

“The story of 1.5 million soldiers that served in WW1 has been forgotten over the years” – Shrabani Basu



Ahead of speaking at the LSE at the launch of the unique Red ‘Khadi’ Poppy, an event which will commemorate the role of more than 1 million Indian soldiers who served in the British Army in World War 1, **Shrabani Basu** talks to **Chris Finnigan** about her book *For King and Another Country* (2015) and the role that Indian soldiers played 100 years ago.



In Remembrance | Credit: [James Harris](#), [Unsplash](#)

Over 1 million people from the sub-continent volunteered to serve for the British Empire in the First World War. Where were these people from?

They were mainly from Punjab, the North West Frontier, Rajasthan and the hills of Garhwal and Nepal. They were picked from the so-called “martial races”. They were the Sikhs, the Pathans, the Gurkhas, the Garhwalis and the Dogras. Apart from these, there were the Imperial troops belonging to the Maharajas.

How did the British present the idea of joining the war effort to them?

The British offered the Indians a regular pay of 11 rupees a month, a uniform and three meals a day. At a time of scarcity, it was enough to attract the illiterate peasants and tribals. Moreover, recruitment was done at village level, so there was the incentive of loyalty to the village and the possibility of fame if they won bravery awards.

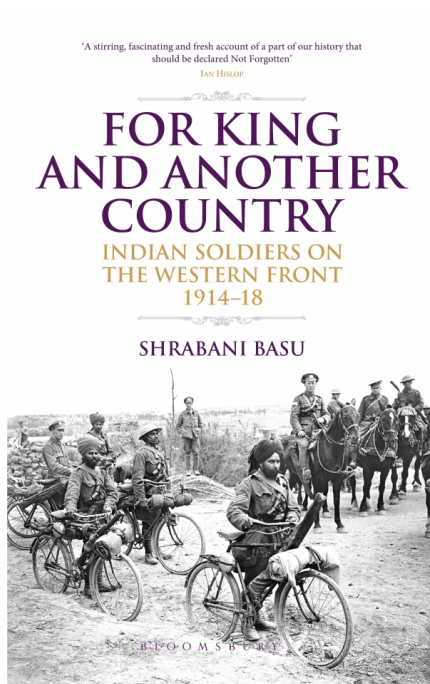
When these recruits arrived in Europe how were they treated by their British counterparts?

They were treated very well. Every effort was made to see that they could practise their religious beliefs and eat according to their religious requirement. A Comfort Committee was set up and the soldiers were supplied with everything they needed from spices, ghee and religious books to neem sticks to clean their teeth and water-proof turban covers. It was the first time that curries were cooked close to the trenches and the first halal butchers set up shop in Brighton.

How did the colonial relationship manifest itself inside the army as a whole? Were these soldiers able to rise up the ranks of the military?

In the First World War, Indians were not allowed to be officers. They were not allowed to train at Sandhurst. They had some Viceroy's Commissioned Officers, but the highest Indian officer was still lower than a low-ranked English officer.

The other discriminatory rule was that white English nurses could not treat injured Indian soldiers. Their role was supervisory. This led to a lot of discontentment, as soldiers felt they were good enough to fight but not good enough to be nursed. White English women were not allowed to visit injured Indian soldiers. The British did not want any relationships developing between lonely Indian soldiers and lonely English women. This changed by the Second World War and there were many Indian officers.



In your book you document how the British authorities censored the letters soldiers wrote home from the front line. Why did they do this?

The British censored the letters for two main reasons: one to see that no military secrets or locations were inadvertently given away. Secondly, they wanted to keep a close eye on any potential rebellions or discontent. Many publications were banned, so the soldiers could not receive any anti-war propaganda. If the soldiers wrote about meeting up with white English women, those letters would not be sent.

What happened to those soldiers that survived the war?

Those who were injured limped back, never able to work in their fields again, others who suffered from shell-shock were never treated for their mental condition. Those who lost their eyes in the artillery shelling had to travel to Bombay for treatment, which was not possible for most. Many villages in Punjab lost their men-folk. Those who had received high gallantry awards had a marginally better life with better pensions.

Do you think that commemoration and remembrance of the First World War in the UK has become an act of exclusion?

I wouldn't say it was a deliberate exclusion. It is just that the story of 1.5 million soldiers has been forgotten over the years. After Independence, India had its own heroes (those who fought for Independence) and the soldiers who fought for their colonial masters were not important. The British, too, forgot about them, as they became India's problem after Independence. But the greatest disservice to the soldiers is to forget their bravery and contribution.

Do you think your book and other books have made a difference in how we commemorate and recognise those who served or do you think there is still a way to go?

I think my book, which was published in 2015, definitely raised a lot of awareness. I told the human story of the war, focusing on some of the soldiers, following their journey from villages in India to the western front. I wrote about the young Indian pilots in the First World War, something that most people knew nothing about. I also told the story of an "untouchable" cleaner, Sukha, who died in a hospital in England, and how no one would cremate or bury him. His story has now gone around the world.

Of course, a lot has still to be done to remember the soldiers. I feel that the first step would be for both India and Britain to ensure that the contribution of the Indian soldiers is studied as part of the curriculum in both countries.

This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the South Asia @ LSE blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.



Shrabani Basu is the author of *Spy Princess The life of Noor Inayat Khan* (2008), *Victoria & Abdul: The True Story of the Queen's Closest Confidant* (2017) and *For King and Another Country: Indian Soldiers on the Western Front 1914-18* (2015). She tweets [@shrabanibasus](https://twitter.com/shrabanibasus)