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## **Historiography of the Indian Army during World War I (1914-18)**

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### **Abstract**

*The First World War contemporaneously called the Great War broke out in Europe on August 4, 1914. It involved many nations, some willingly and others unwillingly. All the British colonies of the world called upon to contribute with men, money and material to fill the War demands. India as a part of the British Empire was pushed into the War. The British relied heavily on the Indian Army during the course of the War. In India, about 14,57,000 army men (including 9,85,000 combatants) were mobilised during the War. The Punjab supplied more than one-third of the total number who served. Indian soldiers fought many battles in extreme cold and unfavourable conditions in Europe and other theaters of the War. On the centenary of the War (2014), many new works relating to the role and experiences of Indian army in the different theatres of war had been released in India and abroad. These works have opened the subject up for further research and raised more questions. Many new aspects of War, especially relating to the life experiences of the soldiers in the trenches has come up. The present paper details the historiography of Indian army engaged in the First World War. It traces the process from early examples, such as the battle histories written by J.W.B. Merewether, Frederick Smith and James Willcocks shortly after the end of the conflict to present day analyses. The article raises questions as to why the significant contribution of Indian soldiers has remained little known and why the past two decades have led to a resurgence in interest to bring this narrative to the attention of wider public audiences.*

**Key Words:** *The First World War, Indian Army, Historiography, The British*

In August 1914, the Great War or the First World War was started after Kaiser William II, Emperor of Germany declared general mobilization of all German forces.

<sup>1</sup> The War took the life of millions. Before 1914, writes Eric Hobsbawm the only quantities measured in millions, outside astronomy, were populations of countries and data of production, commerce and finance. Since 1914, we have become used to measuring the numbers of victims in such magnitudes. The casualties of even localized wars are measured in millions.<sup>2</sup> Europe was the source and the centre of the conflict but given the vast empires of many European states and the fact that the war also became one about imperial control, it is hardly surprising that it engulfed large swathes of the world. As the historian Hew Strachan has noted, 'War for Europe meant war for the world'. If the war was a strange and surprising outcome for Europe, it was perhaps even more so for many of the colonial troops who were quickly drafted into fighting on behalf of their imperial masters and found themselves engaged in various battles across a variety of fronts.<sup>3</sup> At the time of War, the Great Britain and the France were the two largest colonial empires in the world and both

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used the resources of their colonies extensively. Manpower was the major concerns for all the nations during the War.

The Britain relied heavily on the Indian Army and India more generally for the war effort, but there were also contributions by other British colonies-Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. France recruited troops from West Africa, Algeria, Tunisia, Morocco and Indo-China. Over the four years of the war, fighting took place not just in Europe, but also Africa (which was completely under European rule with the exception of Ethiopia and Liberia), the Middle East, Central Asia and the Far East, with Indians fighting on many of these fronts. The Britain had an army of 2,50,000 men on the beginning of war. Half of them were overseas, a little more than 1,00,000 men could be spared for the first battles on the Western Front.<sup>4</sup> It had to depend on its colonies and every possible effort was made to fill the demand of manpower and resources from the colonies. On August 1, 1914, the strength of the combatant troops of the Indian Army was 1,55,423 men including 15,000 British officers, while the strength of the non-combatant branch was 45,660 men. The total strength of Imperial Service troops was 22,479 men.<sup>5</sup> The British War Council agreed upon the Indian involvement in the War as early as August 5, 1914. On 8 August, four days after the Britain declared War on Germany, two divisions of the Indian Army were mobilized. Lord Hardinge, the Viceroy of India (1910-1916) had suggested that Indian Army should fight shoulder to shoulder with their British colleagues in defence of the King Emperor and his country. In four years, more than ten lakh soldiers were sent from India to fight for the Empire.<sup>6</sup> India provided Britain with a volunteer army almost equal in numbers to the combined forces contributed by the dominions of Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa. Nearly every sixth soldier fighting on the behalf of the British Empire would come from the Indian subcontinent. During the War, Indians saw active service not just on the Western Front, but also in the Middle East, Africa and even China. In addition to manpower, India sent horses, ponies, mules and even buffaloes and camels. It also contributed £100 million to the War Loans.

## II

When the War started in 1914, no one in India had an idea that within a month of the starting of the War, Indian soldiers would be deployed to Europe. The primary concerns of Indian Army, before the War, were the defence of India itself and the protection of British interests in India's immediate neighbourhood. The possibility of sending troops abroad was a secondary consideration and yet the need for trained men to stem the German advance on the western front became so immediate that India's army was quickly identified as a crucial source of manpower for the war effort.<sup>7</sup> And yet, by August 1914, hundreds of thousands of Indians not just as infantry and cavalry, but also sappers, miners and followers were making their way for the first time across the *Kala Pani*, the black waters that Hindus had centuries been forbidden to cross for fear of losing caste, to take part in the war. They initially fought on the western front (the first time Indian troops were deployed in Europe) and then in the Middle East and East Africa as well. The Indian troops had never been deployed to Europe before, though they had fought in places like China, Abyssinia, Egypt and Sudan. The tens of thousands of soldiers remained on foreign soil of Europe, the Middle East and East Africa

for four years. Before departure from India, Most of the sepoys did not know where the War was. In fact they had not known where they were going. They had no idea what the War was going to be and how long it was going to last. No one had heard of such a long War.

They fought in extreme difficult conditions. Hot climate, inadequate food and medical facilities and poor drinking water made life hell. One medical officer wrote home, "we drink river water but it gives about an inch of mud per tumbler".<sup>8</sup> Their fight, their life in the trenches, the cold weather of Europe, the hot weather of deserts are only one aspect of the War. As the War progressed, the experience of the soldiers on the frontlines, in the trenches and in foreign countries challenged and changed the ways in which they approached colonial authority. Issues across that began affecting morale. Soldiers chafed at their being sent back to the trenches soon after having recovered from injuries. 'We are all to be killed. Not a scrap of India is to be left' wrote Juvar Singh of the Bhopal infantry while recovering in hospital in England.<sup>9</sup> Some were unhappy about the poor conditions of service, the inequality of pay and lack of opportunity for promotions. These factors occasionally led to tangible acts of dissent among Indian soldiers. Most commonly soldiers wrote letters to their friends and family seeking to dissuade them from enlisting in the army. In May 1915, Havildar Abdul Rahman wrote to a friend to say:

"For God's sake don't come, don't come, don't come to war in Europe... and tell my brother Mohammad Yakub Khan for God's sake don't enlist. If you have any relatives, my advice is do not let them enlist."<sup>10</sup>

The provision of rations for soldiers created further problems. Hindus did not eat beef, Muslims did not eat pork and the Brahmans were vegetarian. Many soldiers could only eat food prepared by the members of their own caste and meat for consumption by Muslims had to be slaughtered in a prescribed fashion.<sup>11</sup> Sowar Yakub Khan, 36<sup>th</sup> Jacob Horse, wrote:

"For the last two years I have abstained from everything unlawful. It is great pity that everything that is most useful in this country (France) is absolutely barred by our religion, but we have to put up with it. I have not touched meat for two years, even though it be *halal*. I have not touched meat for this reason- that it all comes together, both that intended for Sikhs and for us".<sup>12</sup>

The War deeply influenced the Indian soldiers. Their experiences in the War fronts affected their views on a number of important social and cultural issues. The War put soldiers into unique conditions that produced a kind of shattered experiences which broke many barriers. Tara Singh of 6<sup>th</sup> Cavalry wrote from France:

"The state of affairs here is that when I returned from Marseilles to the firing line, we had to change trains en route, and we wandered about Paris for eight hours. On that day we all ate at the same table. Our company was composed of five sepoys (of whom three were Sikhs and two Muslims), two sweepers and three cooks. But we all ate together at the same table. Moreover, we have often eaten food and drink tea prepared by Muslims".<sup>13</sup>

### III

The War had shattered the dream of nineteenth century. The disruption and dislocation followed by poverty, inflation and depression had obliged scholars from various disciplines to write the history of the War. The histories written in England and Europe delved more into the causes of origin of the War, events of War and subsequent disruption caused by the War. India's contribution to the War was not on the agenda of the British historians and thus it remained confined to few lines or in footnotes. The British government in India, however praised India for its support to the War and contribution made by it in the form of men, money and material. Interest on the contribution of India and the Indian army to the World War 1 started after the fiftieth anniversary of the War. Interest in this area was revived after 1970s.

The historiography of the Indian army in WWI began with semi-official history by J.W.B. Merewether and Fredrick Smith, published in 1919. A few memoirs were then published, mostly from the high command such as *With the Indians in France* by General Sir James Willcocks. These works have opened the subject up for further research and raised more questions. General historians of WWI, such as those by Strachan and Keegan, have discussed the role of Indian Army to some extent. These works focus on their arrival at the Western Front, major battles such as *Neuwe Chappelle* (a village in Eastern France) and their early removal to the Middle Eastern Front. The world commemorated the centenary of the First World War in 2014 on a large scale. On that occasion, a number of new works on the role of India and Indian soldiers to World War I were released in India and abroad. In these books, many new aspects of War, especially relating to the life of the soldiers in the trenches and their experiences has come up.

J.W.B. Merewether and Fredrick Smith wrote a contemporary work entitled *The Indian Corps in France*, published first in 1917 and then 1919. This work is entirely focused on Indian soldiers' involvement on the Western Front (France and Belgium) of World War I, despite the British Indian Army's deployment in much greater numbers in the Middle East and Africa. J.W.B. Merewether and Fredrick Smith meticulously trace the Indian Corps's involvement in the War in Europe up to their withdrawal in 1915 after taking participate in the Battle of Loos, the Battles of Ypres, Neuve Chappelle, Festubert, Givenchy etc. This book offers a detail record for posterity and remains an important entry for all historians working on British Indian Army until which fought in France.<sup>14</sup>

General Sir James Willcocks (1857-1926), who commanded the Indian corps in Europe during the War, wrote a book *With the Indians in France*, published in 1920. This is a detailed contemporary work on the contribution of Indian army in the battlefield of France and Belgium. He gives a very readable supplement to the official history of the Indian Corps in France. The better part of his book is a detailed account of the work of the Indian troops in France, based on his diary and official papers. It showed that the difficulties with which the Indian soldiers had to face and the courage with which they encountered them. He praised the contribution of the Indian corps in Europe by following words:

"It must not be imagined that I have any illusions as to the part played by the Indians as will be made clear throughout this book. No one knows better than



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I do how utterly impossible it would have been for them to do what they did, without the help and example of their illustrious comrades of the Scotch, Irish and English battalions which formed part of each brigade or of the splendid territorial units which later joined us and the superb British Artillery which paved the way for all over efforts. But of these history will assuredly furnish a brilliant account. It is not always so of Indian troops; their raconteurs are few and far between; the chief actors in the play, still living, will probably be counted by tens not thousands. The rank and file will furnish no writers to thrill the generations to come; they will just pass with the great masses of India content that they have done their duty and been faithful to their salt".<sup>15</sup>

David Omissi's work, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters 1914-18*<sup>16</sup> is a collection of letters of soldiers written from War Fronts. He has selected 657 letters from a collection of many thousands, written by soldiers, who fought in Europe, thereby opening up new windows that enable us to peep into their psyche and acquaint us with the social, physiological and economic pressures the soldiers faced. The letters written in Urdu, Gurmukhi and some in Hindi and Garhwali have been translated in English by translators. Many soldiers were illiterate. Therefore, their letters were written by scribes. The most fascinating aspect of the letters is soldiers' comment on relationship with contemporary French society. These letters not only comprise an important historical document but also open a window on the psychological effect of warfare as they are eyewitness accounts in their expression of lived experience. Their writers left important records of their reactions to the cataclysmic events they found themselves involved in and their responses to various aspects of European life, from its agricultural and industrial modernity to its education, food, culture and attitude towards women. Many soldiers were disillusioned with the War and became depressed while others remained committed to their nation's cause. Widespread disillusionment argued that WWI was partly responsible for diminishing enthusiasm for the Empire. Soldiers praised gender equality, advancement of women and universal education in Europe. The source of these letters is India Office Records. The author has given voice to unsung heroes whose struggles and stories never find a place in history.

Vedica Kant's *If I die here who will remember me? India and the First World War*<sup>17</sup> narrates the role of Indian soldiers from the trenches in France and Belgium to Battles in the Middle East. Using first-hand accounts such as letters, documents from various archives and rare photographs, the author reconstructs the story of War from Indian perspective. This book documents for the first time, India's contribution to the First World War with details of the different theatres in which Indian soldiers took part. The author observed that the Indian soldiers fought courageously and in an exemplary manner during the war largely with a sense of duty to uphold the honour of their regiments. The collection of rare images of the soldiers sheds valuable light on the Indian soldiers' experiences in the Western as well as the Ottoman Fronts. In addition, the author also examines the unsettling encounters the Indian soldiers had with foreign, especially European culture and how it impacted the way they viewed life and living back home.

Shrabani Basu's *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front 1914-18*<sup>18</sup> is written in flawless style. She has told the story of soldiers as no one has done before. Many soldiers were illiterate and travelled from remote villages in India to fight in a muddy trenches in France and Flanders. The tragedy of these heroes is that they were not only forgotten, but the country for which they fought also treated them with typical racial shabbiness. The author narrates tales of such 'disgusting bias' shown by the officers that it is almost heart wrenching to imagine the plight of the soldiers and their families. By using letters of the soldiers, she give a remarkable picture of an Indian view of trench warfare that was very different to that of the British. The book reveals that the British enlisted Indian children as young as ten to fight against the Germans during the War as the demand of manpower was high. But despite all this, Indians soldiers fought with dedication, courage and strength and won the highest bravery awards. The author argues that the Great War changed the behavior Indian soldiers. They started raising questions against the misrule of the British government in India when they came back after the conclusion of War.

*Neuve Chapelle: The Jullundur Brigade in France & Flanders 1914-15*<sup>19</sup> written by Pushpinder Singh Chopra, a military historian, is a detailed study of the Battle of *Neuve Chapelle* fought by the Jullundur Brigade of Indian Army. The author has also collected maps and photographs of Punjabi Soldiers who fought in Europe especially at *Neuve Chapelle*. Another work *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western Front 1914-15* by Gordon Corrigan<sup>20</sup>, is a detailed account of the Indian soldiers' involvement during the fighting actions in the France and Belgium. The work is a well-researched account based on original unpublished sources and interviews. Immediately after the declaration of World War I, Indian Army of two infantry divisions and a cavalry brigade was ordered to embark for the Western Front who fought major battles in the Europe in bitter winter conditions with inadequate winter supply of cloths and other facilities for two years. In a country they had never seen, against an enemy of whom they knew little, and in a cause that was not their own, they fought for the honor of their country and their regiments. It provides useful account about the life of Indian soldiers in Europe. The illustrated maps and photographs depict activities of Indian soldiers during the War in Europe.

*The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* by Gajendra Singh<sup>21</sup>, focuses on different aspects of the War and its impact on the life of soldiers between the two World Wars. In the two World Wars, hundreds of thousands of Indian sepoys were mobilized, recruited and shipped overseas to fight for the British Crown. The Indian Army was the chief Imperial reserve for an empire under threat. But how did those sepoys understand and explain their own war experiences and indeed themselves through that experience? How much did their testimonies realise and reflect their own fragmented identities as both colonial subjects and imperial policemen? The book draws upon the accounts of Indian combatants to explore how they came to terms with the conflicts. Gajendra Singh traces the evolution of military identities under the British Raj and considers how those identities became embattled in the praxis of soldiers' war testimonies – chiefly letters, depositions and interrogations. It becomes a story of mutiny and obedience of horror, loss and silence. This book is an important contribution to histories of the British Empire, South Asia and the two World Wars.

Amarinder Singh's work *Honour and Fidelity: India's Military Contribution to the Great War 1914-1918*<sup>22</sup> glorify the role of Indian soldiers in the victory of allies during the First World War and how Indian soldiers changed the tide of the War in favour of the British. The book begins with a detail description of the army's mobilisation for war. Two infantry divisions from India were dispatched to the Western Front (Europe). The Indian units fought bravely, but suffered severely. The two divisions that fought in France and Flanders for under a year comprised nearly 24,000 men. They suffered high casualties in compare to other British forces. The book also explain about the Indian soldiers' role in other theatres of the Great War like East Africa, Mesopotamia (Iraq), Gallipoli, Egypt, Palestine and Syria etc. On that theatres of War, the Indian soldiers too fought under unfamiliar and difficult conditions. But they won many gallantry awards. The author mainly concentrates on the battles and campaigns in this work and does not give any importance to other social and economic implications of the War. The work claims to be based on archival and regimental sources, but does not give evidence.

The most important literary work *Across the Black Waters*<sup>23</sup> is written by Mulk Raj Anand, published in 1940. The novel was largely drafted while Mulk Raj Anand was in Spain, fighting for the Spanish republican cause in its civil war in 1937. It describes the experience of Lalu, a Punjabi sepoy in the Indian Army, fighting on behalf of the Britain against the Germans in Europe during World War I. He is portrayed by the author as an innocent peasant whose poor family was evicted from their land and who did not know what the war is about. But he fought many battle with other Indian soldiers in the War. The author also gives an account of the interaction of Indian soldiers with the French. This literary work also sheds a valuable light on the contribution of the Indian army to the British war efforts. It was an important literary attempt to give the sepoy a voice and tell the story of war from his perspective and experiences.

Thus the Indian soldiers fought bravely at the various theatres of the World War I. They fought first time in Europe on a large scale during the War against powerful powers of the World. In France, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Egypt etc. they fought different battles in difficult conditions. They shared their experiences through letters which they have written from the different fronts. Many historians highlighted the role of India and Indian Army during the Great War in their works time to time. Major works on the life experiences and the role of Indian Army to the War have appeared on the centenary of the First World War in 2014. These works have taken hitherto untouched aspects of War: the soldiers, their battles, their likes, their dislikes, their fears, their worries and tragedies.

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