



A Study of The European Adventurers and Transformation of Indian Military System

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Abstract:

During the middle of the 17th century, British merchants under the banner of the East India Company (EIC; usually referred to as "the Company") arrived in India (South Asia or the subcontinent). Bombay, Madras, and Calcutta all had little protected enclaves where they set up shop. Neither the will nor the resources were there for the EIC to create a sizable land empire in South Asia at the time. The "native" powers were invariably defeated by the EIC's armed forces in the seldom conflicts that broke out between them. However, things began shifting in the 1740s. Several native Indian powers began striving to create their own territories after the dissolution of the pan-Indian Mughal Empire. The French and British were motivated to participate in local politics and expand into the interior of the subcontinent by the absence of a strong central authority and the possibility of negotiating economic concessions with the local potentates. The EIC had already conquered the French East India Company (Compagnies des Indes) by the 1750s. The EIC battled and defeated Mysore, the Maratha Confederacy, and the Khalsa Kingdom between 1760 and 1849 to become the dominant force in the Indian subcontinent. The military establishment in South Asia was the mainstay of British empire there. Between a third and half of the EIC's annual budget supported the armed forces. The EIC fed its forces not just with gold imported from England, but also with income taken from its vast agricultural bureaucratic dominion in the subcontinent. Heathcote (1995) depicts the development of the EIC's several armies. During this time, indigenous military forces were largely modernised and Westernised in response to EIC's presence and its capital-intensive infantry-artillery-oriented army.

Keywords: India, East India Company, Military System, European, Indian Army.

Content:

Transformation in Indian military system on European lines was one of the important developments in north India towards the end of the century. Started by De Boigne, it reached its peak under the leadership of Perron. By Perron's time five completely Europeanized brigades had been raised. De Boigne set up an institutionalized, systematic and methodical way of raising and training native armies on European model, something which had not been in practice earlier. In the new system, artillery and infantry, trained on European model, was formed the core of the new army, and cavalry which had earlier been the mainstay of armies was reduced to the status of a mere detachment. Different wings were created in the army that had distinct military functions. It not only made them interdependent thus introducing esprit de corps among them but also helped them emerge as a cohesive unit. Telingas, Najeebs, Aligols, Gossains, and Mewatis were formed the chief components of the brigades. De Boigne played the pivotal role in the process of transformation. His employment with the Maratha leader Mahadji Sindhia and the latter's grant of land in Aligarh to him along with full freedom to raise and train army were the major factors that led to such a transformation. Another important factor that also contributed considerably to it was the friendly relations of the adventurers' of this phase with the English company. It resulted in large-scale migration of English soldiers also who were inducted by De Boigne and given important positions. The relations of the adventurers with the English were one of the most important distinguishing features between the two phases. Unlike the first one, the second phase was marked by the overt friendly relations between the French adventurers and the English officials. However, this complexion of friendly relationship changed when Perron attempted to open diplomatic parleys with the French government. It provided the much awaited pretext to the English company to attack Delhi in 1803 and liquidate Perron's Europeanized brigades. Although General Lake registered victory over Perron, it was achieved more by luring English officers of Perron's brigades to the English side than through a real fight, a fact which does not find much mention in the English accounts.

The military changes effected by De Boigne also had a crucial bearing on the politics of the region. The establishment of Mahadji Sindhia as a major force in the north Indian politics was only due to the military successes of De Boigne's brigades against his master's adversaries. In fact, it was the military potential of De Boigne's forces that had made Mahadji Sindhia the most powerful ruler in Hindustan in the last decade of the century.

De Boigne was born Benoit La Borgne to a hide merchant at Chambéry in Savoy, France, in 1751. When he was just nineteen he received a commission in Clare's regiment in the French Irish brigade. Here De Boigne received a good grounding in the army profession. But Clare's regiment was mostly stationed in France only and there was nothing much for a common soldier to perform except to be with his platoon and turn left and right or advance and retire with others like automatic machines. It was when he realized that there was no hope of getting high promotions in French army even after having worked there for six long years that he resigned in 1776. He then

took up service in Russian army in a battalion of Greeks which was raised by admiral Orloff to fight the Turks. Here he made friends with Lord Percy, Earl of Northumberland, while on an assignment to escort him in his visits to the Near-East. After the defeat of Russian army at the hands of the Turks, De Boigne arrived at Cairo with the intention to travel to India. Lord Percy helped him in this, both by introducing him to the British consul and lending him money. He also provided him with letters of introduction to European officers in India, particularly, one to Warren Hastings, the governor of Bengal, and the other to the town-major of Fort St. George, Madras.

De Boigne landed at Madras in 1778 and joined the English company. After a brief period of work as a fencing master and an ensign he obtained a lieutenant's commission there. It was when he was not promoted further that he resigned from his post and moved to Calcutta. With the letters of recommendation from Lord Percy he met Hastings and expressed his wish to go to Europe. via the overland route through Hindustan. Hastings treated him cordially and gave letters of recommendation for his safe passage through Hindustan. From Calcutta De Boigne reached Lucknow. After a brief stay there, he marched towards Delhi in the company of British officer Major Robert Brown. As he was being accompanied by an Englishman he was regarded as a spy both by the Mughal nobles and Maratha leader Mahadji Sindhia. Later, Mahadji Sindhia had him robbed of his papers to know his antecedents. Although some of his documents were returned to him through Anderson's efforts who was the resident at the Sindhia's court, but his letters of credit and recommendations were not given back. The loss of these documents made it impossible for him to continue his journey, and he was left with no other alternative than join some Indian rulers to earn money. It was under these circumstances that he found service with Mahadji Sindhia in 1784. It is important to note here that he owed his employment to his two English friends Anderson and Major Brown who acted as his mediators with Sindhia. Taking De Boigne as a spy despite the presence of Englishmen with him suggested that although the Marathas had become friends with the English during this time yet there was lack of trust between them.

De Boigne was appointed at a salary of 146,000 rupees per month, which also included the salary of his soldiers to raise two battalions. Besides, he was also given complete freedom to raise, train, and command these battalions as he deemed fit. In order to give the battalions a Europeanized look, De Boigne inducted as many Europeans as possible. He contacted the Europeans who were already in native rulers' service and invited them to join his battalions. He also asked his friends in the English company to persuade European military specialists to join him. His contacts in the company circles helped him in managing many skillful Europeans for his task. His offer was open to all foreigners irrespective of their background and nationalities. As a result, many Europeans including Englishmen joined his service. Sangster, John Hessian, Fremont, Taylor, Lesteneau, and Ramru were some of the prominent names who joined De Boigne at this stage.

Most of the recruitment was made from the common folk who were poor and in utter need of employment. It was believed that their employment would not only form a quality soldier stuff as they had nothing much to lose but it would also benefit them materially. To attract more people to soldiery, the provision of giving army equipments

and uniforms at nominal rates was also made. And most importantly, De Boigne made it a point that his soldiers were paid regularly. He fixed the salary of a soldier at $5\frac{1}{2}$ rupees per month which was commensurate with that of a sepoy in the English army. A recruiting system was put in place by his newly admitted European officers and Indian accountants. It included drawing up rolls, pay lists, and the work of allotting companies and battalions to the recruits. Since everything had to be done afresh, De Boigne himself supervised all the work. For instance, arms and material such as muskets, bayonets, cannons, camels, bullocks, carts, good quality gun powder, shot, shell for the howitzers, all were brought under his supervision. Even minor works such as engaging tailors for the uniforms of soldiers did not escape his eye.

References

- (De Boigne was given the salary of 1000 rupees only, and the salary of 8 rupees per month was fixed for each soldier of his two battalions of 850 men.) James Grant Duff, Vol. II.
- De Boigne's journey was made easy by Baldwin who was the consul-general at Cairo who not only assisted him in obtaining a passage to India but also provided him with the letter for Major Sydenham, town-major of Fort StGeorge. After arriving at Madras, he was recommended to the governor Rumbold who was the governor and appointed as an ensign in the English company's 6th Native battalion. James Grant Duff, Vol. II. 'Esquisse de la vie du general de Boigne publiee dans le Telegraph, en 1797 et 1798' in Victor de Saint-Genis, Letter Written by Longinus from Agra on 20 December 1796. Longinus was the pen name of L. F. Smith, an English officer, in De Boigne's service. Jean Marie Lafont, 'Benoit de Boigne in Hindustan ', in Jean Marie Lafont (edited), Indika.
- James Grant Duff, op. cit., Vol. II.
- James Skinner, Memoir of James Skinner, by J. Baillie Fraser, 2 Vols., London, 1851.
- Major Robert Brown during this time was deputed on a mission to the Emperor. Ibid.
- The contempt for the English had been prevailing from the time much before the arrival of De Boigne on the scene. It was evident from 1780-81 onwards when the Emperor and Peshwa attempted to form an anti-English alliance.. Jadunath Sarkar, Vol. III.
- Victor de Saint-Genis.
- When De Boigne was travelling from Delhi to Agra after having being denied audience with the Emperor, the Mughal noble and wazir Mirza Shafi took De Boigne as a spy when he discovered that the latter had been in the company of Brown and refused to offer him any help. Sindhia grew suspicious due to De Boigne's links with English officers in north India. De Boigne had entered into Hindustan along with Robert Brown and afterwards he was invited by James Anderson, the Resident at Sindhia's court, to his camp. Victor de Saint-Genis.
- Maurice Besson, Le General Comte de Boigne 1751-1830, Librairie Dardel, Chambéry, 1930.
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