

An Early Sepoy Defiance: Berhampore Cantonment and the Making of the Revolt of 1857

Samir Mondal¹

¹Independent Research Scholar

MA in History

Department of History

Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan

Birbhum, West Bengal, India

Email- samirmondal1999@gmail.com

Abstract: *The Behrampore incident of February 1857 constitutes one of the earliest expressions of collective sepoy resistance within the Bengal Presidency prior to the wider outbreak of the Revolt of 1857. Despite its chronological and analytical importance, it has remained marginal in mainstream historiography, which privileges the dramatic uprisings at Meerut and Delhi. This article reconstructs the Berhampore episode through colonial archival records, contemporary narratives, and modern historiographical interpretations. It argues that the refusal of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry to accept the Enfield cartridges was not merely an instance of indiscipline but a structured and collective articulation of accumulated grievances embedded within the Bengal Army. Furthermore, the British response—particularly the disbandment of the regiment—contributed significantly to the diffusion of disaffection across cantonments, especially Barrackpore. By situating Berhampore within a broader analytical framework, this article reinterprets the early phase of 1857 as a process of escalation rather than a sudden rupture.*

Key words: *Berhampore Cantonment, Controversy, Historiography, Mutiny etc.*

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Introduction

The Revolt of 1857 has been variously interpreted as a “Sepoy mutiny,” a “National war of independence,” and a complex, regionally differentiated uprising. Early colonial historians such as John William Kaye and George Bruce Malleson viewed the events primarily through the lens of military discipline and breakdown.¹ In contrast, nationalist historians including Surendra Nath Sen² and Ramesh Chandra Majumdar sought to reinterpret the revolt within a broader anti-

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colonial framework, though they differed on its charac as a microhistorical site that reveals the early stages of sepoy resistance and the processes through which localized discontent contributed to wider rebellion.³

Berhampore Cantonment and the Structure of the Bengal Army

The present-day city of Berhampore in Murshidabad was formerly known as “Brahmapur”.⁴ This Brahmapur was later transformed into Berhampore, and it is believed that the rise of modern Berhampore took place centering around this British cantonment. After the Battle of Plassey, Murshidabad—especially the area adjacent to Cossimbazar—became very important to the English East India Company.⁵ The security of the commercial factories here caused them considerable concern, as the Company always feared that at any moment, the local people might rise in rebellion against them under the instigation of the Nawabs. From this apprehension arose the need for a permanent cantonment to protect the Cossimbazar factory and to ensure the smooth conduct of administration. As a pleasant, healthy, and secure location, Brahmapur—that is, Berhampore—was selected. According to some historians, after the Battle of Plassey in 1757, the construction of this cantonment—Berhampore Barracks—was completed in 1767. The construction required extensive earth excavation, which led to the formation of what is now known as Lal Dighi (Subhas Sarovar), located behind the present SDO office in Berhampore.

In 1769, the cantonment of Berhampore is mentioned in the writings of the historian W.W. Hunter, where he noted that during the time of famine, a large quantity of rice was stored for the Company’s troops.⁶ In the book Sangbadpatre Sekaler Katha, a news report dated on 26 July, 1828 that the establishment of the Berhampore cantonment played a crucial role in helping the city of Murshidabad retain its importance.⁷

At this time, although the Nawab Nazims of Murshidabad were under the authority of the East India Company, their influence had not yet completely declined. Therefore, near the capital city of Murshidabad, the British government developed the Berhampore Barracks as an important military base. During this period, the small industries of the Cossimbazar factory were flourishing, and there was a constant fear of rebellion due to the forced advances (Dadon) and inhumane oppression inflicted upon the weavers. Hence, there was no question of withdrawing

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troops from the Berhampore Barracks, as they were needed to meet the demands related to the ‘Telengi’(Telengana region) and Purbiya(Eastern Gangetic region) sepoys.⁸

In 1855, during the suppression of the Santhal Rebellion, the Berhampore Barracks played an important role through its troops. However, after the rebellion was quelled, troops began to be gradually withdrawn from Berhampore.⁹ According to the “Bengal Directory” of 1854, the principal military center of the Presidency Division was Barrackpore. At that time, Berhampore housed a detachment of European troops—the 2nd Bengal (European) Fusiliers—and the 7th Regiment of Native Infantry. There were also some irregular sepoys present. Subsequently, the European troops were withdrawn from Berhampore, and only native sepoys were stationed there. When the 7th Native Infantry was transferred, the 19th Native Infantry took its place in the Berhampore Barracks, and it was the sepoys of this regiment who first rebelled there. At that time, across the whole of Bengal, there were about 2,400 European officers and soldiers, and around 29,000 native sepoys.¹⁰ It is also known that due to the outbreak of malaria in Cossimbazar,¹¹ the European troops were withdrawn. Therefore, it is clear that at the time of the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857, there were no European soldiers stationed at Berhampore Barracks.

The Enfield Cartridge Controversy and the Politics of Suspicion

According to historian Kaye, by the mid-nineteenth century, sepoys increasingly perceived a decline in their privileges and status.¹² Pay disparities, restrictions on promotion, and racial hierarchies contributed to growing dissatisfaction. These grievances, though not always openly articulated, formed the structural background to later acts of resistance. In the essay “Berhampore Sahor O 1857 Sal”, Mahasweta Devi shows that most of the native sepoys came from poor peasant families, who enlisted in the army for a meagre salary of six or seven rupees and endured injustice and deprivation. The rebellion was thus an expression of their grievances. Moreover, the prospect of being sent overseas (crossing the ‘kala pani’) to fight in Burma and China also created deep resentment among them.¹³

The introduction of the Pattern 1853 Enfield rifle and its associated cartridges precipitated a crisis of confidence within the Bengal Army. The requirement to bite open greased cartridges generated rumors that the grease contained cow and pig fat, thereby threatening both Hindu and

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Muslim religious practices. As Charles Ball observes, the cartridge issue quickly transcended its technical context to become a symbol of cultural aggression.¹⁴ The spread of rumor played a crucial role in this transformation, reflecting the importance of informal communication networks among sepoys.

In 1857, the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal was Sir Frederick James Halliday. In his 1858 report on the condition of Bengal during the rebellion, he wrote: “It has been to points in this division, Berhampore and Barrackpore—the one the military cantonment of Murshidabad, the other the headquarters of the division, which supplies the native guards for the town of Calcutta—where symptoms first showed themselves.”¹⁵ Meanwhile, on 24 February 1857, two companies of the 34th Native Infantry were transferred from Barrackpore to Berhampore. At Berhampore, the 19th Native Infantry was stationed under Colonel Mitchell. There was a good relationship between the sepoys of the 19th and 34th regiments. As a result, when the local sepoys heard from the 34th regiment about the greased cartridges, they became even more agitated. Although Colonel Mitchell initially dismissed the rumour as false, the sepoys at Berhampore, influenced by the accounts of the Barrackpore sepoys, came to believe that the British were deceiving them. Thus, the excitement of rebellion began to grow. Angered by the behaviour of the native sepoys, orders were issued that on the following day the cartridges must be loaded into the rifles and used. According to Colonel Mitchell’s command, when arrangements were made to distribute the cartridges to all on the evening of 31 February, the sepoys refused to accept them. Later, when the commanding officer, Lieutenant J. F. MacAndrew, threatened them with court-martial and transportation across the seas (‘kala pani’),¹⁶ the sepoys silently accepted the cartridges. However, this threat strengthened their belief that the British authorities intended to destroy the caste and religion of both Hindu and Muslim sepoys through the use of these cartridges.

Regarding this, in 1857 Red Pamphlet’s titled “The Mutiny of the Bengal Army” stated: “...but the passions of the men had been roused; their feelings had been so excited that they could no longer control them, they were beyond the power of reason; they felt satisfied that their caste was to be taken away by means of the cartridges, and their excitement persuaded them that these were the fatal messengers... The multitude of counsellors gave new energy to their fears, and in a moment of fanatical frenzy, the regiment rose as one man...”¹⁷

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The Berhampore Incident (26 February 1857)

On 26 February 1857, sepoy of the 34th Bengal Native Infantry at Berhampore refused to accept the cartridges during a parade. Malleeson's characterization of the sepoys as "aggrieved but restrained" underscores the controlled nature of the protest.¹⁸ At around ten o'clock at night, the sepoys broke open the armoury, seized the weapons, loaded their guns, and took up positions.¹⁹ As a great commotion began, the news reached Colonel Mitchell. At that time, there was dense darkness all around; in the words of the Malleeson, "the night was pitch dark and no movement could be made with any certainty".²⁰ In such a situation, apart from the 19th Regiment, there was also on the other side of the barracks "A detachment of native cavalry and a battery of native artillery".²¹

In this complex situation, only two options were open to Colonel Mitchell, either to defend government property with his forces, or to come to a peaceful understanding with the agitated rebels. And he chose the second option. In the darkness of night, lighting torches, the Colonel, along with his colleague Captain Alexander, appeared before the agitated troops. At that moment, the rebels had their guns loaded and ready. If they had wished, they could have killed the two British officers on the spot—but they did not. British historian John William Kaye stated that if the sepoys at berhampore had taken up arms against the British, and if the people of Murshidabad had joined them under the leadership of the Nawab, then the whole of Bengal would have quickly been sent ablaze.²² As part of the terms of settlement, the rebels demanded that the cavalry and artillery be withdrawn from before them. Colonel Mitchell, compelled by circumstances, ordered Captain Alexander to immediately withdraw the cavalry and artillery.²³

Regarding this, Malleeson states: "To this unmilitary concession, Colonel Mitchell felt averse to accede. However, for the reasons above stated, he was powerless. He did not wish to provoke the 19th into a more open demonstration; he consented them to proposal and moved off artillery and cavalry."²⁴

The rebels kept their word according to the agreement; they returned all the guns and ammunition taken from the armoury, and the revolt subsided. However, by then, the news of the 19th Regiment's seizure of the armoury had spread everywhere—from Barrackpore to the whole of Murshidabad. At this time, the Nawab Nazim of Murshidabad, Mansur Ali Khan, on the

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advice of General George MacGregor, declared his support for the British. The next day, although the agitated but outwardly calm sepoys joined the morning parade, British anxiety did not subside. On receiving the news, Lord Canning adopted a strict stance toward the native sepoys. Colonel Keith Young was sent to investigate the Berhampore Barracks. After the inquiry, he recommended that the rebellious soldiers be transported across the seas ('kala pani'). However, the Governor-General was not satisfied even with this and ordered that the 19th Regiment be sent to Barrackpore.²⁵

As soon as the 19th Regiment was sent to Barrackpore, the 84th European Regiment, returning from Rangoon, was brought by steamer to Berhampore Barracks, where they remained until 1870. Meanwhile, upon reaching Barrackpore, some soldiers of the 34th Native Infantry contacted the 19th Regiment and advised them to attack Colonel Mitchell and other British officers, but this plan was not carried out.²⁶ But, when the 19th Regiment arrived at Barrackpore, British troops surrounded them, lined up rows of cannons in front of them, disarmed them, and ordered the entire regiment to be disbanded. Witnessing the humiliation and loss of honour of their fellow sepoys, the soldiers at Barrackpore became deeply agitated. At that time, Sergeant-Major Hughson (often rendered as Haugsten) was present on the parade ground when Mangal Pandey of the 34th Regiment loaded his musket and attacked the British officers. In the firing, both Hughson and Lieutenant Baugh were killed. Soon, as a group of British soldiers surrounded him, Mangal Pandey attempted to shoot himself, but, wounded, he was immediately captured. Following a military court trial on 23 March, he was sentenced to death and executed on 8 April.²⁷

Meanwhile, a sense of fear spread among the Europeans in Berhampore. Many European residents lived in the northern parts of the Berhampore barracks area, with their residences extending from Babulbona to Panchanantala and Banjhetia. Fearing the rebel sepoys, the Europeans were given shelter in the military hospital (later known as Borstal School), and cannons were placed around it for security.²⁸ On June, 1858, the then Governor, Frederick Halliday, wrote: "At Berhampore all was quiet up to the 23rd of June, though some seditious placards had been posted up in the city of Murshidabad." On 23 June, rumours spread throughout the district that the 63rd Native Infantry and the 11th Cavalry at the barracks had again rebelled. As a result, the alert British authorities disarmed all the native troops in the barracks. Meanwhile,

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many dismissed soldiers attempted to collect firearms in Berhampore and across Murshidabad. Consequently, the British authorities seized about two thousand guns along with several cannons from both locations. Gradually, the rebellion spread to different regions of India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Maharashtra, and into villages across the country.”²⁹

From Indiscipline to Proto-Mutiny

The Berhampore episode challenges conventional distinctions between obedience and rebellion. It can be more accurately understood as a “proto-mutiny”—a transitional form of resistance characterized by collective action within the framework of military discipline. This interpretation aligns with broader historiographical shifts that emphasize process over event. Rather than viewing the Revolt of 1857 as a sudden eruption, it becomes possible to see it as the culmination of a series of escalating tensions and localized acts of resistance.

The reinterpretation of Berhampore benefits from engagement with subaltern studies. Ranajit Guha’s emphasis on the autonomy of subaltern politics provides a framework for understanding sepoy actions as forms of political expression. Rather than passive recipients of colonial policy, sepoys emerge as active agents negotiating their relationship with the state. The Berhampore incident thus represents not merely a reaction to specific grievances but a broader assertion of agency.³⁰

Conclusion

The Berhampore sepoy outbreak of February 1857 represents a crucial yet understudied moment in the history of the Revolt of 1857. By examining this episode in detail, this article has demonstrated that: Sepoy resistance developed through a process of gradual escalation collective defiance preceded large-scale rebellion colonial responses played a key role in intensifying conflict reintegrating Berhampore into the broader narrative of 1857 allows for a more nuanced understanding of the revolt as a dynamic and evolving process. It underscores the importance of early acts of resistance in shaping the trajectory of one of the most significant events in colonial Indian history.

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