India and the Second World War

The First World War spurred interest around the world, including in India. Indian historians have written new works trying to make sense of that war to subsequent generations of Indians, who often have had little exposure to "the war to end all wars." India's role in World War I has been largely overlooked, most particularly in India. This is largely because of the painful Indian experience of colonialism.

The same can be said of the Second World War. Post-independence Indians look at these two conflicts far differently than Americans. For us, World War II was the closest thing to a "just war." It was a simple conflict between good and evil. The allies stood for everything that was good and just, while the axis powers indulged in cruelty and naked aggression. For Americans, World War II was, in many ways, a fight for civilization.

For Indians, World War II was not so simple. This is because India remained a British colony throughout the war years. The British government expected Indians to enthusiastically join the fight. The colonial government pledged Indian support to the war effort without consulting its colonial subjects, much as it had done after the outbreak of World War I.

But much had changed in India since 1918. A powerful nationalist movement emerged in the decades of the 1920's and 1930's. Mahatma Gandhi had expanded the Indian National Congress (INC) from an elite parlor party into a mass movement. India's peasant masses, which had been excluded from the nationalist debate, were enlisted as active participants. Indians of all social classes chafed under British rule and there was a deep longing for freedom that had not existed during the World War I era.

During World War I, the idea of Indian independence was unthinkable for all but a few radical intellectuals. By 1939, there was a growing realization in India that the days of British rule were numbered. By the end of the war, there was a consensus among the Indian population that Britain would have to depart. The INC was India's largest party and represented India's nationalist aspirations. The INC leadership initially assumed Britain would acquiesce to a handover of power to Indians in exchange for Indian participation in the war effort.

However, the British colonial government remained mired in its old ways. The British leadership, from the Viceroy down to the ranks of the Indian Civil Service, continued to assume that India was not yet ready for self-rule. The continued to put off Indian independence, thinking that it could not take place for decades. The more blatantly imperialistic faction, headed by the future Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, continued to entertain the notion Britain could rule India indefinitely.

The British rejected the proposals put forth by India's nationalist leadership for a date certain for Indian independence as soon as the axis was defeated. The British projected their own attitudes onto the Indian population. They assumed that Indians would make victory their top priority and shelve nationalist demands for the duration. This implacable divide resulted in bitterness and conflict. That would darken Indian memories of the war period.

Two books look at the war years from differing perspectives. India's War, by Srinath Raghavan looks at India's World War II experience from a political, economic, and military perspective. Yasmin Khan's India at War, humanizes the war by examining personal accounts of Indians from this period in history. While Khan spends a fair amount of time recounting the experiences of Indian soldiers and sailors, he fills in the historical record by providing the experiences of India's civilian population. The two books complement each other. If you read them one after the other, you will gain a broad perspective.

Both books emphasize that Britain extracted an enormous price from India without the consent of its population. The Indian Army had long been used in colonial conflicts throughout the British Empire, but by 1939, its principal focus was on quelling tribal revolts in Northwestern India. In October 1939, at the advent of World War II, the Indian army consisted of 194,373 troops. By the end of the war, the Army had grown to 2,065,554.1The Indian Army would suffer 89,000 casualties during the conflict.

For almost 100 years, the Army had recruited from a group of "martial races" centered in Punjab, Rajasthan, and the Himalayan region. Generations of young men from the same families had joined the British Army. Indian enlisted personnel (sepoys) were recruited from villages, were usually illiterate, and were inculcated with a generational loyalty to the Army, the Empire, and the King.

The Army's rapid expansion quickly exhausted this limited recruitment pool, forcing the British to recruit widely from throughout India. The Army accepted recruits from "non-martial" groups in South India, Bihar, and elsewhere and from the lowest socio-economic groups, the untouchables (now called dalits) and tribals. These new recruits most often joined the Army to escape poverty and had little or no loyalty to the British Empire.

In addition, the pace of mobilization quickly outpaced the ability of the Indian Army to train and equip the new forces. At the war's outset, the British faced defeat everywhere and the British Army could not respond to Axis attacks. The British therefore quickly committed Indian troops to a wide variety of conflicts all over the Empire. Indian troops were shipped to West Africa, North Africa, the Middle East, Iraq, and Persia to fight Italian and then German forces, and to prevent a pro-German military clique from taking power in Iraq. The Indian forces in the European theater of war faced initial difficulties and setbacks, but became battle hardened and effective. They would help defeat Rommel's Afrika Korps and participate in the reconquest of North Africa, Sicily, and Italy.

By contrast, the Indian experience in SE Asia would prove to be a disaster. In the East, the Japanese quickly defeated large numbers of Indian troops in a series of battles in Malaya, Singapore, and Burma. Tens of thousands of Indian troops surrendered to the Japanese, and the defeated British forces made a horrendous retreat through Burma to sanctuary in India. At the war's outset, no one in India could have foreseen that Japanese forces would stand at the Indian border.

The authors ascribe much of the defeat in Asia to poor British leadership, a lack of strategy, poor logistics and equipment, and British underestimation of Japanese military capabilities. A widespread sense of betrayal permeated the Indian forces in Asia. It was not clear to Indian soldiers what they were fighting for. Initially, there was a sense among many Indians that the Japanese were fellow Asians and no enemies of India. Japanese brutality and aggression quickly disabused Indians of these notions. The allies spent years building up Indian military capability inside India in preparation for an offensive to defeat the Japanese and retake lost territory.

Politically, the impasse between the British colonial rulers and the INC would culminate in the 1942 "Quit India" movement. The INC presented the British with an ultimatum, grant independence or face a nonviolent resistance movement. The British headed off the Quit India movement by arresting the INC leadership, which spent the remaining war years in custody. This convinced India's younger generation that Britain's time had come and cemented their resistance to British rule. More radical nationalist elements took up active resistance, engaging in widespread acts of sabotage.

The Muslim League, under Muhammad Ali Jinnah, saw this as a golden opportunity. The League agreed to cooperate with the British and support their war aims and moved to fill the vacuum left by the "non-cooperating" INC. This sowed the future divisions that would culminate in the partition of British India into the modern states of India and Pakistan.

Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose called for an armed insurrection in India and threw his support behind the Axis. His hope was that the allies would lose the war and that Japan would free India from British rule. He formed an Army (the Indian National Army or INA) that grew to a strength of 46,000. Bose hoped the INA would spearhead a Japanese invasion of India that would touch off a revolt by the Indian people. The manpower for this force came from the disenchanted Indian POWs captured in SE Asia and from expatriate Indians living throughout the region.

The Japanese never believed the INA had any serious military value and only reluctantly agreed to allow its limited participation in the Imphal Offensive into India from Burma in 1944. The Japanese offensive was met by a reinvigorated and rebuilt Indian Army. It turned into a catastrophic defeat for both Japan and the INA and signaled the beginning of the end for Japanese ambitions in SE Asia. By this time, the Indian population had come to realize that the allies would win World War II and that India was no longer in danger. With the end in sight, the insurrection inside India collapsed and Indian troops rejected the INA and fully participated in the allied reconquest of Asia.

World War II was particularly traumatic for Indians because of the pervasive economic dislocation it caused at all levels of Indian society. India was turned into a giant logistics base for the allies. Hundreds of thousands of allied troops from a wide variety of countries, including the British Empire, the UK, the United States and China were based in India. India became a logistics hub for the war effort in the the Middle East and Asia, and for the supply of Chinese nationalist forces.

India was at this time among the poorest countries on earth. Almost two hundred years of colonial rule had been a disaster for India. Ninety percent of the population lived in dire and inescapable poverty. At the outbreak of World War II, the Indian literacy rate was 12.5 percent, and life expectancy was only 26 years.

The British compounded this poverty during the war period by subordinating the needs of the Indian population to the war effort. The government could not adequately meet its war time financial obligations. It bled the country by imposing ever more taxes. It compelled Indians to buy war bonds and to contribute to the war fund. When this proved insufficient, it printed money, setting off an inflationary spiral that was devastating to the common man in India. The 90 percent of the population that lived in poverty had no disposable income and no ability to cut back its expenditure. When prices increased, much of the Indian population lost its access to food. This culminated in the Bengal Famine (1943-44), resulting in the deaths of 3 million Indians due to starvation and disease. The government in London rejected pleas from British civil servants for food aid and Prime Minister Churchill publicly expressed his complete lack of concern.

These events convinced most Indians that the British were incapable and unwilling to administer India and were not sufficiently concerned about the welfare of the Indian people. It severed once and for all any bonds that may have existed between Indians and the British. By the end of the war, Indian patience had run out. Indians simply wanted the British to leave.

The catalyst and focus point for Indian bitterness and frustration came from an unlikely source, the Indian National Army. Indians had little or no sympathy for Japan or its imperial ambitions, but throughout the war many Indians nursed a profound pride and respect for the INA. As a result, returning INA veterans and released POWs were greeted with growing enthusiasm. When the British tried to put INA officers on trial, the Indian population rushed to their defense. India's future Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru, was in the team of lawyers defending the accused officers. Although they were convicted in a public trial held in Delhi's Red Fort, the British could not send the INA officers to prison, fearing it would set off a nationwide revolt. Instead, the officers were quietly released and cashiered from the Army.

The INA trial and the simultaneous mutiny by Indian sailors in the Royal Indian Navy convinced the British they could not delay their departure for fear of setting off a widespread revolt by Indian military personnel.

Khan's India at War provides detailed information regarding the lives of thousands of American military personnel stationed in India during the war, including firsthand accounts. This is an aspect of American history that is largely ignored. In the 1940's India was terra incognito for Americans. Few Americans had personal experience of South Asia and there was almost no media coverage of the region. American schools and colleges taught almost nothing about India. Both authors state that when American service men and women arrived in India, their impressions had been formed almost solely by Hollywood movies, which depicted India as an exotic locale filled with elephants and magicians.

Americans were devastated upon their arrival. They had no idea that such poverty existed anywhere on earth. They were overcome by the filth and the stench that greeted them when they got off of their ships in Calcutta or Bombay. Their devastation quickly turned to anger. Americans had been told that Britain was bringing progress to India, but Americans could see no sign of this progress. Instead, they found British colonial officials, businessmen and military officers living in luxury, while surrounded by poverty. Most Americans blamed the British for the poverty and suffering they encountered and quickly grew angry at what they saw as the aloofness and lack of empathy of the British in India. Americans in India shared these impressions with their friends and families back home. American journalists documented the Indian experience for their readers in the USA. This had a profound influence on American public opinion.

The American President, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had been profoundly changed by the war. As the war progressed, Roosevelt became a committed anti-imperialist. He called for the emergence of a new international system and the elimination of colonial empires. The Americans threw their support behind India's nationalist aspirations and quickly clashed with the British.

But the US could not completely count on its right to take the moral high ground. The US was, during the war years, a racially segregated society, and the US military units sent to India were completely segregated. As was common practice at the time, the "Negro" units were provided second class accommodations, food and recreation. Both the British and Americans did not socialize with black troops. The black soldiers were from labor units and worked side by side with Indian manual laborers. They emptied the ships in Indian harbors, and together built the Ledo Road from India to China.

The British and American governments were initially reluctant to send black troops to India. They had determined that the Indian population harbored an innate prejudice against black people and would resent the presence of black soldiers. These conclusions turned out to be wrong. White American soldiers had limited contact with Indians. They employed Indian servants, frequented Indian prostitutes, and shopped in Indian markets, but otherwise had little or no social interaction. The experience of black soldiers was very different. Many Indians identified with the black soldiers and invited them into their homes and formed solid friendships during the war years.