical attachments within the regiment. In the late eighteenth century, European officers were generally able to secure professional advancement for their friends; when Godfrey Evan Baker was given command of a sepoy battalion in 1781, for example, he used his position to make his personal servant Dean Mahomet an NCO in the Bengal Army.[54] Over time, however, 'the eighteenth-century tradition of self-contained and self-regulated regiments', to quote Douglas Peers, 'yielded to the onslaught of nineteenth-century values which placed great weight on order and accountability'.[55] By the 1830s, promotion and punishment were subject to greater oversight than in the past.

It is difficult to know for sure how this change affected individual relationships, but some officers certainly maintained that the limits placed on their discretionary judgement undermined their authority within the regiment. In his statement to the parliamentary committee as part of the inquiry of 1831, Captain Turner Macan (1792–1836) asserted that when a commanding officer 'possessed the power of rewarding merit, he had better means of attaching the natives to him than he has at present'.[56]

[50]James Caulfield, *Observations on our Indian Administration, Civil and Military* (1832), 117–18.

[51]Cochrane, *Regulations Applicable to the European Officer in India*, 199–200.

[52]On theories of oriental despotism, see P. J. Marshall, 'Taming the Exotic: The British and India in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', in *Exoticism in the Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Rousseau and Roy Porter (Manchester, 1990), 56.

[53]Adam White, *Considerations on the State of British India* (1822), 353.

[54]Fisher, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet*, 23.

[55]Peers, '"The Habitual Nobility of Being"', 557.

[56]'Minutes of Evidence', in Villiers, *Select Committee Report,* V, 153.

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Reflecting on this pattern of bureaucratisation from the vantage point of the 1860s, Madras Army officer Thomas Seaton concluded that 'it was from motives of humanity and kindly feeling towards the sepoy, that the power of commanding officers was curtailed', but that 'government authorities never reflected on the change this might operate in the feelings and conduct of the sepoy towards his officer', who had, in Seaton's words, been reduced to 'mere nonentit[y]'.[57] Within the EIC itself, then, there was disagreement about what the relationship between officer and sepoy should look like, and whether an officer's influence depended on his personal qualities and good conduct, or on his patronage.

Another point of dispute in the early nineteenth century was the extent to which Indian officers were essential to the maintenance of military discipline, or a threat to it. 'A Madras Officer', writing to the *Calcutta Journal* in 1822, claimed that because Indian troops lived separately from Europeans, it was 'absolutely necessary that there should be some class of men who, being of the same castes as the men, can mingle with them at all times', but whose status as commissioned officers gave them a stake in upholding the status quo.[58] Still, others doubted whether Indian officers made reliable intermediaries. In a letter to the *Asiatic Journal* in 1821, anonymous contributor Carnaticus described Indian officers as 'entirely unfit for the responsibility or duties that generally attach to the designation of officers' owing to their advanced age. Carnaticus admitted that commissions for Indian officers provided a sop for frustrated ambition by 'holding out, to the Native army at large, some little opening of advancement'. Still, Indian officers as a group were, he thought, dangerous and untrustworthy; the letter alluded to 'plots and defections' at Travancore, Java and Nagpur that originated 'not from any provocations or wrong, on our parts, but from their hearts – their jealousy and distaste of us'.[59] Carnaticus identified a vicious cycle. British imperial dominance meant limited opportunities for Indian officers, which in turn threatened to breed resentments; yet it was precisely these resentments (real or imagined) that deterred some European officers from investing their Indian counterparts with greater responsibilities.

Not everyone believed that Indian and European officers were predestined to come into conflict. Military memoirist Major Henry Bevan (Madras Native Infantry, 1808–38) felt that 'jealousy between native and European officers has been greatly exaggerated'. Referring to the convention, 'frequently asserted', 'that the condition of the native officers is so very anomalous that it must of necessity lead to the agitation of awkward questions of precedence', Bevan claimed that 'I have not heard of any such being mooted', though he admitted that 'the constitution of native officers is not unlikely to lead to such discussions'. Bevan conceded that European and Indian officers did not socialise much but argued that religious difference was the main barrier to intimacy: 'Religious prejudices, on the part of natives, have more effect in keeping up this distinction than the aristocratic reluctance of English officers to mix with persons who have risen from the ranks.' Still, on the basis of 'personal experience', Bevan argued 'that the native officers are anxious to do all in their power to contribute to the comfort of their

[57]Thomas Seaton, *From Cadet to Colonel: The Record of a Life of Active Service* (2 vols., 1866), II, 72.
[58]A Madras Officer, 'Native Army of the Coast', *Calcutta Journal*, 1 (1822), 33–4.
[59]Carnaticus, 'General View of our Indian Army', *Calcutta Journal*, 5 (1821), 275.

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European commander'.[60] Bevan believed that British and Indian officers could coexist harmoniously, but his views were based on acts of kindness performed by Indians subordinate to him in rank; he wrote from a position of privilege, not as one whose social and professional horizons were circumscribed by race, rank and religion.

A different perspective is provided by a seditious pamphlet, authored by a regimental *munshi* (writer or secretary) and circulated in Madras Army cantonments at Secunderabad, Jaulna and Arcot in the 1830s. The pamphlet was composed in response to tracts distributed to the native cavalry by Christian missionaries in 1833. The author's goal was to defend the Muslim faith by refuting the missionaries' claims; the substance of the argument was that Christians did not practise what they preached.[61] One of the topics discussed was the impossibility of friendship between Europeans and Indians in the army. The anonymous author shared Bevan's opinion that religious differences precluded relationships of trust; the pamphlet declared that 'no dependence is to be placed on the word and no belief in their (the English) friendship according to the proverb there is no dependence to be placed on the promises of the kafirs and faithless ones'. Yet, the text also identified a further source of complaint, namely, that Indians who performed favours for Europeans were not repaid in kind: 'whether it be the powerful friend or the servant, what is the reward of either when their (the English) designs are fully accomplished it is thus "we do not know you"'.[62] To illustrate, the text recounted the story of a naik (Indian NCO) who reported an act of fraud, 'and although this information was correct and supported by many witnesses after enquiry it was decided that the naik was a mischiefmaker and he was punished and discharged the service'.[63] According to the text, a man might be rewarded for his performance on the battlefield, but 'in any other case the only reward of fidelity is punishment'.[64]

This kind of evidence about Indian attitudes to British officers is rare for this period. The pamphlet was copied by hand and circulated in small numbers; the only reason it survives is because it was deemed seditious, reported, investigated and recorded in official proceedings. Though filtered through the lens of the EIC's own priorities, disciplinary records still provide the best source for how the relationships between Indian and British officers operated in practice.

The adjudication of honour crimes, in particular, illuminates the tensions that sometimes surfaced in the army. 'Conduct unbecoming an officer and gentleman' was the most common charge levelled against officers during this period, but remained undefined, functioning as a flexible device for disciplining officers who contravened an often-unspoken code. Courts martial were accorded this discretion because of the importance of honour within the officer corps, and the difficulty of predicting the many different ways in which it might be breached.[65] In the nineteenth century, officers were expected to adhere to social codes that reflected military hierarchies as well

[60]Bevan, *Thirty Years*, 91.

[61]Papers regarding a seditious pamphlet written in Hindustani by a *munshi* of the 28th Madras Native Infantry and distributed to the Muslim inhabitants of Secunderabad, London, Asia, Pacific, and Africa Collections (APAC), British Library (BL), Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/1550/62018, 19–20.

[62]*Ibid.*, 60.

[63]*Ibid.*, 61.

[64]*Ibid.*, 62.

[65]Gilbert, 'Law and Honour', 76.

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as their own gentlemanly status; an officer was supposed to be loyal to the commander, was discouraged from consorting with the rank and file and was regarded as belonging to a brotherhood of officers who were empowered to punish him if he stepped out of line.[66] The documentation generated by these cases can help us understand how hierarchies of race and rank were enacted and upheld in the armies, as well as highlighting when and why they were breached.

Alongside official proceedings (always recorded but unevenly preserved) were court martial narratives penned by interested parties. These texts comprised a distinctive genre wherein pamphleteers excerpted the transcript of a court martial but framed it as part of a longer story accompanied by critical commentary. Court martial narratives made heavy use of official documents to appear objective. Yet, the very purpose of these narratives was usually to contest the outcome of a trial by furnishing information that the author claimed had been omitted from official proceedings.[67] Although these texts promise to expose the reality behind the scenes, their claims can never be taken at face value. As stories intended to convince, however, court martial narratives are indicative of broader discourses; after all, they were designed to appeal to public opinion. By comparing them with official records and rival narratives, we can elucidate contemporary reactions to the scandals that sometimes erupted in the cantonment, even if the facts of the case remain elusive. Whereas many court martial narratives relate to seemingly trivial questions of precedence, others, including the scandal analysed here, furnish rare glimpses of a world of interactions. Through them, we can begin to understand the relationships that developed within the cantonment.

## The 'Evil Feeling' in the Fifth Light Cavalry

Major John Watkins warned military authorities that within the army, his dismissal would be interpreted as a cautionary tale. The moral of the story, as Watkins told it, was clear. A case that was ostensibly about rumours of sodomy was really about relationships. Each time that he and Havildar Major Yusuf Khan discussed Colonel Edward Lloyd Smythe's alleged sodomy, Watkins had a choice to make, even if he was unaware of it at the time. Either Watkins could remain silent and preserve Yusuf Khan's confidence, or he could report the conversations to Smythe, his brother officer. Consciously or not, Watkins chose Yusuf Khan over Smythe. In so doing, Watkins argued, he had taken military authorities at their word. For, Watkins observed, 'unrestrained and familiar intercourse with the native soldier is inculcated as a duty, and enforced by reiterated orders, on the officers of the Indian army', and yet, 'will the fate your memorialist's attempt to treat a native as a friend has drawn on him, be an incentive to others to seek their intimacy?'[68] For Watkins, the scandal in the Fifth LC exposed the hollowness of the EIC's commitment to conciliation; perhaps paradoxically, however, the scandal also reveals just how closely connected European officers could become to the Indians under their command.

[66]*Ibid.*, 75.

[67]Ala Alryyes, 'War at a Distance: Court-Martial Narratives in the Eighteenth Century', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41 (2008), 532.

[68]Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xliv.

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The rumours that led to John Watkins's dismissal first emerged while Watkins himself was on furlough. The source appears to have been a trooper named Lal Mahomed. In May 1827, Lal Mahomed shot Smythe (then his commanding officer), briefly evaded capture and then was shot himself. Smythe survived; Lal Mahomed did not. Several different motives for the attempted assassination were canvassed by soldiers on site. The one that stuck was that Smythe had attempted sodomy. As multiple Indian officers later testified, after shooting Smythe the trooper had shouted to his comrades to '*live happy, as he had shot the great sodomite*'. The rumour prompted magisterial and police inquiries as well as a private investigation by the adjutant. Despite a petition from Lal Mahomed's sister and a formal complaint lodged by his brother, investigations were eventually dropped due to a lack of evidence.[69]

Watkins became involved in the case after assuming command of the regiment in the summer of 1829. First, Watkins was presented with a petition from the Indian officers of the Fifth LC requesting Smythe's return. When Watkins asked Yusuf Khan (who delivered the petition) to explain why the men preferred Smythe, the havildar major purportedly replied that the petitioners were sodomites. Then, in May 1832, Watkins received another address, this time from an Indian officer (a jemadar) protesting his supersession by a man junior to him; the jemadar, too, alluded to acts of sodomy by Smythe, and attributed unrest in the regiment to the intrigues of Ahmed Khan (a subadar or senior Indian officer, and Smythe's supposed favourite). The jemadar's complaint was investigated by a court of inquiry, and, upon the court's recommendation, Subadar Ahmed Khan was tried for insubordination.[70] The subadar was acquitted, but during the trial insinuations of sodomy entered the official record and became impossible to ignore.[71]

Another court of inquiry was assembled to investigate. The court considered complaints issued by twenty-two persons between ages eleven and thirty-eight involving twenty-nine different acts of sodomy or attempted sodomy over a period of twenty-five years. On the basis of the court's findings, Smythe was tried at Vizagapatam on 29 July 1833. According to military law, Smythe could only face one charge at a time. A single allegation was selected: that on 27 June 1817, Smythe had assaulted and sodomised Trooper Peer Khan.[72] The official charge was buggery (anal penetration). Buggery had been a capital offence in England since the sixteenth century. Anything less than actual penetration was prosecuted as a misdemeanour, usually assault (regardless of consent). Attempted sodomy was the more common charge, being less specific and easier to prove.[73] Trying Smythe for buggery was risky, and he was acquitted.

[69]For this paragraph, see *ibid*., i–ii.

[70]'Military Courts-Martial in India', *Alexander's East India and Colonial Magazine*, 8 (1823), 597.

[71]For this paragraph, see Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, iv; European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, London, APAC, BL, Records of the Military Department, IOR/L/MIL/5, fos. 239–40.

[72]E. L. Smythe, *Two Letters of Appeal Addressed by Lieut.-Colonel E. L. Smythe, of the Eighth Regiment of Madras Light Cavalry, to Lt.-Gen. the Right Hon. Sir Fredk. Adam, KCB, Governor-in-Council of Fort St George, on the Proceedings against Him on the Part of Lt.-Gen. the Hon. Sir Robt. Wlm. O'Callaghan, KCB, Commander-in-Chief of the Army of Fort St George, on Accusations of a Revolting Nature Offered against Him by Major John Watkins of the Fifth Regiment of Madras Light Cavalry* (1834), London, University College London Special Collections, Hume Tracts, https://jstor.org/stable/60209517, 1–2.

[73]A. D. Harvey, 'Prosecutions for Sodomy in England at the Beginning of the Nineteenth Century', *Historical Journal*, 21 (1976), 941.

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For Smythe, however, the trial was just the beginning of the campaign to clear his name. Smythe published a pamphlet in which he identified three injustices that had impeded his defence: the remote location of the trial; the mistreatment of witnesses; and the withholding of important documents.[74] Smythe also unsuccessfully prosecuted Colonel Thomas Henry Somerset Conway, adjutant general of the Madras Army, for scandalous and infamous conduct for suggesting to a European officer that the allegations were true.[75] Smythe's primary target, however, was Major John Watkins, the prosecutor at his court martial.

Smythe charged Watkins with conduct unbecoming an officer and a gentleman in three instances. First, for having 'surreptitiously held private conversations, deeply aspersing my character, with Troop Havildar-Major Yoosoof Khan, of the Fifth Regiment of Light Cavalry, and making no report to me thereof'. Second, for 'withholding from me all information touching infamous reports regarding me, communicated to him by the said Troop Havildar-Major Yoosoof Khan, as existing in the Regiment'. Finally, for 'by thus listening, without taking any further steps, to the said Troop Havildar-Major Yoosoof Khan, encouraging him to defame my character'.[76] Watkins was found guilty and dismissed from the service.

Next, Smythe attempted to clear the cavalry of hostile forces. When Smythe wrote to the adjutant general demanding the ignominious dismissal of the Indian soldiers whom he believed had been implicated in the scandal, however, his request was refused. The commander-in-chief believed that it was wrong to remove three Indian officers and nineteen Indian NCOs and sepoys on the basis of nothing but hearsay. If there were any substance to Smythe's complaint, the commander-in-chief reminded him, Smythe had, after all, the option of bringing the charges to court.[77]

Still, the governor general and his council were uneasy about 'the Evil Feeling avowedly Existing among the Native Ranks of the 5th Light cavalry'.[78] No obvious solution presented itself. Pensioning them all off would be expensive; dispersing the men to other regiments merely presented 'the risque of spreading Discord instead of extinguishing it'.[79] Whatever action they took threatened to resurrect the controversy, 'the Discussion of which is strictly forbidden'.[80] In his initial report, the brigadier general recommended 'the removal from the service of every man in any way implicated in the late Proceedings to whatever party he may belong', declaring that 'there can be no peace or quiet until this is effected'.[81] When the council followed up a year later, however, the brigadier general had changed his mind, concluding that 'the revival at this late period of an unpleasant subject which has so long been allowed to remain dormant could be productive of no good'.[82] Ultimately, the military department determined to

[74]Smythe, *Two Letters*, 31.

[75]'Court Martial', *Naval & Military Gazette and Weekly Chronicle of the United Service*, 28 Feb. 1835, 5.

[76]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 214.

[77]Case of Lieut. Col. E. L. Smythe of the Cavalry, London, APAC, BL, Board's Collections, IOR/F/4/1631/65326, 19.

[78]*Ibid.*, 21.

[79]*Ibid.*

[80]*Ibid.*, 22.

[81]*Ibid.*, 59.

[82]*Ibid.*

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pension off those who, whether from injury or long service, were eligible for retirement. This included two witnesses from the original court of inquiry: Jemadar Ismael Khan (a confidant of Watkins) and Jemadar Hussein Khan (who was singled out as 'having been deeply engaged in the late unfortunate disputes').[83]

Meanwhile, Watkins printed his own petition. His defence hinged on the fact that the rumours about Smythe were widely known. The implications of this were threefold. First, that it would have made no sense for Watkins to report Yusuf Khan since the havildar major was merely repeating what others were already saying.[84] Second, that it was absurd to hold Watkins accountable for conversations with Yusuf Khan when Yusuf Khan was known to have exchanged words to the same effect with other officers.[85] Finally, that there was no need to report the rumour to Smythe since it was impossible that Smythe was not already aware of it.[86] The rumour, according to Watkins, had polluted the very atmosphere of the regiment.[87]

Contemporaries disagreed about what had really happened in the Fifth LC. Smythe insisted that the charges were spurious, and publicly at least members of colonial society appear to have accepted his claim; press coverage of Lal Mahomed's assassination attempt dismissed the trooper as 'deranged'.[88] A seditious pamphlet that circulated at Secunderabad, Jaulna and Arcot, however, suggests that Indian military personnel may have viewed the scandal differently. According to extracts excerpted by a court of inquiry, 'an Englishman who was notorious through the world for sodomy, in proof of which there were a thousand witnesses – with the help of 24 false witnesses denied being guilty before their (the English) Court – out of regard to one of their own race, and from indulgence he was found guiltless'.[89] Names were deliberately omitted from the pamphlet, making it difficult to ascertain whether it refers to Smythe, but a *munshi* from the Fifth LC was certainly involved in its preparation.[90] Whether the Indian population of the cantonment interpreted Smythe's acquittal as evidence of white solidarity at work is therefore plausible but unconfirmed. Lal Mahomed's family clearly believed that Smythe was guilty. His sister, Hamida Bai, declared that Smythe's repeated harassment had made her brother 'careless of his life'.[91] Lal Mahomed's brother, Sheikh Ahmed, was so convinced of Smythe's guilt that he made a formal complaint, even though, as he later testified, his commanding officer warned him 'that if I did so, he would get me hanged'.[92]

As this alleged intimidation suggests, uncertainty about the case is compounded by our awareness of the inequalities that shaped these inquiries and their documentation. A havildar major testified at Smythe's general court martial that he had witnessed

[83] *Ibid.*, 65, 67.
[84] Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xli.
[85] *Ibid.*, xxxvi.
[86] *Ibid.*, viii.
[87] *Ibid.*, xxxviii.
[88] 'Asiatic Intelligence – Madras'. Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies, 24 (1827), 610.
[89] Papers regarding a seditious pamphlet, 76.
[90] *Ibid.*, 45–6.
[91] Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, 12.
[92] *Ibid.*, 20.

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a subadar in his troop accuse a sepoy of sodomy with Smythe. The havildar major swore that he had testified to this effect before a prior regimental court martial 'but that neither the Court, nor the Conducting Officer, paid the least attention to him; and, therefore, he could not say if his evidence was recorded'. To explain this, the havildar major speculated that 'I think it was in the interest of all the European and Native Officers in the Regiment, to conceal the business of Sodomy which was going on.' Smythe countered that 'to believe this Havildar's story, it is necessary to reject the Official documents taken at the time, and the signatures on Oath of the Subadar President, the Interpreter, and Conducting Officer'.[93] For Smythe, judicial protocols made such an omission impossible. Yet, a signature on a piece of paper is not a guarantor of truth; it is precisely when documents come to stand for truth that the conditions are created for forgery and fraud, as historian Bhavani Raman has shown in the context of the colonial revenue office.[94] Transcripts are the best sources we have for what occurred in court, but they cannot show what was happening behind the scenes. Smythe himself argued that in advance of Watkins's trial, Watkins tried to intimidate prospective witnesses by punishing a subadar and a European sergeant who had previously testified in Smythe's favour during the earlier sodomy trial.[95] Surviving evidence thus suggests the distinct possibility that witnesses were ignored or silenced.

The fact that the case revolved around allegations of sodomy adds an additional layer of complexity. The scandal adheres to the pattern of nineteenth-century British sodomy trials wherein the accusers were normally of lower social and economic standing than the accused.[96] Their status may have made the accusers more available for sex and vulnerable to unwanted advances, but contemporaries were always worried about the possibility of extortion. Because sodomy was regarded as an 'unnatural' crime, accusations of sodomy could destroy a man's reputation; they were also difficult to disprove. Manuals on military law commonly cited Blackstone's principle: that 'it is an offence of so dark a nature, so easily charged, and the negative so difficult to be proved, that the accusation should be clearly made out; for if false, it deserves a punishment inferior only to that of the crime itself'.[97] Accusations of sodomy against figures of authority were therefore received with scepticism. As H. G. Cocks has shown in his study of sodomy prosecutions in nineteenth-century Britain, 'common assumptions about sodomites … tended to protect the respectable from overt suspicion'; sodomy was so closely connected with depravity in nineteenth-century discourse that contemporaries believed it would reveal itself in other ways.[98] A gentleman of good reputation was therefore liable to receive the benefit of the doubt.

In a colonial context, race also factored into sodomy allegations. Analyses of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century cases by Anjali Arondekar and Kate Imy have shown how resistant military authorities were to publicly charging European officers

[93]Smythe, *Two Letters*, 2–3.

[94]Bhavani Raman, *Document Raj: Writings and Scribes in Early Colonial South India* (Chicago, 2012), 3.

[95]Smythe, *Two Letters*, iv, 4.

[96]Charles Upchurch, *Before Wilde: Sex Between Men in Britain's Age of Reform* (Berkeley, CA, 2009), 95–6.

[97]William Hough, *Precedents in Military Law* (1855), 467; Vans Kennedy, *Practical Remarks on the Proceedings of General Courts Martial* (1825), 201.

[98]H. G. Cocks, *Nameless Offences: Speaking of Male Homosexual Desire in Nineteenth-Century England* (2003), 118–19.

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with sodomy.[99] To quote Imy, 'while the colonial state regarded colonized subjects as "habitual sodomites" naturally inclined toward "pederasty," Europeans had their so-called "tendencies" monitored, hidden, silenced, and obscured'.[100] Smythe's fellow officers were certainly unwilling to admit the possibility that the allegations of sodomy were true. As Watkins phrased it, 'he could not bring himself to suppose a brother officer capable of such fearful, such diabolical conduct'.[101] A public expression of doubt would have undermined the racial hierarchies on which the EIC's empire was theoretically predicated.

Contemporary ideas about sodomy may have informed the case in other ways. In the nineteenth century, sodomy was a crime regardless of consent, thereby restricting whether and how same-sex desire was expressed publicly. Lal Mahomed's siblings claimed that their brother was harassed by Smythe, but the relationships between Smythe and other Indians under his command were described differently; one Indian officer referred to Mahomed Nasser, a rough rider, as Smythe's 'beloved'.[102] The prospect of consenting sexual relations between men was never envisaged by the British officers active in this controversy, nor by the Anglo-Indian newspapers that commented on it. Still, given the incentives for remaining silent, and the penalties for speaking out, we can never be certain about the intimate relationships that may have existed within the cantonment, nor the degree of consent that may have characterised them. The military justice archive, by its very nature, limits what we can know. As Anjali Arondekar and Indrani Chatterjee have argued, historians who attempt to recover histories of same-sex desire from official records are at risk of reinscribing colonial categories that do not align with the meanings invested in these acts by the actors in question.[103] The particularly charged nature of sodomy trials, and the complex web of assumptions surrounding them, make it extremely difficult to draw firm conclusions about what was happening in the Fifth LC.

On the surface, then, the scandal in the Fifth LC raises more questions than it answers. The nature of the alleged abuses rendered the case highly emotive in a context where sodomy was classified as 'unnatural'; the fact that these acts occurred in secret made it difficult for contemporaries to ascertain what really happened. Surviving sources contradict one another; Smythe described an insidious conspiracy against him, while Watkins tried to paint a different picture of his relationship to Yusuf Khan, as we shall see. Official records and court transcripts, meanwhile, reflect the perspectives of the military authorities who produced them; questions were raised even at the time about testimony that may have been omitted. There is therefore much that we cannot know about events in the Fifth LC. There are, however, points of consensus within the surviving evidence that can tell us something about life in the cantonment.

[99] Anjali Arondekar, *For the Record: On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India* (Durham, NC, 2009), 82; Kate Imy, 'Kidnapping and a "Confirmed Sodomite": An Intimate Enemy on the Northwest Frontier of India, 1915–1925', *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 39–40.

[100] Kate Imy, 'Transactions: Sex, Power, and Resistance in Colonial South and Southeast Asia', in *The Routledge Companion to Sexuality and Colonialism*, ed. Chelsea Shields and Dagmar Herzog (Abingdon, 2021), 85.

[101] Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, x.

[102] European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 252.

[103] Arondekar, *For the Record*, 3; Indrani Chatterjee, 'When "Sexuality" Floated Free of Histories in South Asia', *Journal of Asian Studies*, 71 (2012), 947, 957.

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## Making sense of scandal

One striking feature of the case is what it reveals about the extent of communication between officers' bungalows and native lines. The whole trial turned on a series of conversations between a British officer and an Indian NCO. Admittedly, Watkins and Yusuf Khan had a personal history, which is how Watkins justified the sensitive nature of their conversations. 'Havildar Major Esoph Khan had been my servant from boyhood until he became a soldier when I left India in 1824', Watkins explained. 'It will not therefore I trust excite surprise, that this man although a non commissioned officer, should have been permitted a greater latitude in conversing with me, than might be either correct, or defensible, under other circumstances.'[104] Yet, Watkins also testified to having spoken 'upon several occasions' to other Indian officers about the rumours of sodomy, including Jemadar Roshan Beg, a man who was 'Native Adjutant of the Regiment during the time I commanded it, and possessed my confidence',[105] and Jemadar Ismael Khan, who was later pensioned off at Smythe's instigation.[106] Yusuf Khan, too, was having the same conversation with other European officers, as he later testified.[107] Rumours about Smythe circulated widely: 'they were known to every one, European and native, in the regiment'.[108]

British and Indian officers were doing more than just gossiping; they were also forming factions. Both Watkins and Smythe referenced 'parties': men united by shared agendas. According to Watkins's narrative, one of the catalysts for Smythe's court martial was that 'a party were determined to get Colonel Smythe back to the Corps'.[109] Smythe, meanwhile, believed that there was a conspiracy against him, orchestrated by Watkins, but involving more than a dozen sepoys and officers. Smythe collected declarations from fifty persons who, in his words, 'voluntarily came forward to state, that they had been tampered with by men belonging to a particular party, to induce them to join in the plot then hatching against me'.[110] One of the key witnesses at Smythe's trial was the European quartermaster sergeant of the regiment, who testified, according to Smythe, 'that he was explicitly asked by a Native Officer, to join in a plan *to put down my friends*'.[111] These 'friends' were Smythe's supporters: the Indian officers who petitioned for his return, but also, 'my friends at Jaulnah', who, 'when the business was first agitated ... sought every information that could throw any light on it'.[112] Smythe believed that these friends were punished for coming to his aid, becoming collateral damage to Watkins's vendetta. 'A Havildar who had interested himself greatly on my side, was accused, by Major Watkins, of an attempt to tamper with his Witnesses; and was therefore placed in arrest', Smythe complained.[113] The treatment of his Indian

[104]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 239.
[105]*Ibid.*, fo. 223.
[106]*Ibid.*, fo. 224.
[107]*Ibid.*, fo. 230.
[108]Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xliv.
[109]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 239.
[110]Smythe, *Two Letters*, iii.
[111]*Ibid.*, iv.
[112]*Ibid.*, 3.
[113]*Ibid.*

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witnesses was one of Smythe's primary grievances: Subadar Ahmed Khan was kept in jail four months after his acquittal, Havildar Shaik Ahmed was kept eighteen months in confinement without inquiry, and after the court martial was decided in Smythe's favour, one of his key witnesses, Subadar Abdul Ghusur, was tried for perjury.[114]

The support of these men had, however, helped legitimise Smythe's cause by demonstrating his popularity within the regiment. The press argued that it was Smythe, not Watkins, who enjoyed the support of Indian officers and sepoys, and that it was because of the men's preference for Smythe that Watkins had conjured up the scandal in the first place. *Alexander's East India Magazine* emphasised that 'it was against this Officer [Watkins] that the men memorialised, and all but mutinied, in 1831′, because of 'the feeling, against the Major on the part of some men, who were anxious for the return of Colonel Smythe'.[115] Smythe, too, contended that 'His [Watkins's] object at the time when the conspiracy was concocted was to prevent my return to the Regiment … as it was well known the Prisoner was to be superceded in a Command he had shewn himself unfit to hold'.[116] In the same way that Indian petitions were mobilised in factional disputes among civilian officials in mid-eighteenth-century Bengal, as historian Robert Travers has shown, they were also used by nineteenth-century army officers.[117] Discontent among Indian officers reflected ill on the European officer responsible for managing them, which meant that Indian officers had the leverage necessary to become active agents within the politics of the cantonment. Most of the Indian officers of the Fifth LC appear to have been involved in the Smythe–Watkins controversy in some capacity. Subadar Mahomed Usman was the exception that proves the rule, since Major Highmoor, Watkins's successor at the Fifth LC, supported the subadar's request for early retirement because 'he has kept clear of party spirit'.[118]

Albert Henry Andrew Hervey, who served in the Madras Army in the 1830s, described (and condemned) this 'party-spirit' in his memoirs.[119] 'European officers', he complained, 'always have their "*pet-men*" and favourites', who 'are constantly to be seen at their quarters, tale-bearing, lying, and slandering, to a most shameful degree; shameful not only in the individual guilty of such mean conduct, but doubly so in the officer encouraging it'.[120] While in theory Indian officers were responsible for apprising their commanding officer of developments in the native lines, Hervey felt that this practice, if pursued too zealously, could produce 'all manner of heart-burnings, bickerings, false reports, and disputes'.[121] Hervey discouraged his military readers from forming personal affinities that might bias them in favour of specific individuals, emphasising the danger of allowing Indian officers to acquire undue authority. 'Is it not

[114]*Ibid.*, 33.

[115]'Military Courts-Martial in India', 508.

[116]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 250.

[117]Robert Travers, 'Indian Petitioning and Colonial State-Formation in Eighteenth-Century Bengal', *Modern Asian Studies*, 53 (2019), 107.

[118]Case of Lieut. Col. E. L. Smythe of the Cavalry, 70.

[119]Albert Henry Andrew Hervey, *Ten Years in India: Or, The Life of a Young Officer* (3 vols., 1850), I, 145.

[120]*Ibid.*, 144.

[121]*Ibid.*, 145.

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the case in nine out of ten, when promotions are required to be made, that the company officers sends for *his* native officer and consults him',[122] Hervey asked, and 'how many an undeserving man obtains his promotion by the partiality and favouritism of the officer, or of those in whom that officer places so much undue confidence?'[123] An anonymous soldier, writing to the *Calcutta Journal*, agreed that 'when a Native Officer was to be selected from each corps, for promotion as Subadar-Major ... there were men to advocate the supercession of six or seven *unexceptionable* Officers for the aggrandizement of a *pet*'.[124]

There is an apparent paradox here; Indian officers are depicted as animals under British control ('pets') but are also accused of manipulating their purported 'masters'. This dehumanising rhetoric reinforces racist hierarchies by suggesting that whatever influence or authority Indians might acquire was unnatural and could only be explained by the weakness, sentimentality and irrational attachments formed by their European officers. By dismissing Indian officers as 'pets', commentators denied that Indian officers could legitimately influence their European counterparts on the basis of knowledge, experience or relationships of trust. At the same time, this derogatory language belies the fact that vertical relationships prevailed throughout the army, as in most domains of nineteenth-century life. As historian Harold Perkin phrased it, 'the relationship of patronage was the module of which the social structure was built'.[125] Some commentators, however, were clearly uncomfortable with the idea of British and Indian officers being bound together in this kind of relationship of obligation.

Precisely because of the existence of these racial hierarchies, however, cross-cultural relationships were both necessary and mutually advantageous for European and Indian officers alike. European officers relied on Indian officers to bridge the distance between the native lines and officers' bungalows and looked to them for both information and support in managing sepoys. Meanwhile, because so many of the vicissitudes of military life depended on character references and recommendations, Indian officers had good reason to curry favour with European officers who could use their credit and connections as well as their seniority within the service to benefit their friends. For example, while promotion within the EIC's armies was supposed to occur according to principles of strict seniority, a bad reputation was considered sufficient cause for breaking with this convention; career advancement therefore depended on the goodwill of one's officers.[126] Likewise, the support of a European officer could become critical in moments of crisis. Historians have demonstrated the importance of discretion within the British military justice system, showing that the 'old offender' was punished with harsh sentences, whereas soldiers capable of obtaining good testimonials were more likely to be treated mercifully.[127] The patronage of

[122]*Ibid.*, 146.
[123]*Ibid.*, 148.
[124]A Soldier, 'A Soldier's Story', *Calcutta Journal*, 5 (1819), 242–3.
[125]Perkin, *The Origins of Modern English Society*, 50.
[126]Villiers, *Report from the Select Committee*, V, 13.
[127]G. A. Steppler, 'British Military Law, Discipline, and the Conduct of Regimental Courts Martial in the Later Eighteenth Century', *English Historical Review*, 102 (1987), 878.

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senior officers therefore acted as insurance against adversity as well as a mechanism for advancement.

Unwittingly, this exchange of favours could connect Indian soldiers to European officers in problematic ways. As evidence that Smythe's mind was 'warped' and his 'judgement blinded' by his outrage at the sodomy charges, Watkins pointed out that:

> he [Smythe] swore, that from his knowledge of the character of Jemadar Fyze Uddeen he did not believe him worthy of credence, even on his oath; and yet this native officer was promoted by the recommendation of Lieutenant Colonel Smythe, and possesses a written testimonial under that officers signature that he had always borne the highest character.[128]

Yusuf Khan, too, had received a character reference from Smythe. Yusuf Khan had once assisted Smythe after the colonel fell off his horse; when Yusuf Khan learned that Smythe was leaving the regiment, the havildar major asked Smythe for a recommendation for promotion, which he received, along with several pieces of nankeen (a cotton fabric commonly used for making trousers). Watkins was aware that Yusuf Khan had received this reference, which, Smythe argued, should have alerted Watkins to Yusuf Khan's deceit: 'if this informant believed what he had so often repeated as current rumours in the Regiment surely I was the last person he as an honest Man should have gone to for a character'.[129] Yet, Yusuf Khan's personal opinion of Smythe was irrelevant in this context. Whatever Yusuf Khan thought about the allegations of sodomy, he had little choice but to cultivate Smythe's good opinion if he wanted to advance in the service; his actions were predetermined by the army's hierarchical structures.

Smythe might have condemned Yusuf Khan as a hypocrite, but it was Watkins, not Yusuf Khan, who was discharged from the service. Smythe wrote to the adjutant general to request Yusuf Khan's dismissal along with several other Indian officers and NCOs, but did not prosecute, apparently because he felt that to go to trial again would be both 'degrading as well as annoying'.[130] Punishing Watkins was the priority; as Smythe expressed it in a letter to the adjutant general, 'my character will suffer, were I to shrink from the task'.[131] Watkins was, in Smythe's mind, 'the individual who, by his secret machinations, encouraged and fostered vague and unfounded reports into specific Charges of Infamy', the one 'who is identified by every one with my base accusers – if not as their instigator, at least as their protector'.[132]

Watkins's senior rank increased his culpability in Smythe's eyes. Smythe argued that the only reason that Yusuf Khan continued to revert to the allegations of sodomy was because he saw that it pleased his commanding officer, whom he had good reason to want to ingratiate. As Smythe put it, 'by complacent listening, [Watkins] induc[ed]

[128]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 242.
[129]*Ibid.*, fos. 215–16.
[130]Case of Lieut. Col. E. L. Smythe of the Cavalry, 27.
[131]Smythe, *Two Letters*, 16.
[132]*Ibid.*, 22.

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the supposition that he would joyfully learn their reality and truth'.[133] In the process, Smythe declared that 'his [Watkins's] listening to the Havildar gave strength to the rumours, he [Yusuf Khan] himself was disseminating ... that it encouraged others to join with him, seeing he had the countenance of the Commanding Officer ready to listen to any thing'.[134] Both Yusuf Khan and Watkins were guilty of subverting military discipline; yet, Watkins's authority within the regiment meant that his participation encouraged the gossip in a way that Yusuf Khan, on his own, could not have done.

Watkins was also held accountable as a gentleman. The conversations represented, in Smythe's mind, a 'violation of the Principles of right between man and man and of the ordinary rules of acting between Gentlemen'.[135] Watkins's status as a gentleman meant that he was subject to codes of elite masculinity that Yusuf Khan was not, including, to quote historian Edward Spiers, 'requirements of dress and deportment, an emphasis on honour and integrity, and a conformity with the manners and etiquette of polite society'.[136] Watkins's scandalous and infamous conduct consisted not simply in encouraging the circulation of rumours about his commanding officer, but in betraying his friend and host. The formal charges specified that at the time of the conversations Watkins and Smythe had been 'living on apparent terms of intimacy and friendship'.[137] Smythe made much of the fact that around the time when at least one of these conversations was said to have occurred, Watkins had not only dined with him but was living in his home as his guest. When taking leave of one another, Smythe had presented Watkins with a snuff box as a token of their 'good feelings towards each other'; Watkins had accepted the gift, and it was this 'simulation of friendship' that transformed Watkins's conduct from a dereliction of duty into a betrayal.[138]

The friendship between the two men dominated the trial as well as press coverage of it, eclipsing the question of military discipline. Both men summoned witnesses to testify to the degree of intimacy existing between them. Captain Daniel Alexander Fenning, witness for the defence, testified that 'Lieutenant Colonel Smythe was on greater terms of intimacy with several other Officers of the Regiment', while Lieutenant Alexander Macleod, witness for the prosecution, asserted that although Smythe was generally liked, it was 'remarked that the Prisoner was a great deal with him'.[139] Macleod endured many questions about Watkins's breakfasting habits: whether he breakfasted at the mess, how often he breakfasted with Smythe relative to other officers, whether he might have breakfasted with other officers without Macleod's knowledge.[140] The snuff box was also discussed; the court were curious to know whether the box had been seen in Watkins's possession, and if so, if it bore any

[133]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 220.
[134]*Ibid.*, fo. 253.
[135]*Ibid.*, fo. 221.
[136]Edward M. Spiers, *The Army and Society 1815–1914* (1980), 1.
[137]European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 214.
[138]*Ibid.*, fos. 221–2.
[139]*Ibid.*, fos. 231 and 225.
[140]*Ibid.*, fos. 226–7.

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inscription.[141] Meanwhile, the Anglo-Indian press made much of Watkins's treachery. The salient point, as the *Bombay Gazette* interpreted it, was that Watkins was 'accused of suborning evidence against him, while living upon terms of intimacy with the Colonel'.[142] *Alexander's East India Magazine* also identified this as Watkins's primary offence: that 'Major Watkins who always professed himself a friend to Col. Smythe, resided at his house, partook of his hospitality[,] was the very individual employed in the laudable work of collecting and arranging the filthy evidence against the Colonel.'[143] Watkins was keen to demonstrate that he owed no special obligation to Smythe, that the 'intimacy & Friendship' that existed between them was no more 'than that which usually subsists between Brother Officers', but he does not seem to have persuaded his audience.[144]

In addition to trying (unsuccessfully) to downplay the debt of friendship owed to Smythe, Watkins also tried to portray his friendship with Yusuf Khan in the proper light. The prosecution depicted the relationship in insidious terms; Smythe described Yusuf Khan as Watkins's 'confidential man', his agent within the native lines.[145] Watkins, however, insisted that the gossip was just one instance of harmless small talk between two people who were in the habit of chatting informally. Watkins emphasised that he had known Yusuf Khan since the havildar major was a boy, and that 'when the man came to my house as is the common custom with native soldiers I was accustomed to ask after his welfare and perhaps inquire the news of the day'; it was in this context, he repeated, that rumours about Smythe had surfaced.[146] At his trial, Watkins argued that it would have been wrong 'to bring the man to punishment for merely mentioning that a rumour had been current'.[147] In his pamphlet, Watkins went further, arguing that to do so would have been 'a dishonourable breach of friendship'.[148]

The trial of John Watkins was thus a disagreement about friendship; what counted as friendship, what kind of conduct was appropriate to a friend, and which friends weighed heaviest in the scale of priorities. Watkins argued that his friendship with Yusuf Khan mattered. Watkins had known Yusuf Khan for decades whereas his acquaintance with Smythe was comparatively brief; moreover, Watkins believed that part of his responsibility as an officer was to conciliate his subordinates through friendly behaviour, including the exchange of gossip. As Watkins put it, 'confidence between the native and his immediate superior, must, to answer any good end, be unreserved'.[149] Social historians have established the importance of gossip for creating and sustaining interpersonal bonds; in the EIC's armies, gossip had the added advantage

[141] *Ibid.*, fo. 227.
[142] *Bombay Gazette*, 17 Jan. 1835, 2.
[143] 'Military Courts-Martial in India', 508.
[144] European General Court Martial of Major John Watkins, fo. 226.
[145] *Ibid.*, fo. 216.
[146] *Ibid.*, fo. 239.
[147] *Ibid.*
[148] Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xlv.
[149] *Ibid.*

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of keeping officers apprised of the mood in camp.[150] To preserve these lines of communication, Watkins argued, he had to maintain his officers' trust; reporting Yusuf Khan would have caused 'the rupture of all future confidence in the native towards the European'.[151] From Smythe's point of view, however, these conversations were more than mere exchanges of information. By listening, Watkins encouraged the circulation of rumour within the regiment, thereby helping to create the very reality of scandal and insubordination that his conversations with Yusuf Khan purported to describe. Scholarship on rumour has testified to its performative power; as Ranajit Guha and Homi Bhabha among others have observed, rumour was an important catalyst of popular resistance in colonial India because it resonated with widespread hopes and fears, 'the stuff that fired the minds of men'.[152] Open lines of communication may have been essential for the collection of information and, by extension, the maintenance of control, but unrestricted conversation was dangerous, too. Where the correct balance was to be found remained an open question.

Another point of contention was the value to be placed on the exchange of gifts and services, and the obligations created thereby. Because of gifts of food and snuff-boxes in Watkins's case, or fabrics and character references in Yusuf Khan's, Smythe believed that both men were obligated to him, and that these obligations outweighed their personal loyalties to one another. Whereas Watkins argued that reporting Yusuf Khan was the more serious breach of friendship, Smythe contended that Watkins's primary duty was to his host and commanding officer. Contemporary press coverage of the case, combined with the outcome of the trial, suggests that Smythe's interpretation was shared by many contemporaries. Such an interpretation favoured those who were able to grant favours in the first place, thus consolidating hierarchies of race and rank. Yet, as Watkins's petition clearly demonstrates, it was possible for an officer to argue that he owed something to the Indian soldiers under his command as well as to the British gentlemen with whom he breakfasted and exchanged gifts. Not everyone agreed that an officer could, or should, be friends with the Indian officers and sepoys under his command; the ideal officer was usually imagined more as a father figure. Still, the scandal in the Fifth LC suggests that, in practice, the relationships that developed within the regiment were far messier and more reciprocal than the paternalistic ideal suggests.

## Conclusion

In existing literature on the EIC's armies, British officers and Indian soldiers are assumed to have led separate lives. The scandal in the Fifth LC, however, shows just how entangled their fates could become. These friendships could be mutually beneficial; Indian officers and NCOs provided their European commanding officers with information and legitimacy, while European officers could procure favours and facilitate

[150]Claire Walker, 'Whispering Fama: Talk and Reputation in Early Modern Society', in *'Fama' and Her Sisters: Gossip and Rumour in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Heather Kerr and Claire Walker (Turnhout, 2015), 23.

[151]Watkins, *To the Honorable the Chairman*, xliv.

[152]Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (New Delhi, 1983), 256. See also Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Oxford, 1994), 286–7.

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professional advancement. These relationships, however, could also become complicated; obligations could pull in different directions, factions could emerge, and problems could ensue. British officers identified as gentlemen and were expected to adhere to the conventions of gentlemanly society, but what if these precepts ran counter to the paternalistic officer ideal, or the EIC's injunctions to conciliate Indian officers? Watkins had a choice: to report Yusuf Khan's gossip to his friend and erstwhile commanding officer, or to treat the conversation as confidential. Contemporaries regarded his silence as treacherous; for Watkins, the greater risk was that he would lose the trust of his men, without which he could not maintain his personal authority within the regiment. These differing perspectives on the case reflect a fundamental ambivalence at the heart of the EIC's armies as institutions that relied on the military labour of Indians but were predicated on racial hierarchies.

The 1857 Uprising brought these long-simmering anxieties about loyalty and esprit de corps to the boiling point. Though 'native' soldiers continued to dominate the armed forces in India, the proportion of European men was increased in hopes of mitigating the colonial government's dependence on their colonised subjects. Still, debates around Indian officers did not disappear. Though the events of 1857 were seen as evidence that Indian officers had failed to perform their intermediary function, the conclusion that some officers drew was that Indian officers needed to be invested with more authority rather than less, especially given that the irregular corps of cavalry, where the proportion of British officers was lower and Indian officers commanded their own companies and squadrons, had largely remained loyal. The debate about what to do with Indian officers rumbled into the twentieth century, where it acquired new urgency in a context of rising nationalism. In response to calls for the removal of racial restrictions, a process of 'Indianisation' occurred between 1929 and 1931 whereby Indians entered the army as cadets and trained as officers.[153] By the 1940s, the composition of the officer corps was fundamentally altered, with significant consequences for the intertwined processes of Indian independence and Partition, as Kate Imy has shown.[154]

Historians have uncovered much about the experience of Indian soldiers during this period of change from the late nineteenth to the twentieth century.[155] The experiences of the First World War have furnished us with particularly poignant source material.[156] Yet, despite the highly militarised character of the nineteenth-century British empire, and the importance of India as its so-called garrison in the east, we still know little about social life within the cantonment during this earlier period. The objective of this article has been to redirect our attention to this longer history, to demonstrate the value of the cantonment as a worthwhile site for the study of cross-cultural encounters, and to emphasise the importance of Indian officers and NCOs as liminal figures whose ordeals reveal much about how the boundaries of race and rank were negotiated in imperial contexts. Combining official records and cheap pamphlets, we can discern the alliances that developed between Europeans and Indians,

[153]For this paragraph, see Omissi, *Sepoy and the Raj*, 157–8, 189–91.

[154]Kate Imy, *Faithful Fighters: Identity and Power in the British Indian Army* (Stanford, 2019).

[155]In addition to other texts cited in this article, see for example Tarak Barkawi, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II* (Cambridge, 2017).

[156]Santanu Das, *India, Empire and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs* (Cambridge, 2018).

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the motives that informed them, and the forces to which they succumbed. In so doing, we can begin to identify the distinctive features of military encounters, framed, as they were, by a separate set of laws and conventions. Understanding these interactions is important, because by putting military camps and cantonments at the centre of study, we reflect not only the preoccupations of British officialdom, but also the experiences of thousands of Indians whose main point of contact with the EIC was the army.

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