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Dr Florian Stadtler

f.c.j.stadtler@exeter.ac.uk

Florian Stadtler is Lecturer in Global Literatures at the University of Exeter. Previously Research Fellow at The Open University on the AHRC-funded projects, 'Making Britain: South Asian Visions of Home and Abroad' and 'Beyond the Frame: Indian British Connections', he has researched and published on the South Asian community and its historical legacy in Britain pre-1950. He has also worked extensively on South Asian literature and film. His monograph, *Fiction, Film and Indian Popular Cinema: Salman Rushdie's Novels and the Cinematic Imagination* is published by Routledge. He is Reviews Editor for *Wasafiri: The Magazine of International Contemporary Writing*.

Florian Stadtler*

'Home' Front: Indian soldiers and civilians in Britain 1939-1945

South Asian involvement in the early phase of the Second World War in Britain has only received scant attention. This lacuna is interesting for a number of reasons, not least since Britain is increasingly looking towards this subject matter as part of its own articulation of a diverse, multi-cultural nation. This has been particularly evident during the centenary commemorations of the First World War in 2014. For example, the British Library has made the Charles Hilton DeWitt Girdwood collection available online through the Europeana website and its own online manuscripts portal.[1] This series of photographs depicts Indian soldiers on the Western Front as well as in Britain. The BBC too has devoted much air time to the Indian role in the conflict, including a two-part television documentary focussing on the troops from across the British Empire enlisted to fight.[2] While the deployments of British Indian Army troops on the Western Front and elsewhere have been brought to much wider public attention, the same cannot be said of South Asian participation in the Second World War — the last BBC documentary, 'Forgotten Volunteers', part of the Corporation's *Timewatch* series, dates back to June 1999 and focused in the main on East Asia and the Burma front.[3] South Asian participation in the European theatre has received even less public attention.

Nevertheless, in fictional form, perhaps one of the better-known representations of the South Asian Second World War soldier is Sapper Kirpal

Singh, a key character in Michael Ondaatje's Booker Prize-winning novel, *The English Patient*, played by the actor Naveen Andrews in the Oscar-winning movie of the novel.[4] Singh is taken under the wing of Lord Suffolk, who teaches him how to defuse mines and booby-traps. Posted in northern Italy, he forms a close bond with the Canadian nurse Hana, taking care of an English patient in a monastery. Andrea Levy's novel, *Small Island* also offers a different perspective on the Second World War by focusing on Royal Air Force pilots from the Caribbean. As mentioned, a few BBC documentaries have detailed some of these soldiers' stories but have not had a significant impact on public perception in Britain, where the European theatre is considered to be largely a 'white' European war with Britain standing 'alone' to fight the might of Nazi imperialism. More recently, *The Princess Spy* (2006) explored the life of the Special Operations Executive wireless operator Noor Inayat Khan, who was infiltrated into France in 1944. Later captured in Paris, she was interrogated by the Gestapo and then executed in Dachau Concentration Camp. A memorial dedicated to her was inaugurated in 2013 and stands in London's Gordon Square.

Recent years have seen a wider process of retrospective commemoration, for example at the yearly service in June at the Chattri memorial on the South Downs near Brighton. This site was used during the First World War as a cremation ground for Sikh and Hindu soldiers who had died in special military hospitals on Britain's southern coast. Ironically, the area was off limits during the Second World War and the Chattri Memorial was damaged because of target practice during army training in the area.[5] The now-annual event has become a

focal point for the commemoration of South Asian servicemen and women from different conflicts, including the Second World War.

Particularly in relation to the period 1939-1945, the preconception persists that Britain 'stood alone' as an embattled island left to fend for itself. For many this notion lies at the heart of the articulation of a resilient British character that remains central to the country's understanding of nationhood. This essay seeks to challenge some of these myths by focusing on the presence and participation of South Asians resident in Britain in the country's efforts during the Second World War. Some contributed as combatants, some as civilians. These contributions raise wider questions about citizenship and divided loyalties, some of which were apparent to participants. Indeed, as India remained under colonial rule, despite an accelerated campaign for self-government and independence, many South Asians in Britain committed themselves only reluctantly, with a main focus on work in civil defence rather than active military service, which caused a rift amongst South Asian activists and campaigners.

My interest in these narratives stems from a series of images and radio programmes from the BBC's Indian section of the Eastern Service, which are reproduced in George Orwell's 1943 collection, *Talking to India*.[6] One image features a group of South Asian soldiers standing around a BBC microphone and is accompanied by the caption, 'Hello Punjab – A soldier of the Indian contingent broadcasting to his family in India from a B.B.C. studio'.[7] Images of broadcasting Indian soldiers as part of wartime propaganda featured in many publications, including the magazines *London Calling: BBC Empire Broadcasting* and *Indian*

Information, published fortnightly by the Government of India, which became a widely used tool during the war to shape public opinion among the English-speaking public in India. Both of these publications offer a useful indication of the manifold theatres of operation as well as the scale of South Asian involvement in and contribution to Britain's war effort. They also feature reflective glimpses of how South Asians resident in Britain engaged with the wartime reality. Orwell's collection is particularly revealing in this regard. For example, in the broadcast for the Indian Section of the BBC's Empire Service 'Open Letter to a Nazi', R.R. Desai directly addresses a character called Hans, whom he had met in London before the war. The talk reflects on the nature of fascism, its relation to wider considerations of freedom and democracy and why it needs to be resisted. In this respect, the broadcast offered a didactic, well-structured argument to the English-speaking Indian listener in an attempt to shape an intellectual élite's opinion to counter propaganda, particularly the broadcasts by Subhas Chandra Bose from Berlin on Azad Hind radio. This was of much concern to India Office, War Office and BBC officials.[8] Importantly, the choice of speaker and writer was seen as crucial — this programme was written by an Indian in London for an English-speaking Indian audience in British India. The programme was commissioned by Zulfikar Ali Bokhari and was broadcast on 13 August 1942 and belonged to a wider series of 'Open Letters'.[9]

Desai formed part of a larger cohort of Indian broadcasters and script writers employed by the BBC. Many of these were left-leaning intellectuals, some involved with pressure groups in London for Indian independence. As is well

known, George Orwell worked as a talks producer alongside Programme Director Zulfikar Ali Bokhari at the Indian Section of the BBC's Eastern Service, which formed part of the corporation's Overseas Service. While the majority of the Eastern Service's output was in Indian languages, necessitating a diversity of regional language speakers to be employed by the BBC, including in Bengali, Gujarati, Marathi and Tamil, forty-five minutes per day were set aside for broadcasts in English for Indian audiences. Notable South Asian broadcasters working for the BBC in English include the writers Ahmed Ali and Mulk Raj Anand, zoologist and cultural critic Cedric Dover, musician, writer and broadcaster Narayana Menon, who was responsible for musical programming, novelist Venu Chitale and political activist Krishnarao Shelvankar among others. Many of these broadcasters had links to the Indian independence movement with connections to Krishna Menon's London-based pressure group, the India League. Many were also involved in civil defence work, particularly as ARP wardens.

Orwell described the Indian section's English output as 'honest propaganda' though whether propaganda can ever be 'honest' is of course a matter for debate.[10] Nevertheless, these samples of radio programmes produced by a London-based South Asian team of writers and broadcasters for a South Asian audience in British India are an important snapshot of how South Asians resident in Britain during the war responded to and engaged with their metropolitan environment. As such, they offer a unique view of the conflict. Charged with broadcasting propaganda to India after Britain's declaration of war on behalf of India and the empire without prior consultation of Indian leaders, Whitehall

officials and ministers in the India Office and War Office sought to impress on the Indian population more broadly and, more specifically, on an educated English-speaking élite, not just the gravity of the situation but also the importance of India's support for the British war effort. This became particularly pressing when Subhas Chandra Bose started to broadcast anti-British propaganda to India from Berlin in 1942. The Indian section of the Overseas Service was founded in May 1940 as a direct response to Nazi Germany's attempt to exploit the nationalist grievances regarding the manner in which India was perceived lacking of public support for Britain's war effort. Such public perception in Britain was of course in sharp contrast to the pledges of monetary and moral support of the Princely States. The Indian section was charged with bolstering and shoring up Indian public opinion, and it fell largely to Orwell and Bokhari to recruit a range of South Asian writers and broadcasters who would write and record programmes for broadcast. This process was not easy, given that many had to reconcile their left-leaning politics and support for Indian independence with producing propaganda broadcasts and such negotiations of their own conscience provided plenty of conflict while working for the BBC.

Susheila Nasta has charted this in its minutiae in her analysis of the friendship between George Orwell and Mulk Raj Anand.[11] Orwell and Bokhari were able to assemble a wide range of South Asian public intellectuals whose views on Indian independence were well known. Why then did they agree to join the BBC and help generate what was in effect British propaganda to be broadcast to India's educated middle-class radio listenership? This can in part be attributed

to the anti-fascist activism with which many of the Indian intellectuals recruited to work for the Indian section had aligned themselves. Indeed, this was not far removed from the position of the Krishna Menon-led India League, which aligned its campaign for Indian self-determination with the anti-fascist fight for freedom and democracy.[12] In terms of programming at the BBC, Anand's collaboration with Orwell, who was initially hired as talks assistant, was significant and their collaboration shaped particularly the Arts output of the Indian Section.

However, Anand needed much persuasion to join. Anand had previously rejected working for the BBC and it was Orwell who convinced him to change his mind.[13] As Susheila Nasta points out, though Anand had severe reservations about a British government that was committed to fight fascism in Europe while restricting freedoms in India and resisting its demand for self rule, 'Anand's divided perspective shifted significantly after Hitler's invasion of Russia.'[14]

Anand's contribution to the BBC offers an interesting snapshot of the multifaceted nature of these writers' work. His output was not limited to art; he also wrote radio boradcasts which engaged directly with the reality of wartime Britain. He is responsible for a series of programmes which reveal an important glimpse of 1940s London life, evoking a city under siege and internalised by a perceptive novelist observer who had made the city his home for the previous twenty years. The result was the programme 'London as I see it', first broadcast on 14 February 1945 and recently reprinted in the literary magazine, *Wasafiri*.[15] Anand describes a Blitz-ravished London, contemplating its 'scarred face' as he walks through it. Anand had previously been involved with several other

broadcasts which sought to showcase the atmosphere and deprivations of Britain in war time to a wider Indian audience.[16] On the one hand, Anand celebrates the spirit of London, highlighting how 'heroism is not always so heroic as the attempt by men to adapt themselves to their surroundings during times when the odds are against them.'[17] He celebrates the resilience of Londoners while highlighting how, in the face of adversity, the city had undergone not just dramatic changes to its skyline but also in character. Anand gestures to the wider picture. He argues that through its experience of intense bombardment the city had now become aligned with other cities under siege — Leningrad, Moscow, Chungking and Calcutta. He concludes that 'one must cultivate certain virtues if one is to build up what has been destroyed, manhood, patience, courage, sensibility and poise.'[18] Anand's perspective is distinctly international and he adopts the position of the outsider to relay to his Indian listener a personal experience, yet he manages to bring this knowledge to a different audience by highlighting a universal resilience in adversity. In this instance we can make connections to the ambivalent way in which Indian soldiers and non-combatants in Britain connected and related to their own wartime work and experience.

The situation for South Asians living in Britain differed. While there was resistance towards conscription into the British Army, many who were members of the pressure group the India League, including its secretary V.K. Krishna Menon, contributed to the war effort as Air Raid Precuation (ARP) wardens and in other areas of civil defence. South Asians resident in Britain were involved not only in a single issue campaign for Indian independence in Britain, but, more

importantly, took up a range of issues concerning social justice and equality. For example, Krishna Menon worked as a lawyer as well as a Labour Councillor for the Borough of St Pancras. According to his biographer, T.J.S. George, for Menon the Second World War required a dual approach. Menon saw himself as having a local duty to St Pancras and as being responsible for providing the necessary leadership to his constituents. As Rozina Visram points out, Menon served with two others on a reduced team of the council.[19] Menon also acted as an air raid warden and was instrumental in moving a motion in the council to improve the safety and working conditions in air raid shelters and posts for attendants. While Menon apparently conducted his war work with great rigour and courage, his campaigning activities for Indian independence in London did not stall. Menon and the India League used the debate around the fight against fascism and for freedom to bolster the call for Indian self-determination. Indeed, India Office Records suggest clearly the larger question at stake for India's participation in the war: 'Would Great Britain have an unwilling India dragged into a war, or a willing ally cooperating with her in the prosecution of and the defence of true democracy? Congress support would mean the greatest moral asset.'[20] An article in the *Colonial Information Bulletin*, published in London on 18 September 1939, further elaborates this point. It clearly outlines that the peddles of support by Indian Princes and Rajas are not a true reflection of public opinion of the Indian people and stresses again that 'India has always been opposed to Nazism and the policy of Munich betrayals.'[21] But what is reiterated in the article, which the India Office assumes is written by Menon, is that India's right to self-determination and

treatment with equality is paramount. In this respect he argues that the Indian position is two-pronged, on the one hand struggling for the right of the country to manage its own affairs and on the other fighting against Nazism.

As mentioned, in his role as councillor Menon participated in air-raid precaution work, yet he took a different stance on the issue of conscription and joining the army in Britain. When asked by an Indian student about the question of enlistment, he responded, according to a report, 'that each individual must be guided by his own conscience.'[22] But he would not join.

Chuni Lal Katial and Menon were contemporaries, working in local politics in London as well as being part of the India League. Katial was a close friend of Gandhi and a staunch supporter of the Indian independence movement. He held long-standing Gandhian principles of selfless service to humanity, reflected in his medical work and the setting up of the Finsbury Health Centre. Katial settled in Britain in 1927 and, as a trained doctor, opened a practice in London's East End in 1929. Katial involved himself in local politics and was elected to Finsbury borough council in 1934. He also served as deputy mayor and later as mayor of Finsbury. As a council member he worked tirelessly for the borough as chairman of the Air Raid Precautions Medical Service and Food Control Committee. He was also a first aid medical officer.[23] In an oral history interview he recalls a meeting with Lady Mountbatten at Birla House after he returned to India in 1947:

> She looked at me and said, ‘we meet at funny places.’ I said, ‘Yes, we do.’ She was the Colonel Commandant of the St. John’s Ambulance Brigade in London during the Second World War and she used to come to Finsbury, which was my borough, my constituency, of which I was the Mayor, in the evening to see civil defence arrangements and shelters. Then we would meet and walk over and have a drink together in the Mayor’s Parlour.[24]

The meeting with Edwina Mountbatten is striking and highlights the multifaceted nature of his work. Important to note here is his wider commitment, like Krishna Menon, to work for greater equality and social justice at both local and international levels.

South Asians were present on the home front, which is well documented in propaganda pamphlets of the time, yet in the post-war process of memorialisation their contribution has been marginalised and has largely remained unrecognised. As previously highlighted, South Asians volunteered in civil defence, as Air Raid Precaution wardens (Sudhindranath Ghose in Ealing, Krishna Menon in Camden, C L Katial in Finsbury) or ambulance workers. For instance, a group of Indians formed and manned the auxiliary ambulance station in Augustus Street, St Pancras, London. This station was set up at the suggestion of Dorai Ross. Its personnel was drawn entirely from the Indian community in London and it was known as Auxiliary Ambulance Station 50 (Indian Section). The unit included some 100 women and men who were from a range of professional backgrounds including doctors and barristers.[25]

Another example is the Indian Comforts Fund which was inaugurated in December 1939 by the Dowager Viscountess Chelmsford. It was a registered war charity approved by the Admiralty, War Office and Air Ministry to provide for the war needs of Indian troops in Europe and lascar seamen, who were often stranded for long periods of time in Britain as sea routes became increasingly disrupted. During the war years, an estimated 30,000 Indian seamen arrived in British ports annually. The Fund's operations were centred at India House, Aldywch, where the Indian High Commissioner had offered much-needed space as a depot and accommodation for the working parties, including the food parcel packing centre.

The Fund was run by British and Indian women and took responsibility for the welfare of Indian soldiers as well as sailors of the Merchant and Indian navies. By 1945 the Fund packed over 1.6 million food parcels to be despatched to Prisoner of War camps in Europe.[26] It also organised knitting parties to supply warm clothing to Indian sailors stranded in Britain and POWs in the camps in Germany and Italy. At its peak, there were some 100,000 knitters across the country, with one of the largest groups in Oxford numbering some 400, who the Fund supplied with wool and whose work it oversaw. This enabled the packing and dispatch of over 75,400 parcels with warm clothing.

In 1941, the Indian Comforts Fund estimated there were some 2,300 Indian Prisoners of War in Europe, 550 of which were seamen. The Fund, packed food parcels for them, which were paid for by the Indian Red Cross.[27] The Indian contingent, too, was cared for by the Indian Comforts Fund, with the present of garments as well as support for the weekly parties, which were held at the Mosque

in Woking.[28] As an entirely voluntary organisation, the Indian Comforts Fund worked in close cooperation with the Indian Red Cross and St John's Ambulance Service. The Fund was officially next-of-kin for all Indian prisoners of war and civilian internees in Europe. This enabled it to provide the quarterly next-of-kin parcels which included clothing, toothbrush, toothpaste, razors and shaving soap, washing soap, pencils, combs, bootlaces as well as other essentials. It coordinated the packing of food parcels, which were regularly shipped to the International Red Cross in Geneva, from where they would be sent on to the internment camps. The work of the Fund reached its peak in 1943 when the number of Indian internees in Europe had risen to 14,000. The parcels contained Indian staples including dhal, curry powder, ghee, atta and rice to the same calorific value of those for British soldiers. In Britain, the charity also supported the entertainment of Indian troops and seamen, providing gifts such as gramophone records, books and sporting equipment. The Fund organised weekly leave parties for Indian soldiers to visit London and introduced a visiting scheme for hospitalised servicemen. The Fund's workload grew exponentially through the war years until it was wound up at the end of 1945. The Indian Comforts Fund highlights especially the way in which Indian soldiers, seamen and civilians engaged in the war effort were supported by the organization. It also serves as an example how people across divisions of class and gender participated in this charitable work for an organisation which commanded support across political lines.

The early South Asian contribution to the war effort in Britain was largely shaped by a resident civilian population, but was bolstered in 1940 by the arrival

of three animal transport companies of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps which had seen action in France and were evacuated in June 1940. Their role has now been largely forgotten. Known in Britain at the time as the Indian Contingent, its personnel worked on the home front and featured heavily in wartime propaganda. One such example is a radio interview between the commander of the Indian contingent, Lieutenant Colonel Reginald Hills, Mohamed Akbar Khan of the Royal Indian Army Service Corps and an unnamed newly arrived Indian Flying Officer who served with the Royal Air Force.[29] These men were amongst the first British Indian Army troops to participate in military action in the Second World War. Their story can be pieced together through archival holdings at several UK and Indian repositories including the National Archives of India, the Imperial War Museum, National Archives, Kew and the India Office Records at the British Library.

Propaganda materials in Britain and India, including Orwell's collection of BBC talks and illustrated photographs, only referred to these troops as 'the Indian contingent'. This designation followed as the original name of the force from India in December 1939 on despatch, K6, had led to difficulties in recognising it in Britain.[30] *The Times* reported the arrival of Indian units in France in December 1939. The newspaper saw it as an example of Indian contributions to the war effort and a statement of Indian opposition to Nazism: 'for even those with a political grievance against Great Britain are as convinced as are the people of this country that existing German policy and methods must be eliminated if the human family is to live in harmony and progress.'[31] It is clear that this is of course part of

a wider propaganda campaign designed to underscore that the British Empire was united in its fight against fascism and Nazi Germany's aggression. The article, then, must be read as an example of how this early deployment was instrumentalised in Britain to showcase Indian support for Britain's war effort, which was severely doubted given the fallout from the widely reported adverse response of Congress leaders to the Viceroy Linlithgow's declaration of war on behalf of India without consultation of India's political parties. Indeed this was a contravention of any pledges made previously by the Viceroy and the Government of India that no Indian troops should be moved out of India without the Central Legislature being informed. Dissatisfaction was compounded by knowledge of the fact that the British government had consulted all other dominions of the Empire before the joint declaration of war on behalf of Britain and its Empire had been made.

The situation had been woefully mishandled by the British government and the Government of India. Previously, the country had been able to rely on large-scale Indian support during the First World War, with some 1.4 million South Asian combatants and non-combatants fighting for the Empire.[32] Even Gandhi, then in London, submitted a petition to the India Office pledging support from the Indian community in Britain and led the establishment of the Indian Field Ambulance Corps.[33]

1914 is invoked in many propaganda publications of the 1940s, highlighting the unprecedented deployment of Indian troops in Europe and wider Indian support for the British war effort.[34] However, in the wake of 1918, when

many promises for greater autonomy for India had ended in disappointment and consequently a movement pushing for full independence was fully underway, the outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 and any potential involvement from India proved a much more challenging situation to handle. Thus, the Government of India as well as India Office officials were working hard to prevent the fallout from becoming a total public relations debacle.

On 28 September 1939, Lord Hailey published an article in the BBC magazine *The Listener* outlining the many ways in which India would support the British war effort. Hailey, too, focuses initially on Indian contributions to the First World War. He arrives at the conclusion that the First World War played a significant part in awakening a political consciousness in India and in generating an increased awareness of the geopolitical position of the country in world affairs. He maintains that the 1935 Government of India Act 'demand[s] that we should respect to the full the position of its elected representatives, but we have everything to gain if we can carry them with us.'[35] Hailey stresses the importance of bringing together a consensus on civil and military activity as the bedrock of any colonial war effort. Hailey offers a relatively balanced interpretation of the Congress point of view, explaining clearly its anti-fascist stance as well as its demand for a clearer position on any future autonomous status of India. Nevertheless, his article obscures the fact that the Imperial Government's unilateral declaration of war led to the resignation of Congress ministers and reluctance to support the war effort.

After its evacuation from France during June 1940, the Indian contingent was headquartered at Shirley Common, Derbyshire. In the late summer of 1940 it was decided to concentrate the contingent in Southern Command with only one company as an animal transport company and to mechanise the remainder for its future role.[36] This is an interesting decision, considering that the British Army requested Animal Transport Companies from the British Indian Army precisely because Britain had mechanised its own transport companies after the First World War. Indeed, Hills recommended that, in the light of recent operations, animal transport companies should be retained as they had ways of accessing and overcoming terrain where transport infrastructure had been destroyed; particularly in areas where mechanised transport was precluded, animal transport became a necessity. It is also seen as more economical for short hauls and for close work with advance troops, as was the case in the Saar area.[37] Official records contain conflicting information about the Indian contingent, its position and its ongoing deployment in the UK.

Formed at the request of the War Office in October 1939, the Indian contingent, was constituted out of four animal transport companies consisting of 16 troops with support units to administer and maintain them.[38] They were seconded from the British Indian Army's Royal Indian Army Service Corps (RIASC) to provide logistical transport support for formations in the British Expeditionary Force sent to France in 1939. In addition to mule transport companies, other units were mobilised so that it would be self-contained. They were evacuated at Dunkirk and other ports in Northern France and stationed in

Britain until the end of 1943 and featured in much publicity during their time in Britain. On initial dispatch, the contingent numbered approximately 1,800 personnel and 1,950 animals. In May 1941, the contingent increased by three Mule companies, was partly mechanised and also received arms training. The Indian Army Lists of 1942 included the companies which had been stationed in Europe.[39] By early 1942, the contingent was placed under the command of the Commander in Chief of the Home Forces and subsequently moved to Scottish Command for operational training together with the 52(L) Division.[40] By that time the contingent had grown to approximately 3,400 men responsible for 3,400 animals. While seconded to Southern Command, where they helped with sea defences, they were also regarded as useful to provide publicity to highlight to an embattled Britain that the Empire supported the mother country in its hour of need. It is interesting to note here how little attention this early example of South Asian contributions to the war effort has received subsequently. While it needs to be acknowledged that the numbers were small by comparison with later large-scale deployments in northern Africa and the Middle East, archival evidence suggests that the contributions of these troops was highly valued at the time. A range of photographs, official publicity materials, letters and oral history interviews attest to their work. Although incomplete, the Indian contingent's war diaries also survive.

Why then has the contribution of these men remained so little known, despite their high visibility at the time? Was it because theirs was mainly a supporting role? Compared with a total of 2.5 million men the British Indian

Army had mobilised by 1945, they constituted only 0.08 per cent of total South Asian military recruitments. Nevertheless, given the recent trend to memorialise and commemorate all manner of diverse wartime contributions, this lacuna seems striking and is only a further example of a lingering and ongoing public view that Britain 'stood alone', when this narrative is actually much more complex. One might also want to question contemporary public perceptions of Britain in the 1940s, which is perceived as largely mono-cultural, when in fact the population's make up is actually much more diverse than usually acknowledged.[41] For example, Indians in London involved in civil defence, Indian lascar sailors as part of the Merchant Marine keeping supply lines open or the charitable organisation, the Indian Comforts Fund, based at India House, Aldwych were testament to a settled South Asian community.

Three crucial questions emerge here. Why have the contributions made by South Asians to the war effort in the Second World War remained little acknowledged? How could Britain's collective memory of the Second World War today be expanded by making visible these archival holdings; and what impact might this have on how the South Asian community in Britain engages with what can be revealed as a shared history in which the entire population is mutually invested? How do we deal with the marginalised stories of these South Asians beyond tokenistic forms of cultural historical retrieval; and what impact does this have on how the war is commemorated and how the legacy of Britain's so-called 'Finest Hour' is interpreted?

In recent years there has been a slight shift in the prevalent narrative of Britain and the Second World War. In public discourse, the notion that she 'stood alone' is in the process of being reformulated. Perhaps this is a spill-over effect from similar efforts in relation to the First World War where the narratives are being refocused to include the contributions of soldiers from the former Empire in wider public debates. It is also a reflection of how history becomes a prism through which a contemporary reality is viewed and refracted, where such narratives become increasingly privileged to represent the culturally diverse present. Such processes are of course fraught with potential pitfalls of perhaps over-emphasising the importance of marginal stories.

I want to return, however, to the Animal Transport Companies. When the Ministry of Defence (MOD) received an enquiry from the BBC journalist Anita Anand, then working for the Southall-based channel Zee TV in 2000, in relation to the court-martial of Paddy Ashdown's father John, who was a captain with 32 Animal Transport Company of the RIASC in France, the MOD replied that, after two days of searches in their archives, they were unable to find any record of Indian troops at Dunkirk.[42] Shortly before the company's evacuation, John Ashdown was nearly court-martialled for disobeying an order, which stipulated that he should abandon the Indian troops and their mules on the beaches in France. He refused and insisted on their evacuation along with all the other British troops. A very short note in the India Office files only marginally alludes to the incident.[43] The Company was part of the Flanders withdrawal of units and arrived on the outskirts of Dunkirk. The unit embarked complete on 25 May and after

arrival in Britain was despatched to Aldershot. The unit suffered two casualties; shipping for animals, equipment and supplies was impossible and orders were received to abandon these. 25 Company was also evacuated at Dunkirk on 29 May and 29 Company, previously stationed in Le Mans, embarked at St Nazaire on 16 June. The rest of K6 was also evacuated. One exception was 22 company, which was seconded to Saar Force for service on the Maginot Line and subsequently captured. From Aldershot, the evacuated contingent was then initially stationed in Glasgow, Doncaster and its HQ established at Shirley Common, near Ashbourne in Derbyshire. Despite pleas by the Government of India for their return, it was subsequently decided to keep the contingent in Britain. They were employed in local defence, 25 and 32 being allotted a sector of the Garrison defences and 25 working with beach defence groups. The Indian contingent was universally praised by its commanders for their admirable conduct and their discipline during the retreat and evacuation. However as the units had not been armed and trained to shoot they had been a liability during the chaotic evacuation from northern France and had to be moved away from danger.

The retention of the units in Britain was driven by political considerations: 'they should be employed in this country in as conspicuous a capacity as possible for political reasons. At a time when troops from all parts of the Empire are concentrated in this country for the defence of Britain, it is unfortunate that there are no fighting units of the Indian Army to take their full share. I suggest, however that the fact of there being Indian troops present should be allowed to have full significance.'[44] Furthermore, anecdotal evidence also suggests that the

British public also appreciated their presence. Units were posted across the UK in the Midlands, Devon, North Wales and Scotland; leave parties made frequent trips to London, and their work was widely reported. Unlike South Asian soldiers during the First World War, the Indian contingent interacted fairly freely with the British public until their return to India in early 1944. Although a simple search of *The Times* or the *Guardian* archive would have provided a lot of evidence of their presence and activities, it seems the general lack of awareness of the contributions of South Asian troops in Europe in the early years of the war has erased their role in the early stages of hostilities from the official radar.

The contemporary debates surrounding the British government's treatment of the Gurkhas and their battle for citizenship rights in Britain are perhaps a further example of this, exemplifying how elisions in the historical narrative of the war influence how the social 'value', 'impact' and contribution of minority communities in relation to a common shared British history is perceived.[45] Far from being excluded from this history, South Asians have an investment through their presence and important contribution to Britain's war effort as soldiers, pilots, as part of civil defence, doctors, nurses and ambulance drivers. In this respect, this archival material offers a direct challenge to the manner in which the Second World War continues to be memorialised today.

In the context of Britain's own historical self-perception this merits further scrutiny, in particular in relationship to the narratives of Dunkirk, the Battle of Britain, the Blitz, and D-Day. Indeed, the role of Indian merchant mariners in the latter has been entirely forgotten. According to the timeline of the war published

in the magazine *Indian Information*, 1,183 sailors took part in these operations.[46] Many more had helped to keep supply lines open, for example by sailing on Arctic convoys. Their role came to wider public attention when British prisoners of war were freed from the prison ship, Altmark and returned to Britain.[47]

Another little-known aspect of South Asian participation in the war, which came to much wider public prominence thanks to the efforts of Mahinder Singh Pujji, is that of 18 Indian pilots who were selected to fly with the Royal Air Force in September 1940. Trained at RAF Cranwell, these pilots would either fly bombers over Germany or sorties in fighter planes over the English Channel and Northern France. Due to a severe shortage, the Royal Air Force had advertised for pilots in Indian newspapers. Mahinder Singh Pujji applied and was one of 24 chosen to go on an intensive training course in Britain. In the end 18 successfully passed the test and six – Pujji among them – became fighter pilots, while the remainder flew bombers. Yet hardly any history of the Royal Air Force mentions them. Furthermore, they were omitted during the inauguration of the Bomber Command memorial in June 2012, while the stories of Czech, Polish, Caribbean and French pilots are much more widely publicised. In a personal interview in 2009 Mr. Pujji suggests that initially he was unconcerned that there was no official recognition of the Indian pilots. For him, having won the Distinguished Flying Cross for his services was the official recognition for his work. However when the commemorations for the 50th anniversary of the end of the Second World War occurred, Mr Pujji wrote a letter to the MOD challenging them as to why, as a veteran RAF pilot of the UK-based 43 and 258 Squadrons, he had not

been invited to the commemorations for Victory in Europe Day, although he had received an invite to the Victory in Japan day celebrations, and why the other Indian pilots flying with the RAF at the time had not been mentioned.[48]

Pioneering historian of Asian Britain, Rozina Visram first highlighted his story in her schoolbook and he subsequently gave talks to children. This has generated more coverage of his story in recent years. A staunch campaigner, he also made interventions challenging the appropriation of symbols like the spitfire by right wing organisations such as the British National Party.[49] Christopher Somerville's extensive interview with Pujji is available at the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, extracts of which are published in his book *Our War: How the British Commonwealth Fought the Second World War* (1998). Pujji published his biography *For King and Another Country* in 2010, just before his death. Yet recognition at the public level of the contributions of South Asian airmen remains sparse.

The above case studies highlight the range and breadth of individual stories that have remained under the radar, despite being well documented by archival evidence. They highlight the fraught process of the writing of colonial and military history. It highlights particularly how the historical presence and contribution of citizens from different ethnic backgrounds still does not feature productively in national stories. This lack of representation, despite archival documentation, is perhaps due to the fact that these material documents have not been accorded the retrospective significance they merit. It is only over the past twenty years that these materials relating to the Second World War have been

revisited more systematically by archivists, curators and historians and are brought to wider public attention. However, the process of reinserting these narratives into contemporary discussion about the Second World War is fraught and difficult as it counters received national discourses.

The historian Michael-Rolph Trouillot offers some useful observations here. In *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (1995) he proposes that 'history as social process, involves people in three distinct capacities: 1) as *agents*, or occupants of structural positions; 2) as *actors* in constant interface with a context; and 3) as *subjects*, that is, as voices aware of their vocality'.[50] This segmentation of agents, actors and subjects has ramifications of how commemoration takes place in the present but also points towards the slippages that lead to absence and silence within historical discourses. This absence is premised on hegemonic discourses in the present day which privilege certain interpretative models and which reflect and confirm a national consciousness in relation to the Second World War, particularly the notion that Britain 'stood alone'. This in turn has an effect on how historical events are memorialised in the present and how other historical narratives are obscured, however much material may be found in the archives. For Trouillot, 'silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments: the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history* in the final instance).'[51]

As Britain has become increasingly perceptive and aware of its own cultural diversity, the manner in which it remembers the Second World War, too, requires re-framing. There is a need to return to the archive to continue the process of diversifying the contemporary historical narrative of the Second World War to account productively for the efforts of the citizens of Empire in the fight against fascism. A socio-cultural historical approach is therefore vitally important to reveal the interconnection between South Asian contributions in Britain to the Second World War as part of a wider national story. Such re-evaluation can only occur by an analysis that triangulates methodological approaches that engage in equal measure with archival evidence and military, social and imperial histories. In this way, such historiography might productively account for South Asian participation and contribution while also underlining the racism and prevailing inequality they experienced. There is undoubtedly a strong case to be made that this pivotal historical event, so often described as 'Britain's Finest Hour', is part of a common shared history that unearths and reflects the complex relationship between South Asians and Britons across the decades.

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