'The Nation Within': British India at War 1939–1947

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IN A RECENT ARTICLE, David Reynolds has shown how the term, 'the Second World War' came into existence in 1941 and 1942. He suggests that the use of this phrase has tended to obscure the manner in which a series of major regional conflicts, with varied origins, flowed together into a catastrophic maelstrom between 1939 and 1945.[1] To the Japanese, the 'Great East Asian War' stretched from 1933 to 1945. General Mutaguchi, one the most notorious of the Japanese commanders, certainly saw it in this light. Mutaguchi played a major part in the Marco Polo Bridge Incident of 1937, which began the great conflict with China. He made his last throw in the perilous Japanese offensive against India in March–June 1944, which culminated in the battles of Imphal and Kohima. Mutaguchi pressed relentlessly for this campaign, hoping that a great victory here would atone for his leading the nation into the long and bloody Chinese conflict.[2] From an Indian, Burmese or Malayan point of view, however, Japan's Great East Asian War precipitated what we might call a 'Great South Asian War', which lasted from 1941 to 1955 and beyond. This war comprised the Japanese conquest of South-East Asia in 1942, the subsequent British reconquest of 1944–5, the Indo Pakistan War of 1948–9, the Burmese civil wars of 1946–53 and the Communist insurrection in

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[1] David Reynold, 'The origins of the two "world wars"; historical discourse and international politics', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 38, 1 (2003), 29–44.

[2] The classic history of the Burma campaign, notable for its use of Japanese sources is Louis Allen, *Burma. The longest war 1941–45* (London, 1984).

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Malaya. All these conflicts, along with the contemporary intercommunal massacres across the region, were bound together in tight chains of causation.

The pivotal event in the 'Great South Asian War' was the reconquest of Burma by William Slim's Fourteenth Army, a largely Indian force, between July 1944 and August 1945.[3] On the high passes of Assam and north Burma, the Fourteenth Army inflicted on the Japanese the greatest land defeat in their modern history, with more than 100,000 casualties. The 'forgotten army' ensured, by a narrow margin, that the British would retain a degree of initiative in their dealings with South and South-East Asian nationalisms. It secured the partial continuation of British power in the East from 1945 to 1965, especially in the critical tin and rubber economy of Malaya. Along with D-Day, it made possible Britain's escape from complete eclipse by US power and resources, even though as Robinson and Louis argued, the British Empire hereafter became an 'Anglo-American' empire.[4] Most significantly, the British reconquest of Burma determined the future of a series of regional conflicts which were to govern the history of South and South-East Asia over the next two generations. It destroyed the Indian National Army, which had fought on the Japanese side, so ensuring the emergence of Nehru's socialist and non-aligned India. It swung the balance towards Aung San's Burmese Independence Army and against the Communists. Broadly, too, the great 1944–5 offensive militarised and mobilised India, contributing to the tensions which exploded during 1947–9 in Partition, communal massacre and post-colonial warfare.

In this lecture, I intend to explore India's response to the Second World War from 1942 to 1945. Over these years, a deeply unpopular alien government managed to mobilise more than three million men for active warfare and at least another ten million men and women for war-related service and labour which many of them viewed with ambivalence. It considerably extended, even if it did not systematically 'develop' the infrastructure of a poor country which had been battered by years of depression and official neglect. In the midst of a major famine, when as a senior financial official said, 'you cannot tighten the belt of a skeleton',[5] it supported a huge range of hospital support staff and civilian experts.

[3] Sir William Slim, *Defeat into Victory* (London, 1956).

[4] Ronald Robinson and Wm Roger Louis, 'The imperialism of de-colonisation', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 22, 3 (1994), 462–511.

[5] Statement of Financial Adviser, Military Finance, at Army Commanders' Conference, 9 July 1943, India Intelligence Summary, 23 July 1943, Oriental and India Office Collections, British Library (hereafter OIOC), L/WS/1/1433.

Most remarkable, this etiolated colonial state secured the temporary, ambiguous and partial cooperation of a sufficient number of India's farmer-soldiers, merchants, industrialists and middle-class professionals to defeat Asia's most formidable military power. This was a power that had proclaimed 'Asia for the Asians!' and had been a model for Indian nationalists since 1905. If the British Government of India was, as Gandhi famously said, a 'failing bank' issuing post-dated cheques, its credit seemed surprisingly robust. I consider that this story throws light not only on a critical phase of Indian history, but on the nature of colonial hegemony, on ideologies of cooperation and resistance and on the control of labour in colonised societies more broadly.

To appreciate India's partial, geographically limited and yet profound transformation, we must understand that the colonial system was on the point of almost complete dissolution as late as July 1942. Senior officials conceded that, had the Japanese been able to put two divisions into south India that year, they could have conquered the whole of the Peninsula within a few weeks. British and Indian troops were struggling back from Burma through Arakan and Assam, demoralised and disordered. Huge numbers of wounded soldiers were left without adequate medical facilities in foetid camps around Gauhati in Assam. British prestige had suffered a near knockout blow as perhaps 140,000 refugees struggled through the mud and high passes back to India.[6] Of these, at the lowest reckoning, perhaps 50,000 perished of malnutrition and disease and the figure may have approached 100,000. Despite official denials, the evacuation policy was contradictory, incompetently executed and riddled with assumptions about race, nutrition and fitness. The 'Quit India' crowds that raged through the eastern Indian towns in the summer of 1942 had every reason to think that the Raj was at an end.[7] With their own eyes people had seen the lines of demoralised and wounded soldiers and heard from Indian and Burmese refugees of the headlong flight of the white rulers.

The initial riposte, too, was largely a failure, as contemporary unofficial accounts and later memoirs attest. The British attempt to build up again in Arakan and Assam in late 1942 and in 1943 was a dismal failure.[8] David Atkins, a major with a transport corps taking supplies up to the Assam bridgehead at Dimapur, told a sorry story. The authorities insisted that the units stopped overnight in malarious camping grounds with the

[6] Hugh Tinker, 'The Indian exodus from Burma 1942', *Journal of South-East Asian Studies*, 6, 1 (March 1975), 1–22.
[7] Indivar Kamtekar, 'The shiver of 1942', *Studies in History*, NS, 18, 1 (2002), 81–102.
[8] Allen, *Burma*, pp. 91–149.

result that ninety per cent of Atkins's own men developed malaria.[9] The willing drivers, many from Madras, were too weak and malnourished to manoeuvre the heavy Canadian Chevrolet trucks with the result that dozens toppled over crevasses into roadside ravines killing their drivers. In early 1943, India's Eastern Command launched an attack against the Japanese in Arakan. This was another failure. The Japanese were equipped with fast speedboats and well dug-in. British command and logistics were weak. Several Indian units, mainly Sikhs, mutinied and threw down their arms as they were outflanked by the Japanese once again. A local Muslim official observed colourfully that, on the appearance of the Japanese, the lethargic British and Indian troops 'began to run as no deer had ever run when chased by a tiger'.[10] When the *Statesman* of Calcutta, a British run but Indian-staffed newspaper, queried the competence of the military command, it was ordered to desist and its journalists harassed.[11] An American officer, with a penchant for history, later wrote that his countrymen were appalled by the inefficiency and unreadiness of the Government of India. This he likened to an amalgam of 'Austro-Hungary and the [French] Third Republic' in their last days.[12] Indian Eastern Command had little up-to-date experience beyond punitive expeditions against Naga tribesmen. The governments of Bengal and Assam were regarded as the most ineffective, corrupt and demoralised in the subcontinent.

Civilian India was, indeed, hardly more robust. Plains eastern India was still sullen following the suppression of the Quit India movement of August–September 1942 and a further outbreak of internal disorder might well have been disastrous. One Indian officer, who had joined up in Europe out of anti-fascist sympathies, refused to take part in the suppression of Indian political demonstrations.[13] Senior officers wanted him court-martialed and shot. But so general was the sympathy among Indian troops that Indian officers persuaded their British superiors simply to

[9] David Atkins, *The Reluctant Major* (Pulborough, 1982), esp. pp. 55–66.

[10] Zainuddin, Assistant Liaison Officer, Kyautaw area, 'Confidential account of my experiences prior to and during the re-occupation of the Kyautaw area by the British', Imperial War Museum, Irwin Papers.

[11] Ian Stephens to Vyvyan Edwards, 18 April 1943, Stephens Papers, Box 20 and 'Genl. Irwin's Conference', Stephens Papers, Box 1, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge (hereafter, CSAS).]

[12] The letter is undated but is from from early 1944, Wavell responded to it in a private letter to Amery, 9 May 1944, OIOC, L/P and O/4/24.

[13] D. K. Palit, *Major General A. A. Rudra. His services in three armies and two world wars* (Delhi, 1997), p. 252.

dismiss him from the service. Rumours of defections to the Indian National Army in Singapore soon began to reach units in India, compounding the collapse in morale. Even more devastating was the loss of faith in the competence of the British government following the Bengal famine of 1943. Up to three million people perished in that year and deaths from subsequent diseases and malnutrition continued into 1944.[14] The loss of Burma rice to the Japanese was a major cause of the famine. But ill-considered policies of destroying civilian transport to 'deny' it to the enemy drove the hunger deeper. As starving women and children gathered outside the gates of military camps in eastern India, Indian and British soldiers began to share their food with the destitute.[15] The morale of the army crumbled further. These events convinced large parts of the civilian population that British rule was on the point of destroying them altogether. Subhas Chandra Bose, commander of the INA, now based in Burma, played his most effective propaganda card when he offered to supply Bengal with rice on behalf of the Government of Free India. It is not surprising that on several occasions in 1943 and early 1944, the Imperial General Staff considered the complete abandonment of India as a base for operations against the Japanese and the transfer of the whole Allied war effort to northern Australia.[16]

How then was this demoralised army and disintegrating polity able to deliver within two years a massive and effective counter-blow? Of course, there are other examples of precarious and unpopular regimes galvanising their populations for supreme effort. The Russian and Austro-Hungarian offensives of 1916 or the Ottoman attacks on the British in the Arab provinces in the same year are cases in point. To some degree, the Soviet fight-back from its Siberian hinterland in late 1942–3 provides a parallel. Yet these were cases where embattled authorities could still count on patriotism and a deep hatred of the enemy. Here I want to consider three, interrelated issues. These are: the moral rearmament of the Indian army and its civilian and transport services; the mass mobilisation of civilian labour and the propaganda offensive of the British government which secured the partial allegiance or at least acquiescence of part

[14] One of the best short sustained analyses of the roots of the famine is to be found in the papers of L. G. Pinnell, Superintendent of Civil Supplies, especially 'Tabular History Statement' and 'Note to Famine Commission', OIOC, Mss Eur D 911/7; cf. Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal. The Famine of 1943–1944* (New Delhi, 1982).

[15] Intelligence Report, 1 Sept. 1943, OIOC, L/WS/1/1433; Barnes Diary, 22 March 1944, CSAS, W. S. Barnes Papers.

[16] Chiefs of Staff Committee, 3 April 1944, 'Maintenance of India as a base', Public Record Office (hereafter PRO), WO/106/3836.

of the population. I then want to turn to the aspirations of Indians themselves during these years. First, however, it is important to take into account the British use of force which, as in the case of Stalin, was of some consequence in holding the line. Anthony Beevor, in particular, has shown vividly how, patriotic feeling notwithstanding, terror had to be widely applied to both military and civilian personnel in order to ensure the success of the Stalingrad campaign.[17]

Corporal punishment and violent crowd control with steel-tipped lathis were everyday features of colonial India. Landlords, tea plantation owners and factory owners commonly used rattan canes to discipline their subordinates. A young British lawyer arriving in India in 1942 was surprised to find that his superiors quite unselfconsciously tapped or struck Indians with a cane.[18] In 1942 and 1943 the level of physical violence used by the British against Indians increased dramatically. Martial law was invoked frequently. British expatriate opinion was hostile to Indians, seeing them as virtual collaborators with the Japanese, stories of whose atrocities were filtering back to India. The systematic campaign of Congress radicals against lines of communication essential to the war effort in August and September 1942 bore out these fears. The CID noted that there had been strenuous attempts to sabotage the telegraph and railway lines in South-Eastern India.[19] These were critical communications with Ceylon, which was believed to be under imminent danger of a sea-borne assault from the Japanese.[20]

The authorities themselves encouraged a violent response against Indian demonstrators whom they classed with potential saboteurs. Lord Linlithgow, the Viceroy, gave orders that suspected saboteurs seen moving along lines of communication should be machine-gunned from the air.[21] An official in London minuted that this was an ‘exhilarating development’. Churchill stoked up hatred of the Congress and returned to his youthful populist rhetoric in describing it as an organ of ‘big-business’ in league with the enemy. Even the Secretary of State himself, Leo Amery, stolid in the face of disturbances and famine, famously described Churchill’s ‘Nazi-like’ attitude to Indians. Local officials took their lead

[17] Anthony Beevor, *Stalingrad* (London, 1988).

[18] Personal communication from the late Dr Richard Gooderson.

[19] The best narrative of the Quit India movement is to be found in ‘India Intelligence summaries’, Aug.–Oct. 1942, OIOC, L/WS/1/1433.

[20] India Intelligence Summaries, 16 Oct. 1942, OIOC, L/WS/1/1433.

[21] Note on Viceroy to Secretary of State, 15 Aug. 1942, ‘Disturbances in India, 1942’, PRO, WO 106/3721.

from above. However cruel were Japanese atrocities against civilians throughout South-East Asia, British 'pacifications' in Bengal and Bihar in 1942–3 were acts of considerable violence.[22] The perpetrators were not brought to book, as were the Japanese. One British officer who torched villages and shot and beat their inhabitants in 1942 retired to a peaceful life as rector in a Cambridgeshire village. An official in Bihar had peaceful Indian demonstrators routinely flogged. He believed that he had prevented the spread of Congress demonstrations to the all-important coal fields in the southern part of the province.[23] Responding to hundreds of incidents like this, Amery was obliged to make a statement in Parliament confirming that flogging in India involved only the use of a heavy bamboo cane rather than a 'cat-o'-nine tails'. Military sedition was repaid yet more ruthlessly. There is some retrospective evidence to suggest that the first batches of INA prisoners captured by the British were taken to the Lahore Fort where they were interrogated and summarily executed. Ajit Rudra, one of the most important of the senior Indian officers, certainly believed these rumours. According to him, it was only after he and fellow officers had warned their commanders that Indians would not stand for this, that INA prisoners were routinely imprisoned for later trial.[24]

The repression was extremely successful in the short run. About 66,000 people were detained or convicted and about a quarter, including most Congress leaders, were still in jail in 1944. Up to 2,500 demonstrators had been shot.[25] The army and the Indian police had not wavered in their allegiance, as they were to do in 1945–6. Resistance had been driven into the Bihar hinterland and distant north Bengal villages where it merged with persistent agrarian conflict. Bose's Indian supporters, formerly grouped in the Forward Bloc, were in prison or under house arrest. All this was strategically most important, because it ensured that fewer troops needed for the eastern front would be diverted to internal duties in aid of the civil power. Over the next few months, the unfolding of famine in eastern India also muted or aborted political activity. Many Congress leaders believed at the time, and many Indians still believe, that the famine was a deliberate act of policy.

The violent suppression of dissidence, however, does not explain the most important part of the story, the capacity of India Base to regenerate

[22] Vinita Damodaran, *Broken Promises. Popular protest, Indian nationalism and the Congress party in Bihar 1935–46* (Delhi, 1992); G. Pandey (ed.), *The Indian Nation in 1942* (Calcutta, 1988).
[23] Memoir of Lawrence Walter Russell, p. 3, OIOC, Mss Eur D 1041.
[24] D. C. Palit, *Rudra*, pp. 252, 256–7.
[25] J. M. Brown, *Gandhi. Prisoner of Hope* (New Haven, 1989), pp. 337–44.

and deliver a formidable counter-punch against the Japanese over the following two years. Repression might have aborted a popular political movement, but it could not in itself have motivated a wide range of elites and ordinary people to engage in vigorous war work across India. In order to explain the moral rearmament of the Raj, the first thing to note is that the Government of India sustained what amounted to a significant military intervention, if not quite a military coup, in the second half of 1943. British rule, *in extremis*, was returned in part to its origins as a military despotism.[26] This transformation anticipated the military nature of the imperial establishment in late-colonialism: Malaya under Templer, Cyprus, Aden and the suppression of Mau Mau in East Africa come to mind.[27] The issue in the imperial history literature is often still posed in terms of an antithesis between British civil government and the militarism of the French counter-revolutionary drive in Indochina, Madagascar and North Africa. But this is an exaggeration. In India in 1943, Wavell, former commander in chief of the Indian Army replaced a civilian viceroy and immediately military voices became more powerful at all levels of government. The authorities sent their most trusted Indian soldier, Rudra, to Bengal as a prelude to taking over the management of famine and food supply. Rudra's report was not encouraging. He told of a British district collector who tried to avoid meeting him to discuss relief in a starving district. The official blamed a pre-arranged tennis match. Within weeks, however, the military had taken over food distribution in the Bengal districts.[28] Army lorries carrying the slogan 'food for the people' in Bengali toured the outlying towns where up to a quarter of the population had already perished.

Wavell fired no magic bullet. Famine deaths multiplied into 1944 and 1945. The famished population could not now digest food, even when they obtained it. Many died of disease. Nevertheless, contemporary Indian testimony makes it clear that the Army's higher profile and Wavell's personal visit to Calcutta, something that Linlithgow never considered, raised civilian morale appreciably. Senior British Bengal civil servants had long been regarded as weedy and incompetent, even by their

[26] The most useful discussion of the colonial state in the twentieth century remains B. R. Tomlinson, *The Political Economy of the Raj 1914–47. The economics of decolonisation in India* (London, 1979).

[27] See for Malaya, T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge, 1999); A. J. Stockwell (ed.), *Malaya*, part 2, *The Communist Insurrection 1948–53*. *British Documents on the End of Empire* (London, 1995), introduction; for East Africa, D. A. Low and Alison Smith (eds.), *History of East Africa*, 3 (Oxford, 1976).

[28] Rudra, *Palit*, p. 269.

own officials, such as Arthur Dash. The corruption of the ministers of the Bengal government brought contempt on it. Now American military engineers quietly took over control of sections the eastern railway network and began to reconstruct Calcutta port. A sudden surge of infrastructure development began to redress decades of neglect. Military pioneer labour was drafted into coal fields and iron foundries.[29]

Another development contributed to this quiet military coup in the later months of 1943. This was the creation of South-East Asia Command and the consolidation of India Command as a body for logistical support. The new Supreme Allied Commander South-East Asia, Lord Louis Mountbatten, appeared in India with a mixed reputation. Alan Brooke, Chief of the Imperial General Staff found him an irritant on the western front, citing bizarre schemes of his such as building aircraft carriers out of ice floes. On the other hand, Mountbatten appreciated earlier than most British soldiers or politicians the importance of self-presentation and propaganda.[30] Even though he later moved off from Delhi to Kandy in Ceylon, his ideas were very influential in both SEAC and India Command. All-India Radio adopted more aggressive and focused propaganda methods, recruiting South-East Asian language specialists from among Malay and Burmese refugees in Delhi. SEAC and the Government of India held regular and detailed press-conferences. Mountbatten himself personally selected the editor of the *Evening Standard*, Frank Owen, to run two new newspapers for the forces.[31] This switch of emphasis in the late empire to propaganda and publicity has been noted in other contexts. John Lonsdale has written of similar, though later developments in East Africa and T. N. Harper in Malaya.[32]

Field Marshal Claude Auchinleck, who took over India Command in mid-1943, was also a man of mixed reputation. A senior Indian Army officer, with a sure political touch, he had been at the forefront of efforts to promote Indian officers (VCOs) and to give them similar responsibilities to their British confrères. As a result of the events of the North African campaign, Churchill and Alan Brooke became dissatisfied with

[29] In 1943 an Anglo-American steel mission visited India to coordinate development. These moves can be traced in WO files in the PRO and Abraham Papers, Centre of South Asian Studies, Cambridge, which contains 'India Base Progress Reports', reports on railway operations, which were militarised, etc.

[30] Philip Ziegler, *Mountbatten. The Official Biography* (pb. edn., London, 2001), pp. 220–30.

[31] Mountbatten to Frank Owen, 1 Oct. 1943. Southampton University Library, Mountbatten Papers MB/C189.

[32] e.g., J. M. Lonsdale with Bruce J. Berman, *Unhappy Valley*, 2 vols. (London, 1991); T. N. Harper, *End of Empire and Making of Malaya*.

Auchinleck's offensive capabilities and he was placed in a command whose function was apparently little more than to provide logistical support. Yet coordinating the efforts of British and Indian officers, training, supply and logistics, Auchinleck created a consensus for victory that complemented the coercion employed elsewhere. The Commander-in-Chief's new and highly political role was vital in neutralising even hostile opinion. He moved around India by air, visiting princely states and recruiting zones which were essential for the continued supply of men.[33] He met the Imam of the Delhi Jama Masjid and other Muslim leaders on a regular basis. After their release from prison, he brought senior Congress leaders, including Gandhi, to his house in central Delhi for talks. Auchinleck increased the intensity of propaganda efforts in the villages and secured improved pay and perquisites for the armed forces. He also expanded what were called 'josh groups' for the troops. These were battalion or unit level discussion groups, modelled on the practice in Gurkha regiments, which ranged over issues of morale, conditions and politics.[34] The idea was that British and Indian soldiers would talk to other Indian soldiers and confirm to each other the possibility of defeating the Japanese. The army was to be purged of the worst forms of racial segregation, at least on the war fronts, and Indian soldiers would be empowered as thinking individuals who were capable of taking the initiative without a lead from British officers. This policy worked so effectively that Indian troops were being drafted in to strengthen weak British units before 1945. This was the opposite of the philosophy and practice that had prevailed throughout the history of the British Indian army. There was, of course, a political price to pay. India Command forbade its commanding officers or the leaders of josh groups to denounce Gandhi and Nehru. They realised that, even if they disapproved of the Congress's stance on the war, most Hindu and Sikh troops, and even many Muslims, now regarded these men as national leaders.[35] The Indian army had become a national army during the war, even if it remained politically neutral and wanted merely 'to get on with the job', as its survivors today insist in interview.

Propaganda, re-equipment and moral rearmament would have been of little use, had not the authorities been able to mobilise a military and

[33] Alexander Greenwood, *Field-Marshal Auchinleck* (Brockerscliffe, Durham, *c*.1981), p. 243. passim and John Connell, *Auchinleck. A Biography of Field-Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck* (London, 1959), esp. pp. 745–88.

[34] Major General J. Cawthorn's note on anti-Japanese and anti-JIF propaganda, 10 Nov. 1943 OIOC, L/WS/1/1576.

[35] SEAC intelligence summary, 5 May 1944, OIOC, L/ WS/1/1433.

civilian labour corps up to fifteen million strong. It is possible to show how this was done from the very detailed reports on recruitment and basic training which were produced by the authorities throughout the War. These leave little doubt that there was at times serious anti-British sentiment and economic distress even in the heartlands of 'Punjabi Mussulman' and Sikh recruitment in the Punjab and North West Frontier Province. A substantial number of that epitome of 'martial races', the Pathans, had been influenced by the pro-Congress Red Shirt movement led by Abdul Ghaffar Khan. Some historians and anthropologists, such as Mukulika Bannerjee, appear to explain the wartime surge in recruitment by arguing that notables and village leaders used force to procure unwilling recruits and suppress opposition.[36] There were doubtless examples of magnates who were too keen to fill their quotas and magnate groups, such as the Tiwana clan of the Punjab, certainly exercised favouritism, patronage and occasional coercion in the villages to keep recruitment flowing. Another, more sophisticated argument concentrates on what has been called the 'discursive loop' of martial race theory.[37] The British were in constant dialogue with headmen and family heads in districts such as Rawalpindi, or the Nepal valleys, where more than forty per cent of the fighting age male cohort fought in the war. Boys were brought up to believe that family and personal honour depended on a military career. Returning from service, they would reiterate this belief, preparing the next generation for recruitment.

The vast mass of documentation available suggests that the argument of forced conscription explains a relatively limited part of the enlistment. The percentage incidence of desertion was, at less than five per cent, very low and remained so during the War. Decisions to send men into the forces were made in general not by big magnates, but by small peasant farmers with a tradition of military service.[38] Family honour was significant to the extent that the aim of service was to increase joint landholdings and to gain a better reputation and better marriage partners for the wider family group. But short and medium term economic influences were also critical. When the worst of the economic crisis of 1943 had passed, recruiting officers expressed the worry that the supply of good quality recruits was now drying up. Men could do very well from high agricultural prices and buy land without sending sons into the army or

[36] Mukulika Bannerji, *The Pathan Unarmed* (London, 2000).
[37] I am grateful to Dr Jeevan Sing Deol for the application of this phrase.
[38] Appendix C to SEAC intelligence summary, 21 July 1944, political activities and the Army, OIOC, L/WS/1/1433.

serving themselves. Soldiers complained in 1944 that poor pay and perquisites were even lowering their clout on the marriage market. As pay and expenses were ratcheted up again towards the end of that year, recruitment also picked up.

Family honour and income may have been central to the recruitment decisions of peasant farmers, but letters and comments indicate that men were also thinking for themselves. The allure of learning new skills was increasingly important. As late as 1940, the Indian Army was very badly equipped. Most units had not even seen a Bren gun. Budgetary miserliness combined with an atavistic British reluctance to provide Indian soldiers with modern tools and weapons. The pressure of the Japanese war changed this. By 1943 armoured troop carriers and tanks were visiting Punjab villages.[39] Recruits were quickly taught to drive and trained in radio and signals procedures. The very recruitment drive itself exposed villages to new international influences. Recruitment vans were provided with gung-ho Hollywood films dubbed into Punjabi, Urdu and Gurkhali. The 'village uplift' enthusiast, Frank Brayne, helped popularise games amongst the troops.[40] The British tried hard to interest village women in this new expertise. They felt that women would influence their male relatives to join up. The exposure of soldiers and their relatives in the villages to propaganda, military technology and news of the war fronts brought about a significant change in the mentalities of ordinary people in the major recruiting areas. This was by no means completely erased by the problems of demobilisation and the horrors of the Partition massacres. Many people were exposed to modern technology and communications for the first time. Others had their mental horizons irrevocably changed by wartime encounters. One villager recounted in a letter that he had met an Italian prisoner of war in Burma. The Punjabi was ashamed to hear that there was a school in every Italian village. He went home determined to build a school in his own village.

The recruitment of civilian labour during the later war years was of even greater significance in forcing social change. R. S. Chandavarkar, in particular, has argued that the control of labour was essential to the practice and rhetoric of British imperialism in India.[41] Now a vast new network of roads had to be punched into Burma from India and China. In addition, the 'backward linkages' in the transport and supply system

[39] F. Yeats-Brown, *Martial India* (London, 1945), p. 26.
[40] 'Pir Kaudi and Babbadi', Brayne Papers, OIOC, Mss Eur F 152/79.
[41] Rajnarayan S. Chandavarkar, *Imperial Power and Popular Politics. Class, resistance and the state in India* (Cambridge, 1998).

across the whole subcontinent needed to be strengthened. Several million people were directly recruited into pioneer or civilian labour corps. But millions of others were indirectly touched by developments in the communication system and more intensive use of ports, coal mines and steelworks. India began for the first time to make body parts for tanks, aircraft and jeeps, creating a demand for semi-skilled as well as unskilled labour.[42] In order to satisfy this demand, the Indian Empire entrenched yet more deeply on existing reservoirs of labour power. At the same time, demand broadened to include large numbers of people, especially from ‘tribal’ and low-caste groups who had not previously appeared on the pan-Indian labour market. This provided a background for the political and social mobilisation of low-caste marginal people, including women, in the post-Independence period. It is striking that the ‘untouchable’ leader, B. R. Ambedkar, who became Member for Labour of the Viceroy’s Executive Council, was put in charge of war mobilisation. In the Naga and Lushai hills of the east, citizen armies were recruited from tribal people which raised complex issues of control for both colonial and independent regimes.[43] Colonial rule had depended in large part on the ‘demobilisation’ of society into disconnected fragments. Once the state began to develop economy and society, it was impossible to maintain control. Almost by definition, the state began to take the form of a national state.

The British Indian Empire did not really possess a society of white settlers or *colons* similar to the French in Indochina and Algeria who could be called on to provide indigenous labour during an imperial crisis. There was one exception to this: the Assam tea industry, which was one of the few slick, capitalist operations in the subcontinent. By the 1930s, most Assam tea plantation labour was drawn from marginal and tribal peoples far to the south in the Chota Nagpur area or in the Orissa hills.[44] The conditions of the coolies had improved somewhat in the early years of the century. Even British observers, however, compared the exploitation of this labour to the old American cotton plantations. Tea labourers, including women who were famed for dexterity with their hands, were effectively purchased from their families and headmen. They were subjected to quasi-military discipline and segregated off from the local Assamese.

[42] Geoffrey Tyson, *India Arms for Victory* (Allahabad, 1943), pp. 35 ff. Propaganda documents such as this should be viewed with scepticism, but not dismisssed completely.

[43] For a good example of this see the papers of A. G. McCall, OIOC, Mss Eur. E 361, which concern the Lushai Total Defence Scheme, modelled on the citizen militias of Scandinavia.

[44] The whole issue of labour for the tea estates can be followed in the Indian Tea Association Papers, OIOC, Mss Eur F 174.

Being illiterate, non-caste people in the main and wholly without political representation, they proved an endlessly malleable and cheap labour reserve. In 1942 and 1943, it was Assam tea workers along with low-caste coal workers from Bihar to the south who were drafted into military and civil public works schemes.[45] Up to 300,000 of these workers were employed in pioneer labour corps at any one time. They often suffered intensely from malnutrition, malaria and exhaustion. In order to boost the supply from the central hills and the south intensive campaigns of recruitment were instituted. Key figures in these campaigns were retired Indian soldiers who had served during the First World War and local Christian missionaries, especially the Baptists, who were among the few Europeans who could speak the tribal languages.[46]

There were other examples of the 'super-exploitation' of labour pools which went back far into the history of the Raj. For instance, the princely states were called on to supply pioneer labour corps as well as troops. Puddukottai in the far south, which had been in alliance with the British since as early as 1744, was nearly denuded of male labour. Following their great rebellion of 1855–6, the Santal people had been moulded into a labour force for road building and estate work across south-east Bengal. In June 1943, the great Damodar Dam burst and threatened to cut India's only major rail-link from the west to Calcutta. At this critical juncture, the Santals provided 100,000 workers, men, women and children for the rebuilding programme.[47]

As in the case of the army, a relatively small number of small territories within the subcontinent had provided the vast bulk of its non-local civilian labour. But by 1942, as in the army, labour recruitment was expanding into wholly new areas. The roads and railways needed to carry nearly twice as much freight in 1943 as they had done in 1939. In addition, Indian labour was pathetically malnourished and weak. A Canadian team calculated that an Indian male labourer could expend only thirty per cent of the effort of a British male and only twenty-five per cent of a Canadian. Poverty and malnutrition, however, held the key to recruitment, too.[48] The Bengal famine and poverty throughout much of the subcontinent threw thousands more people onto the labour market. War and

[45] For the role of the Indian Tea Association, see *Statesman*, 8 April 1942.

[46] 'The War effort in Orissa, 1941', CSAS, Ansorge Papers. In the hills above Cuttack Revd. E. M. Evans, Baptist Missionary and G. Udaygiri who had commanded a labour force in Mesopotamia were key figures recruiting for the Auxiliary Pioneer Company.

[47] Margaret Stravridi Memoir, OIOC, Mss Eur., C 808, p. 6.

[48] 'Nutritional Survey of Indian troops', Appendix A, 12 Nov. 1943, PRO, WO 203/269.

increased communications pushed recruitment into hitherto isolated areas of Nagaland, the Kachin, Shan and Lushai Hills and the whole range of the Himalayan fringe. Hundreds of thousands of young women were enlisted in labour and service gangs. Bengali accounts indicate the existence of a vast sex trade to service both the labourers and the soldiers in base areas. British India had no such wartime institution as the Japanese 'comfort woman'. It did not need to have one, because poverty and free enterprise brought about the same result.

This is another area where the concentration on Partition and its riots has fragmented the history of India. The Indian social history of the poor has scarcely ventured beyond 1942. Labour historians generally treat wars as exceptions. Yet the harsh experience of labour during the war, in pioneer corps, in munitions factories, or even in local military levies on the frontiers, was critical in stimulating popular politics and the ideology of rights after Independence. The 1950s and 1960s generation of Indian anthropologists, such as F. G. Bailey, recorded rapid social changes among low caste and tribal groups.[49] The 'economic frontier' expanded. People became aware of Indian nationalism, socialism, democracy and the concept of individual rights. Old hierarchies of chiefs and headmen were undermined, as even quite poor people developed new skills and aspirations. Such a 'democratisation through practice' was as important as the effect of overt ideologies of social liberation propounded by politicians like the 'untouchable' leader B. R. Ambedkar. These changes can, in many cases, be attributed quite specifically to the effects of the Second World War.

The middle years of the War also saw rapid expansion of the technical professions in India. It may be that at the level of ideology the India of Jawaharlal Nehru looked to socialist planning. In terms of the practical application of science to resource mobilisation and people's experience of the modern, it was the War which provided the breakthrough. Before 1939, for instance, most Indians had regarded the nursing profession as a low-grade occupation, fit mainly for Eurasians, Christians or Hindu orphans and widows of the low castes. Despite nationalist ambivalence about support for the war effort, nursing became a patriotic duty for many middle-class Indian women after 1939. The number of trained nurses in India had already doubled between 1939 and 1943.[50] Universities

[49] F. G. Bailey, *Caste and the Economic Frontier* (Manchester, 1962).
[50] 'Trained Nurses Association of India, Annual Report, 1942–3', Diana Hartly Papers, Royal Commonwealth Society Collection, University Library, Cambridge.

initiated degree courses in nursing, while the supply of pharmacists and medical scientists increased greatly.[51] The ideal of a democratic and equal citizenry, which was enshrined in Nehru's independent India, was spread through war work and wartime social service as well as through Congress demonstrations and self-education among nationalist detainees in British prisons.

This sudden step change in the development of expertise took place across the board, though it was very unbalanced. For instance, a new food canning industry took off in response to the need to provide clean food for soldiers on the front. The production of bottled beer trebled. New cigarette factories sprang up. The expansion of munitions plants greatly increased the supply of chemists and people with a wide range of metallurgical skills. Just as the Indian Army's war effort became a national effort more than it was an imperial effort in 1942–5, so too Indian business began to play an active and autonomous role over these years. British commercial operations and many older industries stagnated. Instead, it was the Tatas, Birlas and other commercial operations that both benefited from the war and became more and more important in planning its successful prosecution.[52] Commercial acumen and fear both came into play. People were well aware of the destruction that Japanese bombers had wreaked on the infrastructure of Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma. Even more frightening was the British 'scorched earth' campaign. This had set back Burma's economic development by a generation and its effects had been bitterly tasted in eastern Bengal. If Indians were generally excluded from the political management of the war, this was not true of its financial and commercial management in Calcutta, London and even Washington where the voices of Indian business were well represented. India's post-war planning regime took shape in 1944 and 1945 and Indian business made it clear to the government that this was to be a national regime within, at the very least, a Commonwealth Dominion.

This returns us finally to the issue of political obligation. The Raj's war was fought in the midst of repression and poverty. Yet it could not have been fought without some degree of political acquiescence and even assent on the part of the subject people, however circumscribed. There were relatively few natural 'loyalists'. Eurasians, people of mixed race, did, however, play this role and it was a vital one. They flooded into the

[51] T. K. Adranvala, 'Developments in Nursing 1947–57' in *Trained Nurses Association of India 50th Anniversary volume 1908–58* (Delhi, 1958), pp. 326–8, copy in Diana Hartly Papers.
[52] Medha M. Kudaisya, *The Life and Times of G. D. Birla* (Delhi, 2003), pp. 197–226.

technical services and armed forces, despite continued British disdain for them.[53] The Anglo-Indians, as they called themselves were a critical element in colonial India, consistently underestimated by historians. On a small scale, they provide a parallel with patriotic nationalism in the British dominions. A second constituency was the old elites. Indian conservatives, of course, saw the writing on the wall and many, from the rulers of the princely states to ordinary zamindars (landholders), believed that the Raj would help them secure a better position for themselves, if they remained loyal and active through the war years. Neither the British abandonment of the princes nor the Indian National Congress's assault on the land-owning system in 1950–1 could have been foreseen in 1943 or 1944. At this date Indian politics still possessed a secular, liberal and right wing, anti-Communist and anti-populist ruling group, composed of lower level aristocracy, urban landowners and old bureaucratic and military families. That whole range of political opinion was pushed to the margins after 1947. But its fate was not inevitable. Its equivalent survived, after all, and remained cautiously aligned with the British in both Malaya and in the Pakistani Punjab. It is sometimes forgotten that British officers continued to serve in the Pakistan army until 1951.

Again, as in post-war Malaya, intercommunal antipathies gave support for the war effort an edge in some parts of the subcontinent. Several conservative mullahs in the Punjab and North West Frontier came to the point of declaring *jihad* against the Japanese for their supposed ill-treatment of Muslims in South-East Asia.[54] Other Muslims expressed hostility to the Indian National Army and restive Forward Bloc politicians in Bengal, whom they pretended to regard as Hindu communalists. As in Malaya, where conservative Chinese supported the Raj, the British also garnered support from the other end of the political spectrum, the Hindu right. Though it is now a matter of acute controversy in India, V. D. Savarkar and other leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha gave support, albeit conditional and ambiguous, to the war effort. Savarkar called on Hindus to enlist in regular and irregular forces in order to make Hindutva a 'nation in arms'.[55] He almost directly paralleled the position taken by

[53] The crucial role of Anglo-Indians in the later British Raj is in grave need of study. Some preliminary material for the Second World War is available in a file on Anglo-Indians prepared for the Information Department of the Government of India, especially a pamphlet by Frank R. Anthony, MLA, *Will Britain Tarnish Her Honour?* (New Delhi, 1947), OIOC, L/I/1/627.

[54] e.g. Badshah Gul, spiritual leader of the Mohmand tribal area described the Japanese as enemies of Islam and stated that all Muslims' duty was to fight, *Statesman* (Calcutta) 9 April 1942.

[55] *Amrita Bazaar Patrika*, 11 April 1942.

Jinnah and the Muslim League. Equally, at the local level, Hindu right organisations were active in refugee and famine relief in 1942 and 1943, in air raid precautions and in associations for the support of Indian soldiers. The Right saw the opportunity of the imprisonment of Congress as a chance to colonise the attenuated wartime public sphere. Indian Communists and Socialists did the same.[56] By 1942 with the Stalingrad battle at its height, Moscow was beginning to whip Indian Communists into line. Their leaders were told that solidarity with the Soviet Union took precedence over the anti-colonial struggle, at least in the short and medium term. Public attitudes in Bengal, revealed in newspapers and censored letters, suggest that many left-leaning middle-class people had already come to that conclusion. The tacit alliance with the Japanese counselled by Bose's Forward Bloc made them uneasy when Communist and Guomindang supporters were engaged in a death struggle with the Axis in China. When Thein Pe, the Burmese Communist, appeared in Simla, urging Indians to support the Allies, it had little effect on Congress supporters, sullen and hostile after the Quit India repression.[57] But many Communists and, most significantly, labour union leaders, quietly made their peace with the British authorities.

These ideological fractures within India at war proved important for the future. Even after independence, the left was to remain split in complex ways between internationalists looking to Communist China, as Bose and his followers had looked to Japan, and Communist nationalists who were never able to transform regional into national power. To some extent, the Hindu right was also hamstrung by its wartime accommodation with the British. Nehru's Fabian socialism narrowly came through as the winner, not perhaps because it represented the 'natural ideology' of the Indian national movement, but in large part because of the polarisation and fragmentation brought about by war.

Yet there was something more, beyond conservatism, communalism and strategic political calculation, more even than widespread ideological distaste for the Axis powers among upper middle-class people. There was something, too, beyond formal ideological positions. The Raj survived to deliver its terminal counter-punch because of a phenomenon which is best called quotidian political obligation. This was not the same as loyal-

[56] e.g., Swami Sahajanand of the Kisan Sabha (Peasants Association) and member of the Forward Bloc was released from Jail and declared Hitler and Tojo were much worse than Churchill, *Statesman* (Calcutta), 26 March 1942.

[57] Thein Pe, 'Wartime Traveller' in R. H. Taylor, *Marxism and Resistance in Burma 1942–5* (Athens, Ohio, 1984), p. 135.

ism. The British always exaggerated the degree to which even their most conservative Indian subjects felt loyalty to the Crown or the British connection. Instead, Indians felt a need to keep their polity and its segments functioning. For Indian officers to break their oath, or Indian members of the Civil Service to resign or go to jail with the Congressmen, would have required them to rupture the whole set of relationships, and not most importantly relations with the British, which made social life possible. There was little enthusiasm and no love for the Raj itself, but the idea of government and society itself had to be protected. Social chaos or Japanese invasion would have led to incalculable consequences, not least in intercommunal and intercaste conflict.

This explains the decision of Indian ICS, police and subordinate services personnel to hold the line in 1942. Privately, they argued bitterly with their British superiors and colleagues against the repression being put in train. This becomes very clear from the 1943 volume of *Towards Freedom*, contemporary documents edited by Partha Sarathi Gupta.[58] Coercion alone could not have kept money flowing into the war funds nor voluntary workers signing up far behind the lines. Ordinary people expected independence and wished to approach it with a functioning polity. A future Mau Mau general fighting in the King's East African Rifles was told by an Indian friend: 'We Indians are fighting for others in this war, but in return we have received a promise of independence when it ends.'[59] Others, though, felt it their duty to support what they saw as India's national armies in the field. In the Punjab alone, 45,000 people worked in Air Raid Precautions and 3,000 carried out other types of voluntary war work. The pledge that they signed contained the following words: 'Because I am proud to be a citizen of India, I solemnly pledge myself to stamp out defeatism and to stamp out alarmist rumours, to face and defy every peril threatening India's national security and to work day by day in certain hope of victory.'[60] This type of feeling spoke not of loyalism, but of a constrained nationalism. Attitudes such as this prevailed among middling and poor people, too. Deference and hope that the authorities would ultimately deliver something kept food riots at bay during 1943 and 1944.

[58] Partha Sarathi Gupta (ed.), *Towards Freedom. Documents on the movement for independence in India, 1943–1944*, Part i (Delhi, 1997).

[59] Warahiu Itote, *Mau Mau General* (Nairobi, 1967), cited J. Ayo Langley, *Ideologies of Liberation in Black Africa, 1856–1970* (London, 1979), p. 413.

[60] 'War effort of the Punjab', DHP 30.5.46, Tiwana Papers, Southampton University Library, Ms 210/10.

It is important to stress that this national feeling by no means excluded a favourable attitude towards Subhas Chandra Bose and the Indian National Army. People's views of the INA were often ambivalent. But outside some parts of the Punjab and the North-West, even the British were forced to admit that the majority understood the motives of the INA soldiers, even if they felt, along with Gandhi and Nehru, that they were 'misguided patriots'. The ground-swell of opposition to putting them on trial was very great. Even conservative Indian lawyers believed that the British sovereignty had lapsed de facto in Malaya and Burma. A free Indian government was therefore quite legitimate and directly comparable, for instance, with de Gaulle's Free French Government. Again, this 'national feeling' was highly plastic. It was still not clear in 1944 and 1945 what type of a nation would emerge at the moment of independence, which most people, British and Indian, now believed to be very close. War work was not yet rigidly divided on communal lines. Many Indian Army regiments were mixed, including Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs, and josh groups were often equally heterogeneous. An irrevocable bifurcation of the Indian state into an Indian and a Pakistan element could not have been foreseen before the elections of the spring of 1946. But all these emotions and ideologies also co-existed with a strong desire to finish the war and to keep civil society functioning. Even many of the Congressmen languishing in jail tacitly accepted the need to avoid chaos. This is why the wave of industrial unrest in late 1945 and 1946 did not really presage an Indian revolution.

Here then, in the army 'getting on with its job', the civil services placing their obligation to society above their political feelings and in the patience and hope of ordinary people was the 'nation within'. As post-colonial historiography becomes more distant from the colonial period, the nature of political obligation at that time becomes more and more difficult to re-imagine. Neo-imperial historians still argue that colonised people often saw themselves as beneficiaries of imperial rule. Nationalist historians invoke repression, 'divide and rule', or the notion of elite hegemony, to explain the striking persistence of colonial government. All these positions over-privilege formal politics and the salience of abstract and activist ideology. Instead, the approach adopted by Gabriel Almond and the political scientists of the 1960s and 1970s still retains some theoretical relevance.[61] The 'day-to-day' has its own ideologies. In segmented

[61] Gabriel A. Almond and James S. Coleman (eds.), *The Politics of Developing Societies* (Princeton, 1960); Gabriel A. Almond and Sidney Verba, *The Civic Culture. Political Attitudes and Democracy in Five Nations* (rev. edn., London, 1998).

polities, day-to-day patterns of practice and interpersonal obligation within institutions may have been as important as, if not more important than, formal discourses of religion or nationalism, let alone loyalty to a distant Crown. In attenuated civil societies, bureaucrats and local leaders feared the rise of what sociologists such as James Scott called ‘amoral familism’ amidst the struggle for scarce resources. Scott’s study of Malaysia during the early years of its independence, showed that political obligation of its civil servants rested on fear of conflict and breakdown as much on their loyalty to the emerging polity.[62] India during the Second World War was a polity posed on the edge of dissolution, yet still sensing a future beyond hardship and the suppression of civil liberties. The minds of many Indians were balanced between fear that the present would dissolve into a Hobbesian chaos and aspiration for that future.

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[62] James C. Scott, *Political Ideology in Malaysia. Reality and the beliefs of an elite* (New Haven, 1968).