

Jai Narain: The Legacy of the Unit Bania and Canteen Contractor System

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Abstract

'Bania' meaning 'trader' is a Hindi term which over a period of time is not used positively as it progressively was used to describe shrewd or miserly traders. In the Indian army it has been used since British Indian times with a positive and functional connotation. This article is about the legacy of one such Bania and about the contractor system in past and present armies. This system has proved its worth and therefore survives. In an era where contracting out provisioning of certain items and services to the soldiers for their housekeeping and welfare needs is considered an economical way of functioning, this system requires to be strengthened.

Prologue

An important member of the units of the British Indian Army was the 'Unit Bania'. He ran what was the Unit Wet Canteen. Post 1947, though, the institute continues in the Indian Army it is not as robust as in yore. While the old term 'Unit Bania' survives in colloquial, formally he is called the 'Unit Wet Canteen Contractor'. This terminology differentiates it from the 'Unit CSD Canteen¹', which is a self-financing, not for profit attached office of the Ministry of Defence (MoD) set up in 1948. Managed by a board of senior MoD/military officials it aims to provide 'easy access to quality products of daily use, at prices less than market rates' to soldiers, ex-servicemen and their families.²

The 'Unit Bania' predates the Unit CSD by a few centuries. Earlier when there were no banks in far flung areas, the Unit

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Bania was the one who cashed cheques for officers, gave loans to soldiers (invariably without interest), sold items of personal daily use like soaps, clothing, prepared tea and savouries, especially *pakora* and *samosas* (forms of fritters) and sweets like the *Jalebies* and *Gulab Jamun*, provided tailoring services and contributed to and was part of unit welfare activities. My own unit Bania, Mr Subhash Agarwal, was from a long tradition of Banias. I had maintained social relations with him from the time I was commissioned in 1977, into the Second Battalion of the Jammu and Kashmir rifles, till date. In late 2020, I visited him as he was unwell having recovered from a bout of Covid. While talking about his life and institution he brought out a campaign medal awarded to his father. I was intrigued to see that it was a proper medal inscribed as is awarded to a soldier. On its rim was the inscription (as it is on all genuine medals) “Bania Jai Narain, 8 Mtn Bty”. Its clasp stated that it was for the 1930-31 North West Frontier operations.

Sadly, Mr Subhash Agarwal passed away in April 2021 during the devastating second wave of Covid 19. To honour his memory and because I was also intrigued with the medal — medals are not bestowed upon civilian unit contractors at present — I have in this article researched the campaign that Bania Jai Narain took part in and also the institution of the Unit Bania. This article is in two formats. In italics are the historically correct events as seen by Jai Narain. In plain font is a brief study of the unique institution of the Unit Bania.

The Unit Bania System

A camp follower to provide those services to soldiers in the field which were not available or provided by the government is an essential prerequisite for any army. The Regimental Sutler of the US Army of yore or the Post Exchange (PX) or Commissary of the present US Military serve the same function. So does the Navy, Army & Air Force Institution (NAAFI) in the British Army. The erstwhile Sutler system in the US Army was practically the Indian Army ‘Unit Bania System’. The PX and NAAFI are an amalgamation of the Unit Canteen Contractor and Canteen Stores Department (CSD) of the Indian Military.

Why 'Banias'?

The word Bania is derived from the Sanskrit *vanij*, meaning 'a merchant'. The term is widely used to identify members of the traditional mercantile or business castes of India. Thus, Banias are bankers, moneylenders, traders, and shopkeepers. Though some members of the Bania castes are cultivators, more Banias than any other caste follow their traditional caste occupation. The Aggarwals and Oswals are prominent Bania castes of northern India.³ There is considerable speculation as to why the trading ethic has been so important in the western part of the Indian subcontinent. Some scholars feel that the harsh desert environment of Rajasthan forced much of the population to turn to non-agricultural occupations to support themselves. Others have suggested that proximity to the overland and maritime trade routes with the Middle East have played a role in this emphasis on trade and commercial activities. The latter explanation seems to be more correct.

The term Bania is often used in a negative sense to mean someone who is greedy, who exploits customers, who resorts to shady deals, and who will do anything to make a profit. The reason for this image is because before the era of the modern banking system, the Bania was the principal moneylender in the villages. Uneducated and poor peasants who borrowed money at high rates of interest to grow their crops, for dowry, to repair their huts, dig wells or for food during famines — many times could not pay off their loans. They eventually ended up losing their land, because of which the Bania was seen as the villain. Early Bollywood movies contributed in no small measure to this image, portraying the village Bania as a Shylock, in the same manner as the village landlord (zamindar) was painted as the lecherous villain. The fact is that as bankers, moneylenders, traders, and businesspeople, Banias have played an essential role in the functioning of India's economy. Today, many of the country's important industrialists and capitalists come from the Bania castes.

Banias and Sutlers. In the Indian Army, the Unit Bania was held in high esteem as is evident from the fact that they were also awarded a campaign medal. The US Sutler system was the closest to the Unit Bania as would be evident to any Indian Army person

from the description of the Regimental Sutler given below⁴:

“Sutlers were usually selected by the unit officers, (a unit board of officers appoints one in the IA and also regulates his rates). A sutler usually had a business partner who purchased goods and handled other logistical details [...] (the unit Bania may handle these tasks himself or employ others). The scarcity of currency resulted in two things, soldiers bought goods on credit, signing promissory notes authorising the sutler to collect the amount owed at the next pay day (same used to happen earlier in the Indian unit Bania system — with the present proliferation of ATMs and mobile banking this has now reduced considerably).⁵

Sutlers and their employees were civilians subject to military discipline.⁶ In the Indian case, Para 2 (1) (j) of the Indian Army act makes the act applicable to the Unit Bania or his employees in war or on an active border or overseas.⁷

Why a ‘Wet’ Canteen?

In the early mass militaries world over, alcohol imbibing remained one of the most common social exchanges for the rank and file. With low educational levels, terrible housing, few recreational venues, and abominable food, it is no wonder that many soldiers turned to the bottle.⁸ Also communal drinking has always brought individuals together. The soldiers enjoyed their beer, and they enjoyed drinking in the company of one another. However, over a period of time, the British and US armies realised that if internal drinking arrangements were not made, soldiers would frequent bars of ill repute near their posts and cantonments where they could consume spurious liquor, or very hard liquor, and would also frequent prostitutes who operated around or within such bars. In the process they could be cheated and there would also be many instances of breakdown of discipline as well as disorderly conduct. It was decided at some stage that in addition to the ‘dry canteens’ which stocked items of daily use for soldiers, there would be a ‘wet canteen’ where off duty soldiers could drink soft and hard beverages, the harder ones generally being restricted to beer only (in the US Sutler system till it existed, both dry and wet canteens were run by the Sutler).

The Wet Canteens became a sort of enlisted men's pub/restaurant/club. In the British and Indian armies, officers had their own officers' messes and they were forbidden or discouraged from going to the wet canteen unless the men had invited a platoon or company commander for an occasion. Attitudes to public drinking in the Indian society were different from those of the British society. Resultantly, the Unit Wet Canteens in the Indian Army did not have the 'pub' element and remained as mentioned earlier — more of tea and savouries restaurants. During office hours, they also supplied the *Samosas* and *Jalebies* for unit officers in their offices during tea breaks or when a guest dropped in to the office.

8 Mountain Battery (8 Mtn Bty) in the North West Frontier Province (NWFP)

From the 1920s, the Indian independence movement was characterised by Congress' adoption of Gandhi's policy of non-violence and civil disobedience. The movement was in constant ideological evolution. Essentially anti-colonial, it was supplemented by visions of independence and economic development with a secular, democratic, republican, and civil-libertarian political structure. I hailed from Neemuchana village in present Bansur Tehsil of district Alwar, Rajasthan.⁹ Alwar was a princely state. It was lesser affected by the independence movement and, hence, traders from princely states were more likely to be selected for running the unit canteen service in British Indian Army units.

Sometime in the beginning of the 19th century, my father moved to the town of Alwar, which was also the capital of our state. He started off as a small trader and also worked for established contractors in the army. When two units of the Alwar state forces, the Mangal Lancers and the Jey Paltan, fought in the Great War as part of the British forces in the Middle East, my father had gone along with one of these units as a camp follower and, later, on return took contracts in some British Indian Army units. I learnt the job under my father and later was able to bid for and become a canteen contractor with a British Indian Artillery unit, the 8 Mtn Bty (Lahore) in 1925. The Bty had been deployed in the NWFP for quite some time since the Third Afghan War in 1919 for which it was given the Battle Honour "Afghanistan 1919".¹⁰

As stated earlier, in the 20s the Indian independence movement affected every part of British India. In the NWFP it made little headway until 1929 when a landowner in Charsadda — Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan — organised a Frontier Youth League with the objective of obtaining independence. His followers were known as 'Red Shirts' after the red uniforms that they wore. A serious outbreak of rioting occurred in Peshawar city on 23 April 1930. However, deployment of the army brought back normalcy after about 2 to 3 weeks. The unrest continued till December 1930. During this period, the Afridis, who had come in the area, did not want to miss an opportunity of taking advantage of a disturbed situation. Use of the army and aircraft of the RAF broke them up wherever they concentrated their lashkars¹¹. It was fascinating for me to see the Westland Wapiti aircraft landing and taking off from the airfield at Peshawar whenever I went to Peshawar bazaar to replenish the Wet Canteen supplies.

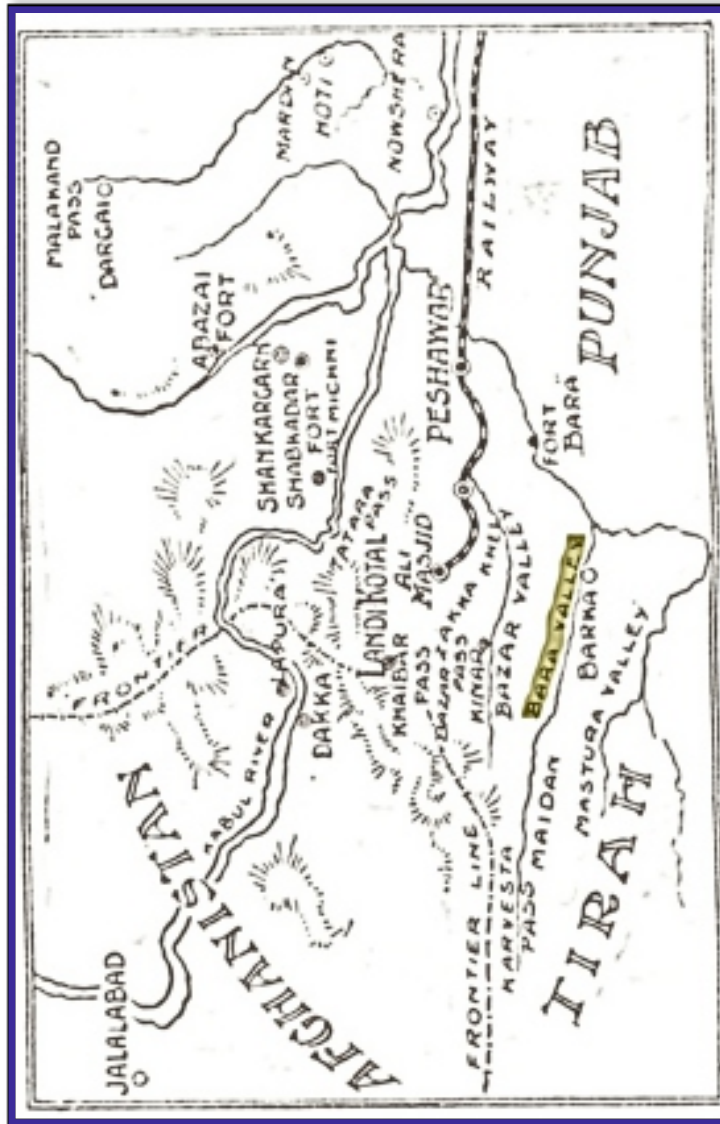
A more serious operation took place in August 1930 when a lashkar, about 3000 strong, carrying revolutionary standards instead of tribal flags¹³ gathered in the Bara Valley with an intention of attacking Peshawar on the 7th or 8th. To counter them, the British had two brigade sized forces, the Naushera Column (three battalions and a mountain battery) and Fordham's Force (three battalions and the 8th (Lahore) Mountain Battery). By this time, I was the unit Bania with the 8th (Lahore) Battery.¹⁴ The battery Commanding Officer (CO) was Major GC Meredith, DSO.¹⁵ I moved along with the 8th Mtn Bty to the Bara Valley, NWFP and set up my canteen. The weather had become pleasant by Indian standards but water was a problem and had to be brought in from the Bara River or some local wells. There was little opposition but the battery was out every day covering the frequent recces in force out of camps and then the withdrawals, by leapfrogging sections of guns.

As time passed, the Kohat garrison was increased by a battalion and the fourth Hazara battery from Abbottabad. Although the Afridi lashkar supporting the agitators disappeared over the next few weeks, the government decided to take over the Khajuri and Aka-Khel plains to the North and South of the Bara River. During October, a camp at Miri-Khel¹⁶ was occupied by the 9th (Jhansi) Infantry Brigade with 23rd Mountain Brigade. The 2nd Infantry Brigade and Nowshera Brigades also reached in



RAF Westland Wapiti aircraft in the NWFP12

(Courtesy IWM from <https://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/205042659>)



The Bara Valley NWFP

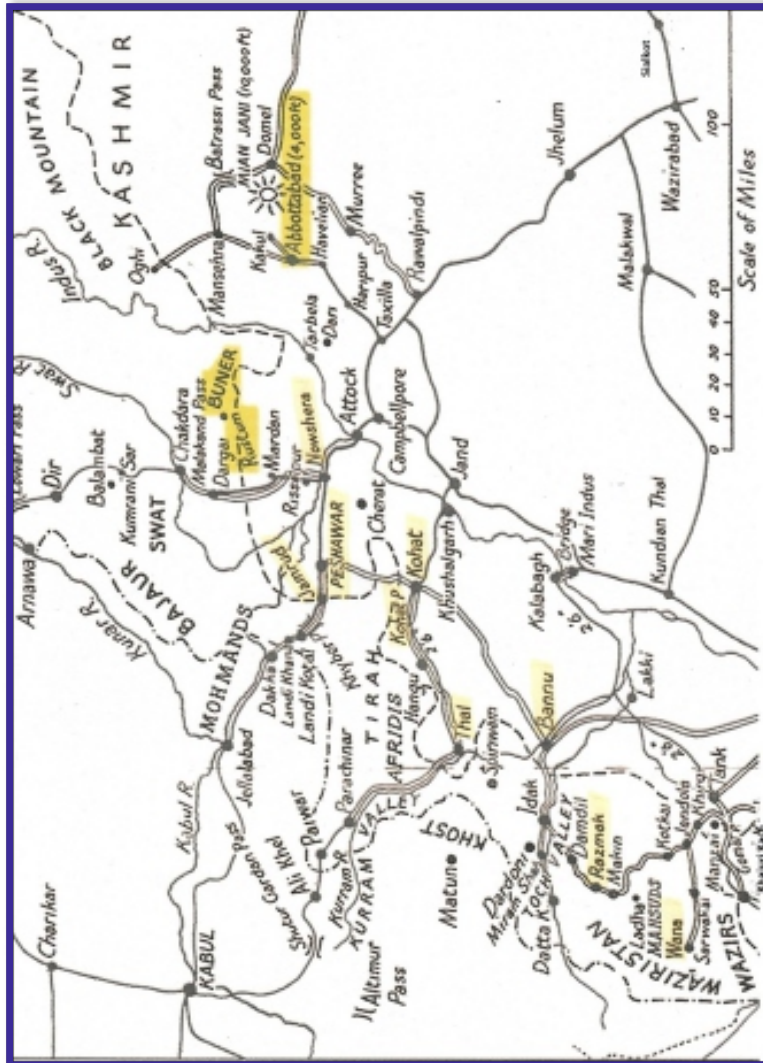
(Map from <https://www.longlongtrail.co.uk/army/other-aspects-of-order-of-battle/british-army-units-stationed-in-india-in-july-1914/>)

November, making it a Division plus force with four batteries plus (16th Mountain, 17th Light, 58th Field and 8th (Lahore) Mountain) and a section (Troop) of 6-inch howitzers of 15th Medium Battery. In my spare time or while supplying food and other items to the troops, I learnt military and artillery terms and could understand their tactical moves. The batteries developed a high standard of snap shooting; all the batteries acquired the habit of dropping a round of gunfire on the target without delay and the OP personal became very efficient at engaging fleeting targets. Whenever the infantry went out, the battery would deploy in selected positions to cover their area domination activities and then withdrawal back to the camp. The roads to Kohat and Jamrud¹⁷ at the Khyber Pass, were also covered by the artillery.

We moved to Miri Khel in November 1930. The 3000 strong lashkar was still in the hills around and would frequently snipe at our patrols and road making parties. December was spent in road-making, recce, and showing the flag all over the Khajuri and Akka Khel plains. Though the weather was pleasant now, the troops were nevertheless exhausted with the frequent movement. Whenever they came back, they would wash and change, and reach my canteen. I had placed straw mats for them to sit and partake of sweet tea, savouries and assorted sweets as also a few charpoys to stretch their legs. I also had set up hookahs and sold sweet tobacco for the men to relax in the evenings.

The army tactics which were tried out in June against the Afridi lashkars did not work this time and the Lashkar closed up to Peshawar from several directions. A guard of 4/11th Sikh Regiment held them off until the arrival of armoured cars and infantry on which the lashkar dispersed but remained in the vicinity in scattered parties. The 8th (Lahore) battery with its 2.75-inch guns (it had not yet converted to 3.7-inch howitzers) opened up with shrapnel but they did not have any satisfactory targets.¹⁸ Nevertheless, they did induce caution and demoralised the tribals.

On 01 April 1932, the NWFP got the status of a province with a legislative assembly and the troubles died down. A bar "North-West Frontier 1930-31" was added to the India General Service medal, and I too received a medal six months after we got back to Bannu. 8th Mtn Bty remained on the Western border till 1944, moving about in stations like Kohat, Razmak, Thal, Bannu,



Area of Deployment 8 Mtn Bty 1930- 1947

(Map From <https://gillww1.files.wordpress.com/2012/09/sketch-map-north-west-frontier.jpg>)

and Wana. In 1940, 2nd Jammu & Kashmir Rifles (Bodyguard) was requisitioned by the British for the NWFP and arrived at Wana in South Waziristan. During this time, I came in contact with the CO Lt Col Abdul Hamid Khan. The state unit did not have a Unit Wet Canteen and the CO asked me to run their canteen. Thus started my association with the J&K Regiment. I did the same for 7th J&K Regiment at Bannu in 1944. Unfortunately, due to some untoward incidents of fratricide, the unit was moved out and subsequently disbanded¹⁹ (The unit was re-raised in 1946, and a few years later, I was very happy when my son Subhash was able to get back the contract for this battalion).

In 1944, a start had been made to form one-class batteries. This was a simple exercise in units with more or less equal personal of different class/religion. Maybe this was a precursor to partition or it was because of administrative convenience to simplify eating habits, especially of meat. 8 Mtn Bty was converted to a pure Punjabi Mussalman battery. It is around this time that I left with some regret because I had spent such a long time in this unit. However, I did not cease being the canteen contractor as I managed the canteen with Muslim Meo employees from Mewat till the battery went to Pakistan on partition. The batteries were now being amalgamated into Regiments. At this time, I was also expanding and could not personally be managing the canteen. Over a course of time, my son Subhash expanded my canteen network to 2, 6, 7, 9 and 15 JAK Rifles and 3 Rashtriya Rifles and 160 Infantry Battalion (TA) — both also JAK RIF units. I had some other units 10,²⁰ and 13 Sikh Regiments, 15 Maratha LI, and 175 Engineers (TA).

8th Mtn Bty (Lahore) went to the Pakistan Army in 1947 along with three other batterys. I was sorry to see it go because a unit becomes part of your life. It was renumbered as the 4th (Lahore) Mtn Bty and became part of 1st Mountain Artillery Regiment of the Royal Pakistan Artillery. Presently it is part of 1 Field Regiment (SP) of the Pakistan Army.²¹ Two of my four sons got into the canteen contractor business with one of them dealing with many battalions of the Punjab Regiment.

Conclusion

The Unit Wet Canteen Contractor exists in the Indian Army. The unit keeps an oversight on the hygienic preparation of the unit

Bania's eatables through the duty officers of the day and through periodic inspections by the Regimental Medical Officer (RMO). Enterprising COs of some units extend help to the unit Bania to provide a good atmosphere for the men to relax — especially in field — by providing a good and clean accommodation/location for him or even providing him some items of furniture. Units also oversee the rates charged for items so that there is quality control and both the unit and the Bania get their due. The first in terms of service and the other in terms of reasonable profit, as this is after all a commercial enterprise. Some units have dispensed with the unit Bania and run their own wet canteen. However, this engages unit manpower as well as is a digression from the primary task of the unit. The unit Bania is an institutionalised system of outsourcing welfare and a part of the Indian Army's regimental system. In the view of this author, this is an organisation which needs to be strengthened and maintained. The spirit of Bania Jai Narain must be giving his benign blessings to his grandson Sanjay Agarwal who is carrying on his tradition being the wet canteen contractor.

Endnotes

¹ CSD standing for Canteen Stores Department.

² CSD Website.

³ Encyclopedia.com. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/humanities/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/banias?msckid=e477178ac56a11ec89f8967df61d8e1a>

⁴ Claire Prechtel-Klusdens, "Sutlers of the Civil War", *NGS Journal, US National Archives, April—June 2014 · Volume 40, Number 2*. pp 39-42

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid. p 42.

⁷ It states "Persons subject to this Act. 1. The following persons shall be subject to this Act wherever they may be namely: -(j) Persons not otherwise subject to military law who, on active service in camp, on the march or at any frontier post specified by the Central Government by notification in this behalf, are employed by, or are in the service of, or are followers of, or accompany any portion of the regular Army".

⁸ Tim Cook, "Wet Canteens and Worrying Mothers: Alcohol, Soldiers and Temperance Groups in the Great War", *Social History, Vol 35, No 70* (2002), <https://hssh.journals.yorku.ca/index.php/hssh/issue/view/337>

⁹ As confirmed from Mr Sanjay Agarwal in April 2022.

¹⁰ CAL Graham, Brigadier General, *The History of the Indian Mountain Artillery*, (Aldershot, Gale & Polden 1957), p.215.

¹¹ A *Lashkar* was roughly a battalion sized irregular force of tribesmen.

¹² These aircraft were probably of No 5 (Army Cooperation) Squadron RAF which was flying Westland Wapiti aircraft out of RAF Peshawar.

¹³ Graham, p.232.

¹⁴ The artillery at that time was not organised into three battery regiments as they were in subsequent reorganisations.

¹⁵ Graham, p.232.

¹⁶ This is most likely the place which is now known as Jhansi Post and is South of Barra.

¹⁷ Jamrud Fort at the mouth of the Khyber Pass was engraved on the Indian General Service Medal.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ K Brahma Singh, *History of the Jammu & Kashmir Rifles (1820-1956)*, (New Delhi, Lancer International: 1989)

²⁰ 10 Sikh is presently not among the units where Mr Sanjay Agarwal has a Wet Canteen contract.

²¹ Maj Gen Syed Ali Hamid, "Mountain Guns and Trusty Mules", *Friday Times*, Nov 15, 2019. <https://www.thefridaytimes.com/2019/11/15/mountain-guns-and-trusty-mules/>