**The British Indian Army in the First World War**

At the outbreak of the War in August 1914, the British Indian Army mustered 194,000 regular soldiers and 46,000 non-combatants, giving a total of 250,000 personnel. By Armistice in November 1918, the force had grown to nearly 1.5 million, with a million serving as soldiers.

In total, the Indian Army despatched from Indian ports some 1.3 million men and 173,000 animals to nearly all theatres of war across Europe, Africa and Asia. One in every six soldiers of the British Empire was from the Indian subcontinent; its contribution was the equivalent of all the ‘white’ forces from the rest of the British Empire combined (namely Canada, Australia, New Zealand and South Africa).

Care was taken to only recruit soldiers from peoples who were considered to have a proven track record of military prowess. Indians from Southern India for example were regarded as “soft” and racially inferior according to the Social Darwinist British thinking of the period. Recruitment from city populations was also generally avoided partly because of the risk of introducing radical or nationalist sentiment into the ranks of the Indian military. Thus, Indian units were composed of soldiers from various ethnic groups or classes, mainly comprising Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Punjabi Hindus, Brahmins, Rajputs and Gurkhas (who hailed from the independent country of Nepal). These peoples conformed to the British perception of a “martial race”. (Of these groups the Sikhs were often treated as the cream of the British Indian Army. In a well-known guide by the British officer J.W.B Merewether they were regarded as the perfect martial people.)

The British had also learnt from the Indian Mutiny or Sepoy Uprising of 1857 (also known as the First War of Indian Independence in modern India) never to rely too heavily on one religion, culture or caste for its supply of Indian soldiers. Muslims, for example, were generally limited to about a third of the British Indian Army. While some regiments drew from one ethnicity, culture or religion it was common for Indians of different faiths and backgrounds to also serve within the same regiment. This was also a means of helping to maintain British control since the diversity of backgrounds made it more difficult to spread seditious ideas (such as that of Indian independence).

These soldiers fought in all the major theatres of war on land, air and sea, alongside British troops. Indian soldiers were all recruited as volunteers. This was in part due to the propaganda that had created expectations of a return: men were going to war, not to die away from home, but to return raised in economic independence, self-assurance and standing with government.

Indian Amy soldiers were in action on the Western Front within a month of the start of the war. Some believed the Indian Corps saved the front line from collapse. A total of 140,000 men, comprising 90,000 combatants (those in the front-line) and 50,000 non-combatants (those in auxiliary battalions), saw active service on the Western Front in France and Belgium.

After a year of front-line duty, sickness, casualties and a loss of highly trained British officers (who understood the cultures and religions of their men) reduced the Indian Corps to the point where it had to be withdrawn (although Indian cavalry continued to serve on the Western Front).

Nearly 700,000 Indian Army soldiers served in the Middle East, fighting with distinction against the Ottoman Empire in the Mesopotamian theatre of war. Indian Army troops also served in Aden, Egypt, Palestine, Persia, Italy, Salonica, Russia, East and West Africa, on the Gallipoli peninsula and even in China.

Indian Army soldiers won 9,500 medals in the five main theatres of war, i.e. France and Belgium, East Africa, Mesopotamia, Sinai (Egypt) and Palestine, and Gallipoli (they won a further 3,500 medals in India and in the frontier wars), including 11 Victoria Crosses – the supreme award for valour. By the end of the war a total of 57,000 Indian Army soldiers had been reported dead or missing; 64,000 were wounded.

**Diet**

Diet was a sensitive issue for Indian soldiers and a complex logistical one for the British military authorities.

Muslim soldiers were typically meat-eaters. They ate most animals such as beef, lamb, chicken or mutton) but not pork. Due to religious reasons, the animal had to be slaughtered in the correct fashion so that it was considered *halal* (permissible)*.*

While many Hindu and Sikh soldiers were vegetarian, others ate meat such as pork, lamb, chicken or mutton, but the animal had to be killed in the *jhatka* fashion (i.e. decapitation with the single stroke of a sword). They refused, however, to eat beef on religious and cultural grounds.

Caste was another complication that meant that soldiers of certain castes would not eat or drink with those deemed ‘impure’. Cooks and their kitchens therefore had to be carefully selected so as not to offend the soldiers’ religious and caste-based sensibilities.

While there was no official vegetarian option for British troops, provision was made for Indian soldiers. This included mixed spices of ginger, turmeric, chillies and garlic, lentils (*dhal*) and wheat flour (*atta*). Instead of meat, vegetarians received additional cane sugar (*gur*) or milk.

**Treatment of the Sick**

As a result of their involvement in the fighting on the Western Front there was a need for thousands of wounded and sick Indian troops to be treated in Europe. Military hospitals were set up in Brighton (including in George IV’s Royal Pavilion) where careful provision were made to ensure that soldiers had little cause for offence.

Water from the well in the gardens was plumbed into separate neatly labelled Hindu and Muslim taps in every room. Similarly labelled milk churns and jugs were lined up in nine newly built field kitchens.

Instead of squatting comfortably on the ground, the regimental cooks and orderlies had to be trained how to cook standing up at what must have appeared to be a bizarre western stove.

In the town, a butcher had set up a halal slaughterhouse and supplied wagon-loads of goats for the Muslim convalescents.

New bathrooms – also segregated – were in place, with squat lavatories instead of western-style ones.

However not all hospitals were equally well run. In the Kitchener Military Hospital in Brighton, Colonel Bruce Seton’s draconian regime (housed in a workhouse tipped with barbed wire and patrolled by military police) provoked one of his patients to attempt his murder. Fraternisation with local British women was also regarded as scandalous.

**The Role of Religion**

In general, Indian troops had complete religious freedom during the war. They were free to hold religious rites and festivals except when they were actually engaged in military operations. Religious artefacts and ritual occasions, such as the Guru’s birthday (for Sikhs) or the end of the fast of Ramadan (for Muslims), perhaps took on greater significance because the men were so far from home.

Religion was central to the way in which Indian soldiers tried to make sense of the war. Several Hindu soldiers remarked that being killed in battle, in the service of King-Emperor, would end the cycle of death and reincarnation, and would send the soldier directly to paradise. Sikh soldiers occasionally referred to coreligionists who had “suffered martyrdom” on the battlefield.

Religious artefacts, such as ceremonial daggers and combs (for Sikhs) and sacred threads (for high-caste Hindus), were of particular importance to Indian soldiers. A charity, the Indian Soldiers’ Fund, was set up in Britain to supply such items, and to offer medical assistance and comforts to the troops.

Efforts were made to send volumes of scriptures and religious artefacts for Indian troops on campaign in France or those recovering in hospitals in England. Donors included altruistic organisations such as St. John’s Ambulance Association and private individuals in India.

Burial rights were also observed according to the respective religions of the fallen. Traditionally, Sikhs and Hindus (including Gurkhas) cremate their dead and scatter their ashes in flowing waters. This practice was followed for the 53 Sikh and Hindu soldiers who died in Brighton hospitals during the War. Each was given an open-air cremation at a specially built funeral platform on the South Downs overlooking Brighton.

Muslims traditionally bury their dead. The burial ground near the Woking Mosque received the bodies of 21 Muslim soldiers.

Perhaps the greatest threat to the cohesion of the British Indian Army came from religion, in particular after the Ottoman Empire in Turkey entered the conflict; it meant that the British Empire was now at war with a Muslim power.

Most Muslim soldiers concluded that the war was still lawful; but there were some desertions from Muslim units on the Western Front, as elsewhere.

There were also at least three mutinies of Muslim troops in other theatres of war, usually when the troops in question suspected that they were going to be sent to fight against the Turks.

German propaganda was also distributed in prisoner-of-war camps designed mainly for South Asian troops. In the Half-moon camp at Wünsdorf near Berlin, a mosque was even constructed in an effort to convince Muslims to switch their allegiance away from the British Empire.

**British Attitudes Towards Indian Soldiers**

British military authorities were careful not to let white women nurses treat Indians. Unlike in France, where records show that female nurses treated Indian soldiers, in England they were treated by male doctors and male nurses (with a few civilian exceptions). This was mainly due to the fear of sexual liaisons taking place that were seen as harmful to the reputation of white women.

As their letters suggest, though complimentary about the care they received, Indian soldiers were critical of the restrictions placed on their movement. Chaperoned at every occasion, with every outing carefully stage-managed, many felt like prisoners.

Some of the British thought it wrong that Asians (and Africans) should fight in a “white-man’s war” on European soil. German propaganda in particular highlighted the risk to the future of the colonial system and supremacy of the “white race” (effectively implying Britain, France and Germany), if Asian (and African) soldiers were trained in the handling of modern arms and brought to Europe. It was argued that they would lose all respect for the white man if they were allowed to participate as equals and experience their vulnerability.