The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy

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Author: Gajendra Singh  
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Reviewer: Gagan Preet Singh

Historians of the British Indian army, with little exception, have argued that Indian soldiers, or Sipahis, were incapable of acting on their own: they were led into anti-British political activities by ‘outsiders’ (1), they were loyal because ‘others’ told them to be loyal (2), and they could not be disloyal to the British as the soldiers had eaten their salt.(3) They could not be disloyal, rebellious, or even loyal on their own. When the soldiers’ actions defied these expectations, those moments were interpreted as moments of exception, when the soldiers had lost their mind for the temporary period, and for which they were not themselves responsible, for they needed only to be properly guided again, or have the bad influences purged from their minds.(4) In this parlance, the soldiers’ minds were only gained, lost, or regained; but they could not think and act on their own.

Gajendra Singh’s work stands apart, for he looks only at those moments of exception, in which soldiers were their own masters, and acted on their own. He argues that these moments, which might have appeared irrational to the soldiers’ contemporaries or other historians, reveal more important aspects of their lives than the study of their routine lives. Soldiers’ abnormal selves, the book seems to suggest, are their normal selves, and their normal selves, or their routine lives, are only mythic.

Like Gajendra Singh’s approach, his sources are also fresh, and his approach to the sources is complex and important enough to be mentioned here. The sources include the soldiers’ censored letters, which they wrote during the two world wars, and their court room testimonies, which they gave during their trials for mutiny and treason. A number of historians have used these sources before without understanding the context in which they had first appeared.(5) For instance, the soldiers’ letters from the two wars, which underwent regimental and supra-regimental censorship, could be censored, but not deciphered; for the soldiers, who were aware of the censorship, and who tried to escape the censorship, wrote in ‘metaphors, allusions and abbreviations’. (6) As a result, a letter which appeared to be about the soldiers’ loyalty, bravery, and honour, could actually convey messages of despondence, fatigue, and even disloyalty, what Gajendra Singh calls ‘hidden transcripts’. For the soldiers, to escape the censorship, explicit praise and pride were licence to incorporate actual hatred and disgust. For the same reasons, the court room testimonies of the soldiers are also shaped by their context, and they can be easily misunderstood by the historian, as they have an element
of fiction. Gajendra Singh attempts to read hidden transcripts in the soldiers’ letters and the fiction in their court room testimonies.

In the first chapter, Gajendra Singh argues that the martial races theory – a theory by which only some communities in colonial India were declared fit for military service, and the rest of the population was excluded from it – was a colonial fantasy. To prove the veracity of colonial fantasies, colonial ethnographers were commissioned to compile ethnographic accounts, also called Handbooks, for each ‘martial’ community, which recorded the ‘characteristics, customs, prejudices, history and religion’ of martial races (p.17). In his study of the Handbooks of three ‘martial’ communities (Sikhs, Pathans, and Brahmins), Gajendra Singh argues that as the colonial fantasies for these communities changed, the Handbooks were revised to meet the new reality, or what he calls ‘new negatives’. With passage of time, the warlike Sikhs became seditious Sikhs, valorised Pathans became perverts for their habits of sodomy and bestiality, and ‘unmanly’ Brahmins, during the 1940s, were revived as faithful soldiers.

The arguments of the second chapter, unlike those of the first one, are complex. Most of the historians of the British Indian army have either looked at British paternalism of Sipahis, or they have looked at the disciplining regime of the army. By combining them in a single chapter, Gajendra Singh argues that both should be studied together for a proper understanding of the history of the Indian army. In the early 19th century, Sipahis were governed by the British military law, but unlike white soldiers they were not punished with flogging or transportation. After 1857, while punishments became mild for the white soldiers, Sipahis received both transportation (kala-pani) and flogging. At the same time, Indian soldiers were provided for handsomely, and during the Second World War, when British soldiers were denied psychiatric treatment for the war neurosis or ‘shell-shock’, it was readily provided for all Indian soldiers. As a result, Indian soldiers, Gajendra Singh argues, were ‘provided for far more generously and disciplined more harshly than their white peers’ (p. 61). This was because Sipahis were visualised as ‘half-savage and half-child, in need of a nurturing, civilizing hand and back-of-the-hand-discipline’ (p. 62).

In the third chapter, Gajendra Singh grapples with soldiers’ letters from the two world wars, which, as earlier mentioned, had ‘hidden transcripts’, of which he provides a good sample. He discusses, from the two world wars, three specific grievances of the soldiers: non-availability of leave and restrictions on their sexual liaisons with white women during the First World War, and the pathetic conditions, due to the Bengal famine of 1943, of their families during the Second World War. But these grievances, Gajendra Singh argues, did not lead to disloyalty or rebellion as the anti-British revolutionaries had expected (p. 98).

In the third chapter, Gajendra Singh, gleaning from the soldiers’ letters, speculates that there was a connection between the Snowball letter (a letter with a messianic message which exhorted Indian Muslim soldiers to follow ‘pure’ Islam, and it was, as the message suggested, to be copied and forwarded to other soldiers) which had a wide circulation, Indian Muslim soldiers’ liaisons with French women, and the mutiny by Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia in December 1915. The importance of the chapter, as Gajendra Singh suggests, lies in the fact that while Indian revolutionaries and the German war-agents had failed to convince the soldiers in favour of an anti-British mutiny – the soldiers mutinied on their own, and especially when there was no instigation from elsewhere.

The fourth chapter is based on the analysis of testimonies of four soldiers, which they gave in the court room, during the trial of Singapore mutiny case (1915). In most of the accounts of the mutiny, the soldiers have been denied any role. The mutiny is either attributed to be a work of German agents or the anti-British Indian revolutionaries, and even in the British official account, the mutineers are missing, for the emphasis was on those white officers who suppressed it (pp.129, 133–4). In an effort to ‘rehabilitate the soldiers’ into the history, Gajendra Singh believes that in their court trials, the soldiers frustrated the inquiry team in its pre-conceived notions of the causes and account of the mutiny, as the soldiers had ‘re-appropriated the physical and linguistic space of the colonial courtroom’ (p. 130). Each soldier, Gajendra Singh shows, fabricated an account to save other soldiers, or even to implicate their personal enemies. Moreover, the soldiers never seemed to be revealing what the inquiry team had in mind. It is without doubt a stupendous
effort to rehabilitate the soldiers into their own history.

In the last chapter, Gajendra Singh studies, from the post-Second World War period, the trial of the soldiers of Indian National Army (INA) or Azad Hind Fauz, an anti-British army which was raised from the Indian prisoners of war in East Asia. Archibald Wavell, the viceroy of India, had thought that INA men were only ‘bewildered and confused soldiers who had been bullied into rebellion’ by the Japanese and Indian radicals, and that they needed only to be ‘immunised’ from the enemy war propaganda (p. 162). It was this understanding which shaped the post-war INA trials, but as the trials progressed, the court room testimonies suggested that the reality was complex and that probably most soldiers had anti-British sentiments even at the beginning of the war. They were not puppets in the hands of the Japanese, or of the anti-British nationalists and their famed leader Subash Chander Bose (p. 158). They chose their own destinies. Moreover, almost all Muslim soldiers refused to join the INA, but this cannot be interpreted as being through loyalty to the British, instead being based in their distrust of its political visions.

Is Gajendra Singh overstating or overestimating the ability of the soldiers to deceive the censor? The soldiers’ allusions and metaphors, David Omissi notes, were easily deciphered. It is likely that the ‘hidden transcripts’ of the soldiers were not as hidden as they have been imagined by the author. One might ask how Gajendra Singh is specially equipped to comprehend those hidden transcripts, which he believes the censor, who was equipped with a team of linguistic specialists who were also Sipahis, could not comprehend? How his method is different, when both are looking for the similar content? How is his gaze different from the imperial censor’s gaze? Similarly, it is likely that he has overestimated the ability of the soldiers to manipulate the court room. We have a scanty knowledge of the imperial intelligence networks which had penetrated the British Indian army, and most of these networks may have been informal and had a secret existence, which may have left no records. Again, we may be under-estimating the court room jury’s ability to comprehend the soldiers’ testimonies, while they might have access to parallel sources of information. Further, during both the wars, a large number of soldiers had deserted ‘on their own’, which, in the legal language, constituted a crime. How were these individual acts of indiscipline different from collective acts of resistance? Is Gajendra Singh looking at only those incidents which can be interpreted as heroic? Should history remember only ‘heroic’ acts? There may be multiple answers to these questions.

In summary, the first chapter does not enrich our understanding and merely restates the obvious. The second chapter is an useful contribution, but it might have been more argumentative. The last four chapters, as already said, are important contributions to the historiography. The presentation of the book is poor: around one third of the book is in lengthy block quotations, most of which could have been interwoven into the text. On the other hand, language is plain, errors are few, and occasional references to literature are interesting.

The book is a breakthrough in the historiography of Indian armed forces, for its tone, approach, methodology, and contents are unique. The author deserves praise for his innovative reading of the sources, and with this book he has successfully filled a long-standing gap in the historiography of the Indian armed forces.

Notes

1. See, for example, Maia Ramnath, Haj to Utopia: How the Ghadar Movement Charted Global Radicalism and Attempted to Overthrow the British Empire (Berkeley, CA, 2011); Sugata Bose, His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle Against Empire (Cambridge, MA, 2011).

2. During the First World War, many religious organisations in Punjab used propaganda to ensure soldiers’ loyalty. For that produced by Ahmadiyya, a religious sect of Islam, see the work under review, pp. 104–8; for Sikh soldiers, Chief Khalsa Diwan, a Sikh organization, played an important role. For Hindu soldiers, caste leaders played the major role.

3. Kaushik Roy, a military historian, believes that material incentives, in absence of nationalism, were responsible for the soldiers’ loyalty to the British. See Kaushik Roy, Brown Warriors of the Raj: Recruitment and the Mechanics of Command in the Sepoy Army, 1859–1913.
4. Gajendra Singh has drawn this framework from Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi, 1992, new ed.); See the work under review, pp. 182–3.


8. See, for example, R. K. Mazumder, *The Indian Army and the Making of the Punjab* (New Delhi, 2003).


10. See *Indian Voices of the Great War*, pp. 4–9.

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