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Women's Mobilization for War (India)

By [Santanu Das](#)

This article recovers the wartime experiences, writings, and songs of women from undivided India. To do so, the article argues for a shift in the very understanding of war from “combat” to “conflict”, and stresses the need to go beyond conventional archival sources to include letters, memoirs, poems, interviews, essays as well as songs. The article considers how the category of gender intersects with that of class, religion, and literacy among others and discusses the responses of aristocrats, middle-class women, poets, and writers as well as non-literate village women from Punjab to the First World War.

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Introduction

Of the various communities in undivided [India](#) and indeed across the non-white colonies during the First World War, perhaps the most silent and shadowy is the world of women. More than 1 million men from undivided India served abroad in the war, as soldiers or non-combatants, in places as diverse as [France](#) and [Belgium](#), [Mesopotamia](#), Central Asia, [East Africa](#), [Gallipoli](#), [Egypt](#), and

Palestine.^[1] But what were the responses of the people they had left behind, particularly their wives, mothers, and daughters? Did the women help in the war efforts or did they protest? How did issues such as class and religion and literacy intersect with that of gender? What largely greets us is a deafening silence. Amnesia, however, is not absence. Indian women did not directly participate in the war in the sense that they did not serve as [nurses](#) or ambulance drivers or ammunition workers, like their European or Dominion sisters. This does not mean that they were less affected by the war: the war was registered by them at every level, from wartime inflation to disruption of the daily rhythm to loneliness and bereavement. Researching the history of Indian women during the First World War involves a two-fold expansion in both how fully we extend the scope of war studies from “combat” to “conflict” and how we rethink our methodology.^[2] First, writing the war lives of Indian women involves investigating how intricately and intimately the war reverberated in the furthest reaches of the colonial “home front”; second, given the low literacy rates, such a shift necessitates broadening the notion of the “archive”, from official or conventional historical documents to a world of fugitive fragments – textual, visual, and imagined traces – and rethinking what questions to ask of that material.

State of Research and Sources

In recent years, there has been much important work on the lives and writings of Indian women from social, cultural, and literary historians as diverse as Jasodhara Bagchi, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Tanika Sarkar, and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan. Female experiences in colonial India have been nuanced to the specificities of religion, class, caste, and region, among other variables.^[3] On the other hand, the history of the First World War in the West has not just been expanded but reconceptualised by the work of several generations of feminist scholars, including [Margaret Darrow](#), Margaret Higonnet, [Susan Grayzel](#), and Alison Fell.^[4] While there is some awareness about the experience of Indian women in warfare, particularly in connection to the Rani of Jhansi Regiment in the Second World War, the experiences of Indian women during the First World War, by sharp contrast, have remained in the shadows. Indeed, the only female traces in the burgeoning field of *India and First World War* studies have been a couple of [letters](#) by women to their men serving in France, preserved among the substantial collection of censored mail of the Indian troops in France and included in [David Omissi's](#) fine selection *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers Letters, 1914-18* (1999).^[5] More recently, Shrabani Basu's *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front* (2015) unravelled the fascinating story of Satoori Devi, the child-widow of Gabar Singh Negi, who used to pin her dead husband's Victoria Cross on her sari and accept the salutes of the people at her dead husband's memorial.^[6] Like the war stories of their male counterparts, there is no single or homogeneous Indian female experience of the First World War: diversity was the key, and obliquity the tenor.

Women in the Recruitment Campaign: Aristocrats, Nationalists, and the Bourgeoisie

India entered the war on 4 August 1914 as part of the British [Empire](#). The Indian political leaders were initially not even consulted about the decision but there was widespread [enthusiasm across the country](#). The most excited group was the princes of the native states who still ruled a third of the country and started competing with each other with extravagant offers of men, money, and materials.^[7] Among them were a couple of important women rulers who rallied to the cause of the British Empire. Consider the following two speeches, the first delivered by the Hindu queen Taradevi in Calcutta on 25 December 1914, and the second by the Muslim Begum (Princess) of Bhopal at the Delhi War Conference in April 1918:

Gentlemen, though I am a lady of such an advanced age yet I am Kshatriya and when my Kshatriya blood rises up in my veins and when I think I am the widow to the eldest son of one who was a most tried friend of the British Government, I jump on my feet at the aspiration of going to the field of war to fight Britain's battle. It is not I alone, I should say, but there are thousands and thousands of Indian ladies who are more anxious than myself, but there is no such emergency, neither will there be one for the ladies to go to the front when they are brave men who would suffice for fighting the enemies.^[8]

Is it not a matter for regret then that Turkey should ... join hands with the enemies of our British Government? All gentlemen like you have read, I suppose, in the papers, how the British Government is now, as ever, having Mohamedan interests at heart.... India will leave nothing undone to justify the confidence, the love, the sympathy with which the King-Emperor has always honoured us. The need of the Empire is undoubtedly India's opportunity.^[9]

Such speeches challenge any neat attempts to equate colonial femininity with anti-colonial protest or [pacifism](#). Made by two powerful women rulers of the time, they try to galvanise a version of heroic colonial [masculinity](#) by appeals to issues of caste and [religion](#) respectively. If the first speech joins Hindu caste hierarchies – Kshatriya is the martial caste – to colonial patriarchy in the service of the empire, the second excerpt points to a specific issue: the retention of the loyalty of India's Muslim population when they are being made to fight their co-religionists in Mesopotamia after the entry of the [Ottoman Empire](#) into the war. The Begum of Bhopal even sent 500 copies of the Qur'an and 1,487 copies of religious tracts to Muslim soldiers.

More surprising was the support of the political bourgeoisie, including the various nationalist parties. Within the Indian National Congress, both the moderates (who dominated in 1914) and the extremists extended their full-fledged support, hoping that India's contribution to the war effort would ensure the then much-cherished dream of India's '[Dominion](#)' status within the British Empire. These impulses inform the wartime speeches of the Irish theosophist [Annie Besant \(1847-1933\)](#) who joined the Indian National Congress in 1914 and would set up, along with the so-called "extremist" ([nationalist](#)) leader [Bal Gangadhar Tilak \(1856-1920\)](#), the Home Rule League, with a membership of about 60,000 in 1917-18.^[10] Writing for the *New India* on 16 November 1915, she noted, "When the war is over and we cannot doubt that the King-Emperor will, as reward for her [India's] glorious

defence of the Empire, pin upon her breast the jewelled medal of self-government within the empire”.^[11] Leaders such as Besant, [Mahatma Gandhi \(1869-1948\)](#), and [Jawaharlal Nehru \(1889-1964\)](#) encouraged women to join the struggle for independence. As early as 1886, the illustrious female social reformer [Swarnakumari Devi \(1855-1932\)](#), sister of the Bengali poet and Nobel Laureate [Rabindranath Tagore \(1861-1941\)](#), formed the “Sakhi-Samiti” (Ladies Association) to inspire women in the nation’s cause. Her daughter [Sarala Devi Chaudhurani \(1872-1945\)](#) gave fiery recruitment speeches and extended hospitality to Indian soldiers. On the other hand, in the Bombay War Conference of 1918, fellow women’s rights activist [Ramabhai Ranade \(1863-1924\)](#) “obliged the government more than she was expected to” and was given the Kaiser-i-Hind Medal for her loyalist speech:

The soldiers of India are fighting valiantly on the battlefields and are not shirking from danger to their life ... A time has come when a vigorous campaign must be carried... Some parents and especially mothers of young recruits will naturally feel unwilling to send their sons to face death on the field of battle. Yet the women of India, though educationally backward, know full well the duties and the responsibilities of the rulers and ruled.^[12]

Present in the audience was fellow Kaiser-i-Hind recipient Mahatma Gandhi who had thrown himself into the recruitment campaign and was reaching out to women as well. In a recruitment speech, delivered in Ras on 26 June 1918, he implored:

Sisters, you should encourage your husbands and brothers and sons and not to worry them with your objections. If you want them to be true men, send them to the army with your blessings. Don’t be anxious about what may happen to them on the battle-field.^[13]

Women’s War Writing

In an article entitled “Women in War”, published in *The Indian Review War Book*, the author – calling herself ‘A Hindu Woman’ – notes:

And the women of India? They, too, are doing what they can, though their work consists for the present in the sewing of shirts and sending gifts of chocolate and money for the soldiers. The women of Bombay alone have collected about two and half lakhs in cash for the War Fund. Mr Bhupendranath Basu has told us that the women in Bengal have offered their jewelry for the cause of the Empire.^[14]

The above account was echoed by one Mrs. Palmer, the wife of the Bishop of Bombay, who sent in her own account to the *Daily Telegraph*:

Large numbers of Hindu and Mahomedan ladies – many strictly purdah women – not only gave generously of their money, but also themselves learnt to knit and to work sewing-machines, and made hundreds of shirts and pyjamas as good as any English shop could produce. In Bombay, we have four principal racial divisions, English, Hindu, Mahomedan and Parsi, and each community chose its own lady secretary, who organized the work among the women of her own race.

A “ladies only” play was performed in Calcutta to raise money. Indeed, well-to-do Indian women contributed to war charities such as the Imperial Indian Relief Fund, the Prince of Wales Fund, the Silver Wedding Fund, and particularly the “Our Day” Fund. A 300-bed hospital for Indian soldiers was set up and fully furnished by women in Bombay and three ambulance trains were provided for use between Bombay and up-country hospitals. Finally, Indian women were asked to equip a 500-bed hospital at Alexandria and, in a month’s time, all the linen required for it was prepared and despatched: 3,000 sheets, 3,000 pillow-cases, 2,500 blankets, over 1,000 pairs of pyjamas, and other items of clothing. Towards the end of “Women and War”, our anonymous “Hindu Woman” hints at global sisterhood forged on the anvil of war:

If the women of India send ... a sum [of money] “as a token of love to sorrowing English women from sympathising Indian sisters” to the wives of poor British soldiers who have died in the present war, it will create a lasting bond between the two countries.^[15]

Though still pro-war and pro-empire, it is nonetheless a feminine vision of support and care as warring hordes of men are here supplanted by an international community of loving women that will bind “the two countries as nothing else has done hitherto”.

Though forming a microscopic minority, the literary women of India were not far behind. Foremost among them was the internationally renowned poet [Sarojini Naidu \(1879-1949\)](#), christened by Mahatma Gandhi as the “Nightingale of India”. She was also an ardent feminist and a nationalist, going on to become the leader of the Indian National Congress in 1926.^[16] Naidu would not only powerfully support India’s participation in the war but would use her “feminist” rhetoric to glorify the contribution of Indian sepoys. Consider “The Gift of India”, written for the Report of the Hyderabad Ladies’ War Relief Association, December 1915, and later collected in *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and Destiny 1915-1916*:

Is there aught you need that my hands withhold,

Rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold?

Lo! I have flung to the East and West,

Priceless treasures torn of my breast,

And yielded the sons of my stricken womb

To the drum beats of duty, the sabres of doom.

Gathered like pearls in their alien graves,

Silent they sleep by the Persian waves.

Scattered like shells on Egyptian sands

They lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands.

They are strewn like blossoms mown down by chance

On the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.^[17]

A lush war lyric in a late Victorian vein becomes striking when produced by a nationalist Indian woman. What is remarkable is the way the nationalist/feminist image of the abject Indian “mother” – a recurring trope in Naidu’s poetry – is here exploited to legitimise and glorify India’s “gift” to the empire: a standard trope of anti-colonial resistance flows into and fuses with imperial support for the war with breath-taking fluency.

Naidu’s poem shares a common inherited Georgian vocabulary and pastoral imagery with the English war poets but the message is very different. The nation is no longer Britannia but the subjugated and destitute “Mother India” with whom the female poet and, implicitly, the Indian reader identify. The final line of her poem recurs in a speech she made in 1916 to protest against the government ban on the right of Indians to carry arms to defend themselves:

Have we not, the women of India, sent our sons and brothers to shed their blood on the battlefields of Flanders, France, Gallipoli and Mesopotamia, when the hour comes, for thanks, shall we not say to them for whom they fought... *remember the blood of martyred sons*, and remember the armies of India and restore to India her lost manhood.^[18]

In the poem, is she asking India to remember her sons martyred in the war, or, is the empire called upon to remember India’s “gift”? The maternal metaphor binds together empire, nation, and the female poet. Yet, such gallant “sacrifice”, it was felt, was not properly recognised, let alone rewarded, by the imperial state, a sentiment that fuels the strangely restless modernist short story “Mutiny” by the above-mentioned Swarnakumari Devi. Here, an upper-class Indian woman, presumably the writer, finds herself in a gathering of British women in India where the war is discussed in nationalist

terms, but without any reference to the contribution or experience of the Indian troops who had just arrived in France. The story becomes an exploration of the relation between race, class, and empire, as the Indian female speaker moves between indignation, pride, ignominy, and a loss of self, while an English woman narrates a dream that tunnels back to the Sepoy Mutiny.^[19] However, possibly the most remarkable female literary contribution comes from an eighty-year old novelist and bereaved grandmother Mokkhada Devi. When her beloved grandson Kalyan Kumar was killed in Mesopotamia, Devi set about to write his biography *Kalyan-Pradeep: The Life of Captain Kalyan Kumar Mukhopadhyay I.M.S.* in vivid detail, weaving in her grandson's letters sent from the front alongside her own observations about the war, particularly the course of the war in the Middle East.^[20]

Subaltern Women: Voices from the Village

What about the women from the villages whose men actually fought? Poor, illiterate, and disenfranchised, they are the real “subalterns”, in the Spivakian sense of the term, in that we do not get to hear about them – let alone *from* them. A singular document which has surfaced in recent years is the following remarkable letter by a young girl called Kishan Devi from Punjab writing in Gurmukhi script to her father Havildar Sewa Singh, of the 23rd Sikh Pioneers, serving in Egypt:

Dear Father, Ek onkarsatguru Prasad [“There is One God by the grace of the True Guru”] This is Kishan Devi. I am writing in to inform that I am alright over here. We received your letter...We came to know about you. We were really scared after receiving your letter. Mother says that you can write to us about what goes on in your heart. Father, I shall read all your letters. I do not fight with anyone. My heart is yours. You are everything to me, and I worry about you. I am like a living dead without you. ... Dear father please take leave and come to meet us. Please do come. We repeat again and again. My mother bows her head to you to pay respect. We do not have any more envelopes. ... Father, please take a leave and come and meet us. Please do come. Please do reply to our letter.... Reply to our letter soon.^[21]

A child's scrawl in Gurmukhi script fills in all available space on the postcard; the words are joined together. In asking her “bapuji” to pour out the feelings of his heart (*jo tere dil de vich hai*), Kishan Devi narrows the distance between the war-front in Sinai and a village in Punjab. If letters arriving from the front would usually be taken to the postal clerk to be read aloud to the non-literate family members, here Kishan Devi circumvents that by learning how to read and write: a global catastrophe here seems to be a catalyst for female literacy. Devi's letter is the only original document by a woman hitherto unearthed. There are, however, a couple of translated and extracted letters from women sent to their men in France and intercepted by the [censors](#), as in the following letter from an irate wife: “Why do you not return? Your mother has gone out of her mind, so I am alone all night. The winter and dark nights are ahead and how can I, a lone woman, stay by myself?”^[22] “Subaltern as female”, writes Gayatri Spivak, “is more deeply in the shadow”.^[23]

What *have* serendipitously survived are folksongs improvised and sung during the war years by

these women. Coaxing, cajoling, anxious, passionate, angry, mournful, and desolate in turns, these folksongs provide us with a veritable archive of female emotions, pointing to a buried subaltern tradition of female lament and protest. The distinguished Punjabi poet Amarjit Chandan, who has recovered and translated many of these songs has called them “the voice-overs of historical events”.^[24] Most of these songs exist in both Urdu and Punjabi versions.^[25] What is remarkable is the emotional acuity and realism of these songs, from their angry initial protests against enlistment:

May you never be enlisted

You who leaves me behind at my parents' house

Before we have even lived together

to desperate pleading with their husbands to be allowed to accompany them, –
'take me with you to Basra then/ So I will work through the night for
you/Spinning cotton on the wheel' – to the moment of farewell:

Go slowly, O train, go slowly

My husband is going to Basra

He wears a tussar shirt,

Go slowly, O train, go slowly, you carry

A passenger bound for Basra.^[26]

These can be read alongside the section “Bewailing by the wives” in recently recovered verse-narrative in Gurmukhi, entitled *Vadda Jung Europe* (1934), by former combatant Nand Singh Havildar.

The women mourn the demise of their husbands,

‘Today we have become widows ...

We have discarded clothes and ornaments

We don't need necklaces and embellishments.

We won't be wearing these anymore,

We don't need perfumes and powders.

They do not suit our widowed youth

We have, now, become, widowed.^[27]

In a context where we do not have any testimonial accounts from women, such passages, even if penned by men, provide insights into the emotional history of the womenfolk of the villages. Another powerful example is the short story "Us Ne Kaha Thah" ("The Troth") by the writer [Chandradhar Sharma Guleri \(1883-1922\)](#), with its strong representation of the mother figure and her entreaty to her childhood sweetheart to save her son's life.^[28] Literary traces often help us to imagine and recover fuller lives in the absence of adequate historical or testimonial documents.

Conclusion

A few years back, I interviewed the Punjabi novelist Mohan Kahlon in Kolkata. Two of his uncles – peasant-warriors from Punjab – perished in Mesopotamia; his grandmother became deranged with grief. In the village, their house came to be branded as "*pagalkhana*" (the asylum).^[29] War trauma here spills into the furthest reaches of the empire. This is an idiom very different from Naidu's abstract rhetoric of "martyrdom", showing how female responses to the war were often fundamentally divisive across class, caste and regional lines; memories of the poor village women refuse to fit the national discourses of enthusiasm or martyrdom that we find in the polished Anglicised verses of Naidu or the crafted loyalist speeches of Ranade. Like the experiences of Indian troops, there was no homogenous experience for Indian women. The present article is only a preliminary study, the first step towards recovering women's history in India during the First World War. What is needed, as indicated before, is a more expanded notion of the "archive" and new ways of reading such materials for much of that history has been articulated through silences, fractures, cries, and whispers.

Reviewed by external referees on behalf of the General Editors

Notes

1. ↑ Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914-1920, London 1922, p. 777.
2. ↑ I have elaborated on this two-fold expansion – both in the definition of the ‘archive’ and the corresponding methodological shift – in my monograph; see Das, Santanu: *India, Empire and First World War Culture: Writings, Images and Songs*, Cambridge 2018, pp. 3-36.
3. ↑ See, for example, Sarkar, Tanika: *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, Bloomington 2001; Bagchi, Jasodhara (ed.): *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, Delhi 1995.
4. ↑ See Higonnet, Margaret R. (ed.): *Lines of Fire: Women Writers of World War I*, New York 1999; Fell, Alison: *Women as Veterans in France and Britain after the First World War*. Cambridge 2018; and Grayzel, Susan R. / Procter, Tammy (eds.): *Gender and the Great War*. Oxford 2017.
5. ↑ For an early piece on Indian women, see my chapter ‘Indian Sisters! ... Send your husbands, brothers, sons’: *India, Women and the First World War*, in: Fell, Alison / Sharp, Ingrid (eds.): *Women’s Movements: International Perspectives, 1914-1919*, London 2007, pp. 18-37. The work of the historian [Radhika Singha](#) on the [Indian Labour Corps](#) also contain references to women; see her forthcoming *Coolie’s Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*, London 2020.
6. ↑ Basu, Shrabani: *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front, 1914-1918*, London 2014, p. 192.
7. ↑ See *India’s Contribution to the Great War*, Calcutta, 1923, pp. 190-202; also Das, Santanu: *India, Empire and First World War Culture*. Cambridge 2018, pp. 39-74.
8. ↑ Quoted in Bhargava, M.B.L.: *India’s Services in the War*, Allahabad 1919, p. 205.
9. ↑ *Ibid.*, pp. 278-80.
10. ↑ See Bandyopadhyay, Shekhar: *From Plassey to Partition: A History of Modern India*, Hyderabad 2009, p. 291.
11. ↑ Quoted in Natesan, G. A. (ed.): *All about the War: India Review War Book*, Madras 1915, p. 267.
12. ↑ Quoted in Ganachari, Arvind: *First World War: Purchasing Indian Loyalties. Imperial Policy of Recruitment and ‘Rewards’*, in: *Economic and Political Weekly* 783 (2005), pp. 779-788. For details about the Kaisar-i-Hind Medal, see <https://archives.collections.ed.ac.uk/repositories/2/resources/83644> (retrieved 8 July 2020).
13. ↑ Gandhi, M.K.: *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, XIV, Ahmedabad 1965, p. 454.
14. ↑ *Women and War*, in: Natesan (ed.), *All About the War* 1915, p. 245.
15. ↑ *Ibid.*
16. ↑ See Banerjee, Hasi: *Sarojini Naidu: The Traditional Feminist*, Calcutta 1998.

17. † The Gift of India, in: *The Broken Wing: Songs of Love, Death and Destiny 1915-1916*, London 1917, pp. 5-6.
18. † The Arms Act, in: Naidu, Sarojini: *Speeches and Writings*. Madras 1925, pp. 102-3. My italics.
19. † Swarnakumari Devi's intriguing story is extracted in Higonnet, *Lines of Fire* 1999, pp. 384-389; for analysis, see Das, India, *Empire and First World War Culture* 2018, pp. 311-314.
20. † Devi, Mokkhada: *Kalyan-Pradeep: The Life of Captain Kalyan Kumar Mukhopadhyay I.M.S., Calcutta* 1928; also see Das, India, *Empire and First World War Culture* 2018, pp. 250-255.
21. † The postcard is owned by Avtar Singh Bahra and was brought to my attention during the exhibition 'Empire, Faith and War' organised by Punjab UK Heritage at SOAS in 2014. The text has been translated by Arshdeep Singh Brar.
22. † Letter to Lance Dafadar Nasab Ali Khan from his wife, 3 November 1916, quoted in Omissi, David: *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters 1914-1918*, London 1999, p. 248.
23. † Spivak, Gayatri: *Can the Subaltern Speak*, in: Nelson, Cary / Grossberg, Lawrence (eds.): *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, London 1988, p. 257.
24. † For quotations and translations, see Chandan, Amarjit: 'How They Suffered: World War I and Its Impact Upon the Punjabis', <http://apnaorg.com/articles/amarjit/wwi/> (Retrieved 29 June 2020).
25. † Jasdeep Singh, an archivist at the National Army Museum, London, and his wife Amanroop have now set some of these lyrics to Punjabi classical tunes from the time to bring out their emotional range and rawness.
26. † 'How They Suffered: World War I and Its Impact Upon the Punjabis'.
27. † Singh, Nand: *Vadda Jung Europe (The Great European War)*, Ludhiana 1934, p. 26. Translated by Arshdeep Singh Brar.
28. † Guleri, Chadradhar Sharma: *At Her Bidding*, in: *Indian Literature* 102/27 (1984), pp. 4, 41. Translated from Hindi by Jai Ratan.
29. † Interview conducted with Mohan Kahlon in Kolkata, 20 December 2007.

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