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A New India and a New World

How the Pacific War Led to Indian Independence

HIST 399: Pacific War

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On minute past midnight on August 15, 1947, Britain relinquished its grip on the jewel in the crown—at last granting India its long-sought independence.¹ This was no small decision. Since 1757, after the East India Trading Company had defeated the king of Bengal, the Indian subcontinent had been ruled by the heavy-handed British.² What led to the sudden British withdrawal from India? Mahatma Gandhi and nonviolent disobedience have become symbolic of Indian independence—but the lesser-known reality is that many factors were part of the equation, most significantly the Pacific War. What role did the Pacific War play in the destabilization of British colonial rule in India, and to what extent did the war influence the Indian Independence Movement? The surprising reality is that the Pacific War was one of the main factors which directly led to Indian Independence, and had at least as much impact as Gandhi's nonviolent resistance movement. In the Pacific theater of World War II, the major players involved in the conflict were not merely the United States and Japan. In reality, many nations and peoples were swept into the chaos. One often-overlooked but significant aspect of the Pacific War is the influence it had upon India. In the aftermath of World War II, the political map of the world was redrawn and dramatically altered on many fronts. India was one key place of change. To understand the changing world, and specifically to understand the change on the Indian subcontinent, it is essential to study the impact which the Pacific War had on India. To understand the impact the war had on independence, it is essential to explore the historical context along the road to war, the British-Indian Army, the opposing Indian National Army, and the British perspective.

During World War II, the British Indian Army became a major catalyst of change which indirectly helped to make independence possible. The Pacific War altered the British Indian Army (BIA) in multiple ways. The first major change brought about by the Pacific War was unification. The BIA was a force to be reckoned with, composed of about half a million troops during the First World War³ and over

¹ Fay, Peter, *The Forgotten Army : India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942-1945*, 2.

² Ali, Tahseen, "The Untold and Alternate Story of the Indian Subcontinent's War of Independence," 40.

³ Barkawi, Tarak, *Soldiers of Empire: Indian and British Armies in World War II.*, 7.

two and a half million armed men, all volunteers, by the end of the Second World War.⁴ The BIA was practical: local soldiers cost less to pay, were immune to more diseases, and when trained were as effective as Europeans in combat.⁵ “Perhaps the greatest and most long-lived” of all “indigenously recruited forces,” the BIA helped to secure and expand Western colonialism.⁶ Composed of colonial subject soldiers and British officers, the British Indian Army was not truly a national army.⁷ This Indian Army “was not Indian in the way the Japanese Army was Japanese or the German army German. It was a British creation.”⁸ And it was deeply divided. For colonial empires, “raising troops from among the colonized was a tricky business, one that often defined the rise and fall of empires.”⁹ Astutely, the British recognized early on that a unified army of Indians could rise up and overthrow their rule—but a divided army could be controlled and used for the Crown.¹⁰ To this end, the British government created “official ethnic identities” within the army.¹¹ Regular British officers were encouraged to become experts in Indian groups and subgroups with different ethnicities, languages, cultures, and religions. They were challenged to foster friendly competition between these groups.¹² The BIA “was an ethnically diverse conglomeration in which few soldiers operated in their primary language.”¹³ Organized around the concept of martial races,¹⁴ the BIA separated Indians into groups and kept them separated. So what about the Pacific War changed this situation? Dubbed a ‘war without mercy,’ the Pacific War was notorious for its brutality, oppression, and violence.¹⁵ Caught up in the bloody torrents of the

⁴ Cavaliero, Roderick, *Strangers in the Land: The Rise and Decline of the British Indian Empire*, 214.

⁵ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 7.

⁶ Ibid., 7.

⁷ Fay, Op. Cit., 226.

⁸ Ibid., 18.

⁹ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 7.

¹⁰ Ibid., 22.

¹¹ Ibid., 21.

¹² Ibid., 18.

¹³ Ibid., 1.

¹⁴ Ibid., 8.

¹⁵ Dower, John, *War without Mercy: Race and Power in the Pacific War*, 285.

war, the BIA fought in engagements every bit as savage and intense as any on the Pacific island battlefronts.¹⁶ Once started, the blood-cycle was hard to stop. Brutality bred brutality. Feeding off of itself, the war was fueled by vengeance, racism, and unfiltered hatred.¹⁷ Casualties created a “self-generating circuit of battlefield violence” built on “group sentiment, collective sacrifice, and blood debt.”¹⁸ Extraordinary racialization and military savagery marked the war.¹⁹ The nature of this war without mercy led to two major changes. First, the brute nature of the fighting led to a breakdown of the long-held structural divisions of the BIA as the various groups, once pitted against each other, had to rely upon one another and the social barriers dissolved in the face of the basic need to survive.²⁰

The second major change was the structure of officers. It was not until WWII, “when officers were desperately needed, that the army as a whole was opened to Indian officers.”²¹ These new Indian officers, who were “generally nationalist in their thinking,” had great sway both during and after the war on politics in India.²² Even though “in the Army the Indian officer never had an equal chance with the British officer,” the new ability for Indians to hold high military office was a key change with a significant impact on the nationalistic spirit of the troops.²³

Finally, the Pacific War changed the spirit of the army. Most soldiers in the BIA were “uneducated peasants” who “served a distant King-Emperor” and “fought an enemy who promised them liberation from white colonialism.”²⁴ They were, in essence, “fighting someone

¹⁶ Ibid., 286.

¹⁷ Ibid., 284.

¹⁸ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 11

¹⁹ Ibid., 5.

²⁰ Ibid., 9.

²¹ Ibid., 95.

²² Ibid., 104.

²³ Lebra, Joyce, *The Indian National Army and Japan*, 18.

²⁴ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 10.

else's war."²⁵ The Allies alliance was committed to national self-determination, yet the British denied this very thing to their subjects, and this was a glaring contradiction.²⁶ So what motivated Indians to fight for the British? Although the answer to that question is complicated and merits further research, a very simplistic answer is that "...a good number of the Indians were career soldiers, and many of the rest were in no hurry to be discharged into a civilian economy noted for chronic unemployment."²⁷ As many as 75% of troops wanted to remain in the army after the war since it was, for many, their only form of security, pay, and stability.²⁸ After the First World War, "regular forces returned to normal" – and for many, 'normal' looked like poverty, low quality or no education, poor lighting, insufficient hygiene, and hunger.²⁹ Simply put, although some Indians were genuinely devoted to the British, most soldiers fought in the British Indian Army because they felt that it was their only option. But the Pacific War presented a new world to them: the BIA was no longer their only option. Another option arose during the Pacific War – the Indian National Army.

In India's armed struggle for its independence, one army has often been lost and forgotten. The Indian National Army (INA) arose in WWII, "using Malaya as a base, Burma as a launching pad, and Japan as a helpmate...to throw the British out of India."³⁰ Luring Indian soldiers with the promise of their national independence in exchange for wartime service, the Japanese presented the INA as an alternative army, and some nationalistic Indians hungry for their freedom eagerly joined.³¹

Yet most of the ranks of the INA came from within the prisoners-of-war (POWs) held by the

²⁵ Ibid., 10.

²⁶ Ibid., 82.

²⁷ Spector, Ronald, *In the Ruins of Empire: The Japanese Surrender and the Battle for Postwar Asia*, 76.

²⁸ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 93.

²⁹ Harfield, A. G., *British & Indian Armies in the East Indies, 1685-1935*, 376.

³⁰ Fay, Op. Cit., 1.

³¹ Barkawi, Op. Cit., 112.

Japanese. After dramatic defeats of the British Indian Army in a few major battles, many of the Indian POWs were called upon to join the enemy side to fight against the British. This happened, for example, after the fall of Singapore, where “of the 60,000 Indians who surrendered, 25,000 chose to go over to the enemy. They became the core of the Indian National Army (INA), which two years later took part in the Japanese invasion of India.”³² Why did these POW troops join the enemy side? Philip Mason, the Indian War Department’s wartime secretary, said that: “only a small number were ardent nationalists; another small number were frankly opportunist; a few honestly planned to escape and return to their own lines; but the majority were puzzled, misinformed, misled, and on the whole believed that the course was the most honourable open to them.”³³

It is intriguing to view this point in the story through different sets of eyes. Iwaichi Fujiwara, a prominent Japanese officer in WWII, wrote in his memoir about the inauguration of the INA: “The rising sun in the centre of the flag blazed in the morning sunshine, as if blessing out future success. We had given birth to the I.N.A... We drank a glass of champagne to our success, then I ordered my men to advance...”³⁴ The scene looked bleaker through the eyes of many Indians. Mohan Singh, the Indian military officer who cooperated with the Japanese to organize the INA, even admitted that although most men jumped and shouted for joy when he started speaking about fighting for their independence, some among the crowd sat downcast, those who knew the future of India would be wrought with blood and gore and political confusion.³⁵ Those who did leave the British forces to join the INA were now forced to take an oath of loyalty for Japan and to fight for Indian Independence. But “for many Indian officers and men, the issue of co-

³² Heehs, Peter. "India's divided loyalties?", 1.

³³ Ibid., 2.

³⁴ Fujiwara, Iwaichi, *F. Kikan: Japanese Army Intelligence Operations in Southeast Asia during World War II*, 107.

³⁵ Fay, Op. Cit., 87.

operation posed a loyalty crisis; the personal dilemma was not easy to resolve.”³⁶

To some, fighting a gory war seemed a more pleasant alternative than languishing in an abusive prison labor camp. In prison camps held by the Germans and Italians, the death rate of POWs was 4%; in those held by Japanese, the POW death rate was 27%.³⁷ Those who chose to remain in concentration camps instead of enlisting in the INA faced terrible prison conditions – bad food, abuse, brutality, threats, no medical aid, beatings, being forced to salute INA sentries and made to carry mounds of earth with bamboo poles on their backs, and in one case, a man being forced to live in cage barely larger than himself.³⁸

But life was not easy for the troops who joined the Indian National Army either. India’s independence was not scheduled, not certain to be granted, not even inevitable—it was something that had to be fought for fiercely.³⁹ And fight they did. On their long trek towards India, the INA under the Japanese had to pass with their vehicles and equipment through jungles, had to be ferried across rivers, and were ordered to trudge through passages rife with malaria and drenched with monsoon rains.⁴⁰ However powerful Britain might appear with its many tentacles widespread over many colonies,⁴¹ Britain imagined the Japanese as invincible jungle fighters,⁴² and consequently “the British strategy was defensive; there was little eagerness to fight the Japanese in Malaya.”⁴³

But how did the rise of the INA in the Pacific War lead to the Indian Independence Movement? The changes are actually linked in several ways. The first has to do with the spirit of the army and the Indian people. During the war, the INA believed their independence was at

³⁶ Lebra, *Op. Cit.*, 38.

³⁷ Barkawi, *Op. Cit.*, 115-116.

³⁸ Fay, *Op. Cit.*, 101.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 99.

⁴¹ Lebra, *Op. Cit.*, 210.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 16.

last within arm's reach, so that they could almost taste freedom—and the taste did not leave their lips after the war. Japan saw India as a peripheral concern in the Pacific War; but to many Indians, “military co-operation with Japan brought the goal of independence within the realm of possibility.”⁴⁴ Even though the INA failed, “for Indians, as for many other Asians, Japan was a source of encouragement for aspirations for freedom from colonial rule. Japan’s unexpected victory over the western colossus of Russia in 1905 infused hope into Asian nationalist movements.”⁴⁵ Japan gave Indians something that had only seemed distant before—hope.

Clearly, then, the Indian people were prepared for Independence through the Pacific War. Both through the unification of the British Indian Army and the rise of the Indian National Army—ironically at odds with one another and fighting on enemy sides—the subcontinent was ready to push for its freedom. But how and why did the British ultimately decide to withdraw? That is an even more complex question.

The British had ruled India since the 1700s⁴⁶, and their power had only increased over time. There were rumblings and rebellions now and then; but the first major event to loosen the British grip of India significantly was World War I. “The First World War did more than destroy the old certainties of Europe. It also marked the end of a century during which British power in India was seen to be invincible and her rule permanent.”⁴⁷ Britain’s proclamation to stand for freedom and self-rule while not permitting India to have hers was a “contradiction [that] fueled anti-colonial, nationalist politics in India.”⁴⁸

In the interwar period, India’s struggle for independence became a mass national movement.⁴⁹

⁴⁴ Ibid., 215.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 212.

⁴⁶ Ali, *Op. Cit.*, 40.

⁴⁷ Cavaliero, *Op. Cit.*, 201.

⁴⁸ Barkawi, *Op. Cit.*, 82.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 82.

To appease the Indian nationalists, the British instituted the India Act of 1935, which gave some provincial ministers further functions of government.⁵⁰ Still, the British refused to withdraw from India, proclaiming her too deeply divided – while it was the British presence that kept her so.⁵¹ Through these years, the nonviolent resistance movement, led by Gandhi, rose to prominence and culminated in Gandhi’s 240-mile walk to pick up a symbolic handful of salt during an oppressive salt monopoly.⁵² As a powerful political adversary of the British and an inspiration to many, Gandhi challenged the British with his potent message.⁵³ His significance should not be dismissed or minimized. But Gandhi’s peaceful message was not the main force which propelled the British to withdraw.

The Second World War “disrupted any possibility of an orderly transition to dominion status.”⁵⁴ Gandhi’s ideals were precisely that—ideals. However powerfully he spoke and acted nonviolently, his actions alone were insufficient fuel for the fire of freedom.⁵⁵ Ultimately, Britain transferred power to India for a few reasons—almost all of which were tied to fear. The first motivation was fear of civil war. The Pacific War had already pitted Indians against one another in a bloody feud, with some siding with Japan and others with Britain. In the ultimate British post-war choice, it was not primarily anti-colonial sentiment or benevolence which drove the British to withdraw; “independence was handed to India and Pakistan because Britain feared a communal civil war, which she could not control, not because she was beaten at the barricades.”⁵⁶

Another reason for British withdrawal was fear of insurrection. The British had faced

⁵⁰ Fay, *Op. Cit.*, 117.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 126.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 114.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁵⁴ Barkawi, *Op. Cit.*, 85.

⁵⁵ Cavaliero, *Op. Cit.*, 205.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 219.

rebellions in the past and crushed them with relative ease. But the Pacific War had turned India upside-down. The British may have feared Gandhi's words; but they truly feared the actions of another leader, "the most charismatic revolutionary of all wartime Asian nationalists, Subhas Chandra Bose, who led the INA against British troops."⁵⁷ Bose was "a single-minded revolutionary for whom the alliance with Japan was only a means for achieving the goal of Indian freedom."⁵⁸ One of the most important leaders of the Indian National Congress, his influence extended far and wide.⁵⁹ Bose even had a private audience with Hitler.⁶⁰ The world may not remember Bose's name as well as that of the non-resistance leader Gandhi, or even the names of Nehru and Mountbatten, who built the modern Indian post-war state.⁶¹ But at the time, Bose was considered the largest threat by the British. Bose himself quipped: "A frail old vegetarian, a Fabian socialist, and a young royal did not between them produce the India that emerged on 15 August, 1947."⁶² Certainly those individuals played enormous roles in independence; but they were only part of the big picture. Faced with the decision about whether or not to grant India its independence, the British were much more concerned about a reinvented INA, long-term violent resistance, and the leadership of Subhas Bose than they ever were inspired or moved to benevolence by Gandhi's pacifist demonstrations.⁶³ This argument can best be summed up by an illustration. In 1956, former British premier Clement Attlee was at a formal dinner party with other officials. The Chief Justice asked him why the British had pulled out right when Gandhi's 1930s movement had failed, the INA was imprisoned, and nothing stood in the way of the British taking further power. In response to this question, Attlee abandoned the

⁵⁷ Akashi, Yoji, "Jungle Alliance: Japan and the Indian National Army (Book Review)," 1513.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 1513.

⁵⁹ Heehs, *Op. Cit.*, 3.

⁶⁰ Ali, *Op. Cit.*, 51.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 38.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 56.

standard British propaganda lines and frankly replied that the biggest reason for withdrawal was because of Bose's movement and the fragmentation of the main foundation of British rule—their dependence on Indian mercenaries.⁶⁴ In other words, with the threat of Subhas Bose on the horizon and the breakdown of the army underway (with the BIA troops now unified and other troops having joined the INA), it was clear that Indian nationalists would keep posing a serious threat to British rule.⁶⁵ India was ready for change; and like it or not, Britain had to be ready too.

Through looking at the British Indian Army, the Indian National Army, and the British response, it is evident that the Pacific War played a fundamental role in bringing India into independence. While most individuals who have been educated about India can name Gandhi as a leader of Indian independence, most have little idea about the other individuals, nations, armies, and forces that shaped the struggle and made freedom possible. Each army—though on opposite sides of the war—played its part in the Indian Independence Movement. This subject, relevant both to the history of the Pacific War and to the modern understanding of India as a nation, deserves and demands attention. Of the many soldiers whose stories and dreams were left behind in the jungles of WWII, we only have fragments. But those fragments allow us to see the Pacific War in a new light—as a vehicle of change that helped bring about a new India and a new world.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 57.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 57.

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