

Sepoy Letters (India)

By [David Omissi](#)

Indian soldiers were sent to Europe in 1914, and some of them were to serve there until 1918. Throughout their stay in Europe, Indian soldiers wrote and received letters. Translated excerpts from their correspondence – mainly to and from their families – have copiously survived in transcripts preserved in British censors' reports. These letters offer evidence for the morale and concerns of India's warrior-peasantry, and reveal much about their reactions to wartime life in Britain and France. The letters demonstrate that their encounter with Europe encouraged them to reflect, sometimes critically, on life in India.

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Introduction

This article will consider several questions. Why were Indian troops sent to [France](#) in the first place? How did they write (and read) [letters](#), given that most of them must have been illiterate? How effectively were they able to use writing? What impact did military [censorship](#) have upon their letter writing? What views did they express about the experience of the face of battle on the [Western Front](#)? How did soldiers react to life in wartime [Britain](#) and France? How did their encounter with Europe cause them to reflect on [India](#) and on Indian customs?

Indian Soldiers in Europe

The Indian army in 1914 numbered 159,134 Indian other ranks and 2,333 British officers.^[1] On the outbreak of war, most of the war-ready Indian army was sent overseas in [expeditionary forces](#) to [East Africa](#), Iraq and [Egypt](#).^[2] Before 1914, Indian troops had not been used in action against a white enemy in Europe. Indian Expeditionary Force A – originally two [infantry](#) divisions (Lahore and Meerut) and one [cavalry](#) brigade – was at first destined for garrison duty in the Mediterranean to free British troops for service in France.^[3] The Viceroy, [Charles Hardinge, Baron Hardinge of Penshurst \(1858-1944\)](#), “protested vigorously and demanded that these splendid divisions should be sent to France.”^[4] He did not wish to dampen patriotic Indian political opinion.^[5] He also sought to remove a “stigma and a colour bar upon the Indian troops.”^[6] [George V, King of Great Britain \(1865-1936\)](#), who took a keen interest in India, also wanted Indian troops to be sent to France. Furthermore, there were clear

military reasons to do so. Reinforcements for the [British Expeditionary Force](#) were desperately needed.^[7] Troops from the [dominions](#)^[8] of white settlement were not yet ready in large numbers, so India offered the only immediate source of trained reserves from the British Empire.^[9]

Indian troops began to arrive in France at Marseilles towards the end of September 1914.^[10] They went by train to Orléans, were sent to the front, and then immediately thrown piecemeal into the fighting during the First [Battle of Ypres](#).^[11] Their losses were very high – much higher than the troops were accustomed to from other colonial military campaigns. The Indian divisions were taken out of the line to rest from late December 1914 to early January 1915.^[12] They were then sent back into the line. By early 1915, the Indian forces in France had been built up to four divisions – two of infantry and two of cavalry. The two Indian infantry divisions provided half the attacking force at the Battle of Neuve-Chapelle, 10-12 March 1915; and the Lahore Division was marched north to counterattack at the Second Battle of Ypres after the Germans' first use of [chlorine gas](#) in April 1915 during that battle. The Meerut division took part in the diversionary attack at the Battle of Loos in September 1915.^[13]

The two Indian infantry divisions were withdrawn from France at the end of 1915, and sent to the [Middle East](#). The two Indian cavalry divisions remained in France until 1918.^[14] There was not much need for cavalry on the Western Front, although the Indian mounted divisions did see some action in 1916 and 1917.^[15] The Indian cavalry were, however, kept in France mainly for political reasons: chiefly so that the government of India could show that the country had an on-going stake in the main theatre of war. The cavalry divisions were withdrawn to the Middle East in early 1918, and later took part in the successful offensive against the Turks by Field Marshal [Edmund Allenby \(1861-1936\)](#).

Letter Writing and Censorship

Throughout their time in France, Indian soldiers (and their families) made full use of the military postal service, not least because letters to and fro were carried free of charge.^[16] According to the 1911 Census of India, however, only about 11 percent of all Indian males were literate, a figure which fell to 6.3 percent in the Indian army's main recruiting ground of the Punjab.^[17] Literacy rates must have been still lower for Punjabi soldiers, who were recruited in [rural areas](#) where fewer people could read and write than in the cities. Most Indian soldier correspondents must therefore have used scribes to write their letters for them. These scribes may have been Indian company officers or company clerks, who were literate. Soldiers' families in India may have used professional letter writers or village schoolteachers. Many soldiers and their correspondents must, however, have been aware of the significance of writing, for example through the recitation of scripture.

Paradoxically, we know so much about Indian soldiers' letters because they were censored. As in the British army, British regimental officers read soldiers' letters to ensure that they did not reveal information of possible military value to the enemy.^[18] A second layer of censorship was set up in November 1914 at the Indian Base Post Office in France to monitor "inward" mails to the Indians because of concern that seditious [literature](#) might be sent to the troops.^[19] This censorship was then extended to outward mail because of concerns about evidence of depression in the hospitals. The main aim of this censorship was to gather intelligence, particularly about the morale of the troops, rather than to prevent them from writing. The Chief Censor was Captain (later Sir) [Evelyn Berkeley Howell \(1877-1971\)](#) a member of the Political Department of the Indian Civil Service originally seconded to an Indian cavalry regiment as an Urdu translator.^[20] Howell had a team of censors working under him, which consisted mainly of Indian Civil Servants and former Indian army officers with a command of the relevant Indian languages. The censors produced short, weekly reports on the content of the Indian mails. These reports included appended extracts from forty to ninety examples of the soldiers' letters, translated into English.^[21] The entire censorship archive runs to around 4,000 pages. (The vast majority of the original letters probably have not survived.)

The troops knew about the regimental censorship, because they saw it being done. They later worked out the existence of the central censorship, although exactly how is not known.^[22] Indian soldiers soon tried to find ways of subverting the censorship. They could evade the military censorship altogether by using the French civilian post.^[23] This was against army rules, and was punished when detected, but was difficult to prevent. Many soldiers resorted to coded writing.^[24] For example, several men used the image of black pepper and red pepper to represent Indian and British troops respectively. One Jat wrote home that the "black pepper" was "very pungent" but the "red pepper" was "not so strong", meaning that Indian troops fought more fiercely

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than British troops.^[25] The censors could easily work out the meaning of most of these codes.^[26] There were, however, codes that the censor could not decipher, particularly when soldiers had woven Punjabi proverbs and Urdu poetry into their letters. Such letters may also, of course, have been difficult for the recipients to understand.

The letters contained examples of both “practical” and “emotional” literacy. The first included advice not to enlist, instructions about money remittances home, and letters intended to serve as a last will and testament. Letters in the second category aimed at purging the trauma and [bereavement](#) of war.

Morale and the Experience of Battle

The very fact of the war, and the experience of battle, understandably loomed large in soldiers’ letters home.^[27] Conditions at the front in the very cold winter of 1914-15 were appalling; Indian soldiers did not initially have the full complement of warm clothes.^[28] The improvised trenches were often waterlogged, and some men developed trench foot.^[29]

Soldiers used religious and agrarian imagery in their letters in order to convey to families the horrors of the Western Front. One wounded Punjabi Rajput wrote home “this is not war. It is the ending of the world. This is just such a war as was related in the Mahabharata about our forefathers.”^[30] Other men described themselves as sharing the fate of “maggots” or “goats”.^[31] Letters home provide evidence of poor morale among the wounded in hospitals. In January 1915, Howell noted that “the number of letters written by men who have given way to despair has increased” and there was “a melancholy impression of a fatalistic resignation to a fate that is regarded as speedy and inevitable.”^[32]

British officers soon noted a very high number of wounds to the left hand, and it has been plausibly suggested that these were self-inflicted.^[33] Indeed, in November 1914 one British general estimated that 65 percent of all casualties in the Indian Corps had been self-inflicted.^[34] The British authorities took stern measures to stamp out this way of avoiding the trenches, including the imposition of the death penalty.^[35] The morale of Indian units also suffered from high casualties among their own British officers.^[36]

The entry of Ottoman Turkey into the war on the side of the Central Powers towards the end of 1914 also tested the loyalties of some of the Muslim soldiers of the Indian army.^[37] Most Muslim troops of the Indian army remained steady. The reaction of one Muslim officer was typical. In a letter home in December 1914 he wrote:

What better occasion can I find than this to prove the loyalty of my family to the British Government? Turkey, it is true, is a Muslim power, but what has it to do with us? Turkey is nothing to us.^[38]

Nevertheless, there was some unrest in Muslim units.^[39] In early March 1915, one man, Jemadar Mir Mast, went over to the Germans with a group of about two dozen Afridi Pathans.^[40] The British authorities immediately disarmed the remaining 120 Pathans of the battalion.^[41]

There was therefore some relief when Indian troops fought well at Neuve-Chapelle in mid-March. The battle was a tactical success.^[42] The first lines of the German trenches were overrun, but losses were heavy. There was, however, some evidence of battle shock in letters home. A week after the battle one Punjabi Muslim wrote home to his brother:

God knows whether the land of France is stained with sin or whether the Day of Judgement has begun in France. For guns and of rifles [sic] there is now a deluge, bodies upon bodies, and blood flowing. ...Our guns have filled the German trenches with dead and made them brim with blood. God grant us grace, for grace is needed. Oh God, we repent! Oh God we repent!^[43]

One of the main grievances of the men was that the lightly wounded were sent back to the trenches once they had recovered.^[44] Letters home reflected this concern. “No sound man can return to India”, lamented Gurdit Singh, a wounded Sikh, to his father on 6 April 1915. “Only those who have lost a limb can return.”^[45] Two days later, Ragbir Singh, a Dogra, recovering from a second wound, and about to be sent to the trenches for a third time, wrote succinctly that “the butcher does not let the

goat escape.”^[46] In May 1915, Indian soldiers in hospital addressed this issue in a petition to the King. They wrote:

Your Majesty's order was that a man who had been wounded once should be allowed to return to India; or that if he had recovered he should not be made to serve again. The heart of India is broken. ...Any man who comes here wounded is returned thrice and four times to the trenches. Only that man goes to India who has lost an arm or a leg or an eye.^[47]

An Indian officer, Subedar [Mir Dast \(1874-1945\)](#), would raise this issue again when the King visited the Indian wounded in the Brighton hospitals in August 1915.

There was, however, a more positive side to the experience of the Western Front. The war marked an opportunity to show loyalty to the King, to offer military service and to win renown and medals. Letters home contain many expressions of loyalty and joy at the opportunity offered by the war. For example, after a soldier of the 39th Garhwal Rifles had won the Victoria Cross, one of his comrades wrote that he had “made the reputation of his family for three generations” and that “the fame of the Garhwals is now higher than the skies.”^[48] One wounded Punjabi Muslim officer, expecting to return to the front, asked his father not to concern himself too much: “Fighting is now to me nothing more than an ordinary game”, he wrote. “I will fight to the end for my King, and will have no hesitation in sacrificing my life.”^[49] Some Hindus and Sikhs expressed the view that death in battle in the service of the King would send them straight to Paradise.^[50]

The two Indian infantry divisions were moved from France to the Middle East at the end of 1915. Some historians have taken this move as evidence that the story of the Indian Corps in France was a “history of failure”, because the Indian Corps had proved unequal to the task of fighting the Germans.^[51] This view can, however, be challenged.^[52] There were good reasons (both political and military) to move the Indian divisions to the Middle East. The new armies of Field Marshal [Horatio Herbert Kitchener \(1850-1916\)](#) were now arriving in France.^[53] The second Canadian division had also joined the front line. Furthermore, the British Cabinet was impressed with the “great military and political advantages” that would accrue from the planned capture of Baghdad, in which, it was hoped, Indian troops would play a leading role.^[54]

The Encounter with Europe

Some of the Indian wounded were sent to specially designed hospitals in towns on the south coast of Britain. Their letters suggest that they appreciated the treatment that they received there. In January 1915 the Chief Censor reported that “the English country and people, the excellence of the arrangements made for the comfort of the Indian wounded, and the kindness of the King and Queen on the occasion of their visit to Brighton are all mentioned over and over again in terms of the warmest admiration.”^[55] Brighton Pavilion was converted to an Indian military hospital, and letters suggest that the Indian patients warmed to its Royal associations, which were emphasised in an official pamphlet given to all Indian troops who were treated there. Royal visits were the subject of much favourable comment. “The King and Queen talked with us for a long time”, wrote the wounded Subedar-Major of the 6th Jats, in January 1915. “I have never been so happy in my life as I have been here.”^[56] Some soldiers, however, were very critical of the restrictive regime of some of the other hospitals, which was primarily intended to prevent “immoral” contact with white women.^[57] One [Gurkha](#) even described his hospital as “a very large prison.”^[58] Despite this, many Indian soldiers took away a relatively favourable impression of Britain.

Soldiers serving in France admired the fine brick houses in the villages, and the wealth of French agriculture. They were touched by the hospitality of the French, and developed tremendous affection for the French families on whom they were billeted.^[59] According to one Sikh “the people here treat us better than mothers treat their children in India.”^[60] Another wrote that the French people were “like angels. All they lack is wings.”^[61]

During the war, most French villages were deprived of young menfolk who were away at the war so the Indian soldiers' encounter with French civilian life would have been principally with women, old people and children. Soldiers' letters accordingly comment on French gender roles. They admired the stoicism of French women in the face of the loss of their loved ones.^[62] They did, however, sometimes describe French women as “shameless” because they mingled so freely with men. French Catholicism was occasionally dismissed as just outward show. Indian soldiers became anxious about undermining their caste or

religion as a result of prolonged contact with an alien culture.^[63] Many wrote home asking for spiritual advice about preserving their religion during a prolonged stay in a Christian land.

The letters do reveal something of Indian soldiers' attitudes to the Germans. The Indian troops certainly admired the fighting power of the German armies. "The German is very strong", wrote one Sikh to his brother in India.^[64] This admiration was, however, mingled with distaste for German "frightfulness." After the Germans had used chlorine gas, one Rajput suggested that the [British government](#) should retaliate in kind: he wrote that "the proverb 'against blackguards one must be a blackguard' is quite apt here."^[65] One wounded Dogra spoke for many when he wrote that "the evil Germans ought to have been strangled at their birth."^[66]

To travel from home is to reconsider home and to reflect on home. Many of the Indian troops reconsidered India in the light of their experiences in Europe. Previously accepted customs became the object of critical reflection.^[67] Soldiers noted the wealth of Europe compared with the poverty of India, and speculated about its causes. They noted that French women seemed much more independent than those in India. Some gave instructions to their families in India to value women more. One man, Ranji Lal of Rohtak, wrote that "a woman in our country is of no more value than a pair of shoes, and this is the reason why Indians are low in the scale."^[68] The troops were struck by the fact that most French women could read and write.^[69] Noting this, several men wrote home to their families in India urging them to send their girls to school.^[70] Others urged their families to stop spending wastefully – as they had come to see it – on expensive weddings and religious ceremonies.^[71]

Conclusion

Their letters demonstrate that Indian soldiers were able to make use of writing effectively, despite often being illiterate and usually communicating under conditions of wartime censorship. The military postal service may have encouraged soldiers (and their families) to learn to read and write. The military censorship was not an insurmountable obstacle to communication, and its records have served to preserve soldiers' words – although translated, excerpted and mediated by censorship – that might otherwise have been lost. Soldiers' letters are a significant vehicle for the understanding of the history of South Asian literacy, as well as of the engagement of South Asian peasant-soldiers in the First World War. The letters offer evidence for soldiers' morale, suggesting that, despite some problems with depression and homesickness, the story of the Indian army on the Western Front was not overall a story of failure. From the letters we can learn about soldiers' reactions – both positive and negative – to the encounter with wartime Europe. Soldiers' letters offer a window into the mental and cultural life of South Asian peasant-soldiers which might otherwise have been closed to the historical record. One of the paradoxes of the soldiers' letters is that Indian soldiers and their families may come to be remembered for the words they composed under conditions of censorship and illiteracy.

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Notes

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2. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, p. 329; Martin, G: *The Influence of Racial Attitudes on British Policy Towards India in the First World War*, in: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 14/2 (1985), pp. 91–113, here p. 91.
3. ↑ Visram, Rozina: *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, London 2002, p. 170.
4. ↑ Hardinge of Penshurst, Charles: *My Indian Years 1910-1916*, London 1948, p. 99; Morton-Jack, George: *The Indian Army on the Western Front: India's Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War*, Cambridge 2014, pp. 134, 153.
5. ↑ Martin, *Influence of Racial Attitudes* 1985, p. 91.

6. ↑ Quoted in Martin, *Influence of Racial Attitudes* 1985, p. 92.
7. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, p. 338; Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 171.
8. ↑ In 1914 the Dominions included [Canada](#), [Newfoundland](#), [South Africa](#), [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#).
9. ↑ Greenhut, Jeffrey: *The Imperial Reserve: The Indian Corps on the Western Front, 1914-15*, in: *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, 12/1 (1983), p. 54.
10. ↑ Mason, Philip: *Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian Army, its Officers and Men*, London 1974, p. 412.
11. ↑ Omissi, David (ed.): *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918*, Basingstoke 1999, p. 369; Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 56.
12. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, p. 345; Corrigan, Gordon: *Sepoys in the Trenches*, Staplehurst 1999, pp. 125, 143.
13. ↑ Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches* 1999, pp. 224–236.
14. ↑ Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 171.
15. ↑ Omissi, David: *Europe Through Indian Eyes: Indian Soldiers Encounter England and France*, in: *English Historical Review*, 122/496 (2007), p. 383; Visram, Rozina: *The First World War and the Indian Soldiers*, in: *Indo-British Review*, 16/2 (1989), p. 18.
16. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 370.
17. ↑ *Census of India, 1911, Volume I, Calcutta* 1913, pp. 294–295.
18. ↑ Mason, *Matter of Honour* 1974, p. 422.
19. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 369.
20. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 369.
21. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 370.
22. ↑ Mason, *Matter of Honour* 1974, p. 423.
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24. ↑ Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 176.
25. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 49.
26. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 27.
27. ↑ VanKoski, *Letters Home* 1995, p. 45.
28. ↑ Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches* 1999, p. 45.
29. ↑ Gould, Tony: *Imperial Warriors: Britain and the Gurkhas*, London 1999, pp. 181–182.
30. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 32.
31. ↑ Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 175.
32. ↑ Mason, *Matter of Honour* 1974, p. 423.
33. ↑ Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 57. For a further discussion of this issue see Morton-Jack, *India's Expeditionary Force* 2014, pp. 171–186.
34. ↑ Beckett, Ian: *Ypres: The First Battle*, Harlow 2004, p. 109.
35. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, p. 341; Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 59.
36. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, p. 358; Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, pp. 58–61.
37. ↑ Strachan, Hew: *The First World War: A New Illustrated History*, London 2003, p. 97; French, David: *The Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut: Prestige as a Factor in British Eastern Strategy, 1914-1916*, in: *War and Society*, 5/1 (1987), p. 48.
38. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 25.
39. ↑ Hardinge, *My Indian Years* 1948, p. 117.
40. ↑ Mason, *Matter of Honour* 1974, p. 418.
41. ↑ Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 62.
42. ↑ Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 65.
43. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 43.
44. ↑ Mason, *Matter of Honour* 1974, p. 423.
45. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 53.
46. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 53.
47. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, pp. 62–63; see also Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 177.
48. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, pp. 41–42.
49. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 70.
50. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, pp. 35, 39, 88.
51. ↑ Greenhut, *Imperial Reserve* 1983, p. 68.

52. ↑ Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front* 2006, pp. 362, 348.
53. ↑ Visram, *The Indian Soldiers* 1989, p. 17.
54. ↑ Hardinge of Penhurst, *My Indian Years* 1948, pp. 123–124; French, *Dardanelles, Mecca and Kut* 1987, p. 55.
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57. ↑ Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, pp. 188–191.
58. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 84.
59. ↑ VanKoski, *Letters Home* 1995, pp. 54–55.
60. ↑ Omissi, *Europe Through Indian Eyes* 2007, p. 385.
61. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 110.
62. ↑ VanKoski, *Letters Home* 1995, p. 52.
63. ↑ Omissi, *Europe Through Indian Eyes* 2007, p. 386.
64. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 54.
65. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 86.
66. ↑ Omissi, *Indian Voices* 1999, p. 126.
67. ↑ Omissi, *Europe Through Indian Eyes* 2007, p. 389.
68. ↑ VanKoski, *Letters Home* 1995, p. 52.
69. ↑ Visram, *Asians in Britain* 2002, p. 193.
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