

THE ARMY OF BEGUM SAMRU

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Abstract: A large number of military adventurers of the 18th century of India have left their lasting imprints on the sands of history. Jadunath Sarkar has termed the period between the death of Muhammad Shah (1748) and establishment of British suzerainty under Wellesley (1803) as “golden age of foreign mercenaries in India.” Among these hoards of mercenaries an illuminated name is that of Begum Samru of Sardhana. The wonderful life-story of this remarkable lady has attracted many a pen in the past –each touching upon her life and career with newer depth and diversity. As a jagirdaar of the Mughal Emperor of Delhi the Begum Samru was obliged to maintain an army not only for her safety but also to help her sovereign the Mughal Emperor whenever required. Part of her army resided at Sardhana, and another part at Delhi always in attendance upon the Emperor. Apart from the regular army, the Begum also raised irregular troops whenever the need arose. She had a well furnished arsenal and a foundry for manufacturing cannons. These were protected by well fortified walls. Her army was famous as a well disciplined force, and was composed of infantry, artillery, and a well trained cavalry. Her forces were mostly commanded by European Officers, the most famous among them was a German General Pauli, George Thomas, Levassault, General Raghaini, also among the officers was the young John Thomas the son of the celebrated General George Thomas.

Keywords: Sovereign, Curtailment, Infantry, Disbanded, Troops, Overpowered, Uniformity, Cavalry, Courage, Allowances, Artillery, Categories, Treaty, Battalions.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Begum herself was a fearless and consummate leader of her troops. Colonel Skinner who was in service of the Marhattas had many a times seen the Begum on the field of battle and describes her as a beautiful young woman leading her troops and ordering them to attack, displaying great courage in the midst of fearful fighting, and showing great presence of mind. However, after her treaty with the British she was seen only once on the field of battle when Lord Combermere was conducting the siege of Bharatpur. Perhaps her great zest for military honour again made her desirous of endearing his battle and obtain a share of the glory. Major Archer, has given a graphic description about the sudden appearance of the Begum on the scene. He wrote, “when the army was before Bharatpur, in 1826, the Commander-in-chief was desirous that no native chief of our allies should accompany the besieging force with any of his troops; this order hurt the pride of the Begum, who remonstrated, she was told that the large and holy place of Mathura was to be confined to her care. Nonsense she said, “if I do not go to Bharatpur, all Hindustan will say I am grown a coward in my old age.”

2. THE FORMATION OF THE ARMY

The artillery was commanded by an officer of rank of Major. In most cases when the post of commander fell vacant it was most often the major who succeeded under him the formation was as follows:-

- (a) European officers : 1 captain, 3 lieutenants.
- (b) Indian officers: 3 subedar majors, 11 subedars, 11 jamadars.

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- (c) Non-commissioned officers: 42 havaldars, 39 Amildars, 97 khalasis.
- (d) Other ranks: 432
- (e) Superumaries (soldiers exceeding the normal numbers:172)

The cavalry:-

- (a) European officers: 1 captain, 2 lieutenants
- (b) Indian officers: 1 risaldar major, 4 risaldar , 4 jamadars
- (c) Non commissioned officers: 16 duffadars, 16 naiks
- (d) other ranks: 432
- (e) Supernumeraries: 13

BEGUM'S BODYGUARD: - Infantry:

- (a) European officers: 1 captain, 2 lieutenants
- (b) Indian officers 1 subedar major, 4 dubedars, 4 jamadars
- (c) non commissioned officers: 16 Havaldars, 16 Amildars
- (d) other ranks: 192

The Supernumeraries included Quartermasters, whose main function was to look after rations and stores and other necessities. There was also a surgeon to look after injuries mostly sustained in wars. They were all usually Europeans . For the Indian sick soldiers there was usually a hakira who dispensed medicines. There were also Bhishtie(water-carriers). There were also Harkaraha (news carriers and messengers). There were about 60 bullock cart drivers. There was a band for every unit. The begum's band was the largest with special and big musical instruments.

Mrs. Deane, the wife of a British officer who visited Sardhana sometime in 1809-1810, has left a very graphic and absorbing description of the Begum's soldiers, "we were escorted over the estate by her colonel commandant, she has a regular cantonment here for her troops, and a strong part containing some good houses, which are inhabited by the officers and their families. Her soldiers are tall, stout men, being principally Rajputs, who are the best soldiers, but much addicted to chewing opium, generally proud, and often insolent. Their uniform is a dress of dark blue broad cloth, reaching to the feet, with scarlet turbans and waistbands. Her park of artillery seemed also in excellent order: most of the large guns stood in a line in front of the palace

The strength of the begum's army varied from time to time. In the Ibratnama it has been described that in 1787 when the Begum overpowered Ghulam Qadir her army consisted of 'four Paltans of sepoy trained for battle with 85 guns "

Immediately after the Begum's death Mr. R.N.C. Hamilton, magistrate and collector of Meerut sent a detailed statement to the commissioner of Meerut depicting the actual strength of her forces by obtaining information from different sources.

It was as follows:-

Native Infantry:

- 1st battalion total - 507
- 2nd battalion total - 504
- 3rd battalion total - 504
- 4th battalion total - 488
- 5th battalion total - 481
- 6th battalion total - 462

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Men belonging to the bodyguard - 266

Men belonging to irregular Cavalry - 245

Artillery establishment - 1007

TOTAL - 1518

GRAND TOTAL - 4464

After the begum's treaty with the British in 1805 half of her troops -3 battalions and a small park of artillery were placed under the command of the british for their requirements and under their orders stated below are the stations and the number of men posted in these places:-

- 2nd battalion

- at Raina 388

- At Bhawani 128

Total 516

- 3rd battalion

- At Meerut 259

- At Muzafarnagar 194

- At Saharanpur 62

Total 515

- 5th battalion

- At karnal 250

- At gurgaon 265

Total 515

As per the statement given by Nicholas Shreeves in his book we get a fair idea as regards the payment of the officers, soldiers and other ranks of the Begum's army as well as extra allowances paid to them during campaigns . the payments fall into three categories , (a) the basic rate of pay,(b) extra pay when engaged in hostilities outside the Begum's territories, ans (c)anyother extra allowance.

Rank	(a)	(b)	(c)	total Rs. Per month
Colonel	500	500		1000
Major	400	200	200	800
Captain	250	200	50	500
Lieutenant	150	110	40	300
Commandant	82	60	22	162
Subedar major	57	35	22	114
Jamadar	22	17	5	54
Artillery sct	200	100	50	400
Sowar	30	17	8	55

After Sardhana had passed under british protection the constitution of the Begum's army was considerably modified, which resulted in a curtailment of the expenses. However, it made no difference in the attitude of the soldiers. The Begum's soldiers were well trained and hard fighters. Because of these qualities the british wanted to retain them in their own service when they were likely to be disbanded after the death of the begum.

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Rev: Father Patrick Nair has stated that , “A source of great concern, but to whom she owed much of her fame and power, was her army. The maintenance of her troops was a very great drain on her income. Nor did the british allow her to reduce their number after her treaty with them in 1805. The strength of her forces varied from four battalions and 85 guns in 1789, to 6 battalions of infantry totaling two thousand, nine hundred and forty nine sepoy, one thousand and seven hundred artillery men, a cavalry of two hundred and forty men, and a bodyguard of two hundred strong . this force was disciplined and officered by Europeans .

From the above statements and observations it is very clear that the Bagum so long as she was on this earth , she lived an eventful and adventurous life. Till the end her mental capabilities were intact. At an advanced age she even then kept herself informed about state matters and took necessary actions whenever required. Though she had handed over the administration of her territories to her adopted son and heir, David Dyce Samru, yet she kept an eye on all important matters and must have given experienced advice to her adopted son. All went well till she was alive. And her name endures forever in her noble deeds.

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