

'The Nation Within': British India at War 1939–1945

Professor Christopher Bayly FBA delivered the Raleigh Lecture on History on 26 November 2003.

In his analysis of India at war, Professor Bayly considered how and why it was possible for the British Raj to recover from defeats to the Japanese in Burma and the 'Quit India' movement of 1942. In the edited extract below, Professor Bayly describes the actions of the British, and the responses of Indian nationals to the crisis, and considers their consequences for the emerging polity.

The colonial system in India 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.

Civilian India was 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. Rumours of defections in Singapore to the INA (Indian National Army, a force cooperating with the Japanese made up of captured Indian personnel) 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 mal-nutrition continued into 1944. 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. 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.

How then was this demoralised army and disintegrating polity able to deliver within two years a massive and effective counter-blow?

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. This transformation anticipated the military nature of the imperial establishment in late-colonialism: Malaya under Templar, Cyprus, Aden and the suppression of the Mau Mau in east Africa come to mind. 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, Linlithgow, 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 tell 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. 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,



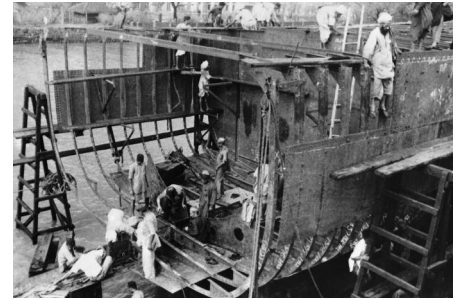
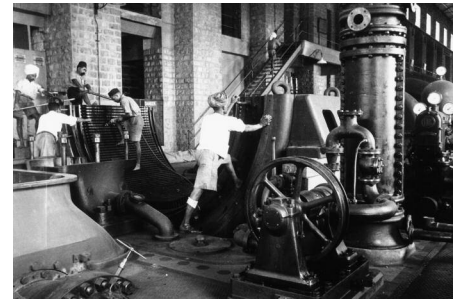
General Wavell conferring with British staff officers. By permission of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London.

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 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 of 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.

Another development contributed to this quiet military coup in the later months of 1943. This was the creation of South East Asia Command (SEAC) 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. 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. 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.

Field Marshall 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 his offensive capabilities and he was placed in a command whose function was apparently little more than to provide logistical support. Yet co-ordinating 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. 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. 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. 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.



Images of the Indian military and civilian labour force, mobilised during the war. By permission of the Trustees of the Imperial War Museum, London.

Propaganda, re-equipment and moral re-orientation would have been of little use, had not the authorities been able to mobilise a military and 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 movement of the 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. 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. The British were in constant dialogue with headmen and family heads in districts such as Rawalpindi, or the Nepal valleys, where more than 40 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. 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 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 in 1940. 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. 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. 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. 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 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. 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 raised from tribal people which raised complex issues of control for both colonial and independent regimes. 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 full text of this Lecture has been published in *Proceedings of the British Academy*, Volume 125, 2003 Lectures, and can be found via www.proc.britac.ac.uk

Professor C.A. Bayly's book *The Birth of the Modern World, 1780–1914* has been nominated for the 2005 British Academy Book Prize.
