

Vellore 1806

A Dress Rehearsal for the 1857 Revolt?

SABYASACHI DASGUPTA

On 13 March 1806, the commander-in-chief of the Madras army issued a general order in which the new standing regulations were published. The new regulations of the Madras army emphatically prohibited native soldiers (or sepoy as they were called) from sporting caste marks on their faces, or for that matter, flaunt earrings or whiskers on parade. Though the regulations had been in vogue for a while, they had not been uniformly followed across the length and breadth of the Madras army, and each regiment was left to its own devices as far as coping with these regulations was concerned. The new order, though, removed all ambiguity on this score and strove to enforce uniformity.

The new order initially led to general discontent among native troops stationed at Vellore fort cutting across barriers of caste and religion. Matters were compounded by the introduction of new turbans, which had leather as a building material, thus affecting the sentiments of both Hindus and Muslims as leather was considered polluting by both communities. Moreover, the sepoys claimed that the new headgear resembled the one worn by the avowedly “lowly” and “half-caste” drummers in the regiments. Discontent now assumed an overt form, though not violent in tenor. On 6 May 1806, the sepoys of the second battalion 4th regiment refused to wear the new turbans. The tension had burst forth into the open and the air was now rife with rumours of fakirs roaming around and staging puppet shows that exhorted the sepoys to kill their European officers. Things were now poised on a razor’s edge and finally on 10 July 1806, an open mutiny broke out with a large number of native sepoys and officers attacking the European troops and their officers stationed in the fort. Reinforcements, though, arrived from nearby Arcot around 9 am and quelled the mutiny by the

Foreshadowing the Great Rebellion: The Vellore Revolt, 1806 by K A Manikumar, *Hyderabad: Orient Blackswan, 2021; pp 288, ₹695.*

native troops, thus setting an end to the first major mutiny in the company armies, namely the Vellore Mutiny of 1806.

Forerunner of the Revolt of 1857?

The Vellore Mutiny created a huge sensation and attracted the attention of contemporary observers and generated a slew of eyewitness accounts. Subsequently, there would be a host of scholarly works on the mutiny. K A Manikumar’s monograph is the latest in a long series of scholarly works on the Vellore Mutiny. Manikumar essentially argues that the Vellore Mutiny was much more than a mere military mutiny. It had definite political objectives and was part of a larger political movement criss-crossing the boundaries of caste and religion, which aimed to overthrow British rule in southern India. The dispossessed chieftains and dynasties had never reconciled to British hegemony over the southern part of the subcontinent. The sepoy unrest over the new regulations provided them with an opportunity to plan an insurrection.

The notion of a political conspiracy was bandied about in official circles in the aftermath of the mutiny as colonial officials ascribed it to the presence of the late Tipu Sultan’s family stationed in Vellore fort. In contrast, Manikumar is hinting at a larger involvement of the dispossessed indigenous ruling elite of South India. Coupled with that was the discontent among the common populace of who hated the British. Manikumar stresses on the agrarian distress in large parts of South India and particular in the areas around Vellore, thereby discomfiting the general populace. Adding to their woes were the extravagant land revenue demands of the East India Company. This led to large numbers of men

from landowning families in agriculturally depressed regions of South India joining the Madras army.

Manikumar thus seeks to link up the disgruntlement of the sepoys to larger political issues. Manikumar also lists certain long-term and relatively short-term professional grievances of the sepoys, which served to add grist to the mill. The sepoys were avowedly discontented over stationary wages, slow promotion, and the racial arrogance of the new generation of European officers. The publication of the new standing regulations served to exacerbate a situation that was already on the boil. A question, though, arises as to why did the mutiny break out in Vellore in the first place. Admittedly, disturbances broke out subsequently in other cantonments of the Madras Presidency as well. But they were all nipped in the bud, thereby averting a wider conflagration engulfing large parts of South India. The defiance of the sepoys at Vellore in 1806 could well have been the forerunner of an upsurge akin to that of the Great Rebellion of 1857.

Mutiny or Popular Uprising

Thus, one may concur that the Vellore insurrection missed the bus. It could have—with a bit of luck—triggered off a widespread rebellion, which could have well-earned itself the appendage of the “first war of independence.” Manikumar, though, hints that notwithstanding the Company’s success in suppressing the defiance of the sepoys in the other cantonments at a very incipient stage, the Vellore Mutiny nevertheless could be dubbed as a forerunner to the revolt of 1857. Indeed, he makes it amply clear in the title of his monograph that the Vellore Mutiny foreshadowed the great rebellion approximately 50 years later. Manikumar does not go as far as to dub the rebellion as the “first war of independence,” though, I suspect, he would have liked to do so.

Manikumar is indeed not the first scholar who would strive to describe the heroic stand of the sepoys at Vellore as a forerunner of 1857 or even as the first war of independence. The reviewer has already made his stand clear on this score, and one feels that it is time one moves to other aspects of Manikumar’s hypothesis, though these

revolve around the fundamental tenets of his argument, that the uprisings, chiefly at Vellore and other stations, were part of a wider movement with a definite political objective of extinguishing British rule in South India. The upheaval, according to Manikumar, had the widespread support of the dispossessed indigenous ruling elite and the general populace. It is undoubtedly a charming proposition but Manikumar does not sustain it in any way.

For one, there is simply no proof that the uprooted indigenous elite were in touch with the rebel sepoys. Manikumar does not supply us with any oral or written evidence on this point apart from some circumstantial evidence pointing to the involvement of Tipu's family in the dramatic events at Vellore fort. Again, he is hardly the first to argue that Tipu's family played a part in the heady happenings at Vellore fort. Many more, including this reviewer, have argued along the same lines. Therefore, Manikumar's argument that the rebel sepoys had the support of the defeated indigenous elite simply has no empirical basis to rest its case. While one is not denying the possibility, it requires concrete evidence to make a firm affirmation along these lines.

Moving along to the issue of mass support, there is no doubt that several areas in South India were experiencing agrarian distress in the initial years of the 19th century. The excessive revenue demands of the British further exacerbated the situation. Under these circumstances, the existence of a deep discontent among the masses was a distinct possibility. Notwithstanding all these factors, the hard truth remains that there was no participation of the civilian populace in the upheaval at Vellore or the nebulous upheavals at the other cantonments. There is no recorded civilian-sepoy connect in any of these cases. There might have been covert support for the sepoys among the masses. Maybe, one would have evinced overt support and indeed participation by the general populace if the rebellion at Vellore had run a longer course or the uprisings at the other centres had not been crushed in their infancy. These are, though, the ifs and buts of history. The hard truth remains that there was no visible support for the rebellion at Vellore and other places in 1806.

What were then the extraordinary series of events at Vellore and other centres in 1806? Was it merely a military mutiny? Did the native sepoys harbour long-term grievances against the British? Or were the new standing regulations and the introduction of the new headgear a short-term provocation which assumed overwhelming proportions? The answers to these questions are not simply black and white. The sepoys, no doubt, had some long-term grouses. Promotion was slow and the pay stationary over extended periods of time. Matters were further compounded by the racial arrogance and aloofness of the new generation officers who hardly knew any of the Indian languages. This led to a further estrangement between the sepoys and the European officers. The earlier personalised system of command, while hardly being perfect in its functioning, at least provided for enhanced interaction with the native soldiery. Moreover, the older generation officers had a good grip on Indian languages.

Thus, there were certain niggling long-term issues that played on the mind of the native soldiers. There were, though, extenuating factors that compensated for these irritants. Manikumar neglects to dwell on the fact that the infantry regiments of the Madras army, after showing an initial preference for recruiting high castes, increasingly sought to recruit middle and lower castes in large numbers. By the turn of the 19th century, the infantry units of the Madras army were dominated by middle- and lower-caste Hindus along with a good number of Muslims. The number of high-caste recruits increasingly dwindled as the Madras colonial establishment found them to be a bit oversensitive with regard to their religious beliefs. This dominance of the middle and lower castes had important consequences for both the army and these recruits for it empowered these recruits and endowed them with a new-found notion of honour and self-respect. The Company uniform bestowed on them status and privileges that they were not accustomed to before. The native elite could henceforth not ride roughshod over them. Yet, the reader may ask whether this new-found status and notions of honour impeded the large-scale

participation of intermediate and lower-caste recruits in the Vellore Mutiny. Why was it so? Why did these recruits revolt against the East India Company if military service had empowered them in the first place?

The answer may lie in the fact that the new regulations threatened these very notions of status and honour, which these recruits had so assiduously cultivated. This made them react with a vengeance. They would not surrender their status, privileges, and honour without a bloody fight. Once they crossed the psychological barriers and resorted to open and violent defiance, the resistance in Vellore acquired a momentum of its own and inscribed certain political objectives. The sepoys may have harboured designs of proclaiming the eldest son of Tipu as their ruler and of extinguishing British rule in India. It is possible that the sepoys at Vellore were in touch with soldiers in other cantonments. The abortive attempts at revolt in other centres possibly indicate along these lines. There is, though, no evidence of the sepoys being in touch with other sections of the erstwhile ruling elite in South India apart from circumstantial evidence hinting about their dalliances with Tipu's family lodged in Vellore fort.

In Conclusion

To conclude, certain disagreements aside, I have no hesitation in affirming that Manikumar has written a very fine book. The book is rich and contains intricate details about the circumstances and events leading to the mutiny, the way it actually played out at the ground level, and its aftermath. Manikumar also raises several important questions, though he does not always supply us with the answers. Nevertheless, the author's effort will stir all researchers on the Vellore Mutiny out of their comfort zone and force them to look anew at various aspects of the extraordinary sequence of incidents at Vellore and its postscript. To put it in a nutshell, Manikumar's book is a must read for all those who are interested in the history of colonial South India and the colonial Indian army.

Sabyasachi Dasgupta (sabyasachidasg@gmail.com) is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the Visva-Bharati University, Santiniketan.