

War, Identity and Subaltern Voices: Bengal and the 49th Regiment in the First World War

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Abstract

The ‘Great War’, popularly known as the First World War, proved disastrous for human civilization in the first half of the twentieth century, with diverse trajectories. India, as a part of the British colony initially reluctant to join this catastrophe. Later, India had been part of this war as a British colony under compulsion. Most of the literature on the First World War is Eurocentric, and the colonies’ role in it has been marginal or omitted from the mainstream narratives. Recent research on the First World War since 2018 has particularly focused on the unexplored terrain of the war and shifted focus towards the global south. India’s contribution in this regard has been discussed at length, yet the role of Bengali soldiers and subsequently the 49th Bengalee Regiment has not been properly analysed in the broader context of First World War studies. Therefore, my paper tries to focus on Nazrul and his inclusion in the 49th Bengalee Regiment and how the war changed the personal and literary landscape of Nazrul. This paper also challenges the dominant narrative that the Bengalis were effeminate and did not have martial qualities for the war.

Keywords: Nazrul, First World War, Literature, 49th Regiment, Bengal.

Introduction

The ‘Great War’ (1914-1918) was a devastating global conflict involving major world powers divided into the Allied and Central Powers. Nobody knew that this war would come to be known as the ‘First World War’. After twenty years, the world had witnessed Hitler’s war, then we heard it as the ‘First World War’ or ‘World War I’ and Hitler’s war was known as the ‘Second World War’.¹ The ‘Great War’ or the ‘First World War’ was triggered by the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand, which led to unprecedented casualties and destruction. It greatly influenced the global social and political order and marked a major shift in human civilization, especially in the West. The war introduced new warfare technologies, including tanks, machine guns, and chemical weapons, resulting in massive loss of life. The outcome reshaped geopolitical boundaries and sowed seeds for future conflicts. During the First World War, the Indian Army played a crucial role, although the British government was initially reluctant to join in this devastation. Later, India had been part of this war as a British colony under compulsion. Approximately 1.5 million Indian Soldiers has been fought in the Great War; combatants were 8,77,068, and non-combatants were 14,40,437. Besides this, there were an

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estimated 2,39,561 men in the British Indian Army serving in Mesopotamia.² They were participated in diverse theatres across the Western Front, and the Indian army fought the Kaiser-Heer battle and against the Ottoman Army on various battlefields such as Flanders, Salonika, East Africa, Egypt, Syria, Palestine, and Mesopotamia. However, Mesopotamia was the Indian Army's prime theatre among all other theatres where Indians soldiers had fought.³

In the first half of the twentieth century, India was ruled by the British Government, and Bengal was an important part of the British Government. Therefore, Bengal made a significant contribution to the British Indian war position in the First World War. The Bengalis were not less capable or fit for war in comparison to other martial races' armies. As a result, the 49th Bengalee Regiment, also known as the 'Bangali Paltan', was formed in 1917, marking a notable inclusion of Bengalis in the military. This regiment participated in the Mesopotamian campaign, with 63 soldiers losing their lives. The Bengal Ambulance Corps was also established and dispatched to Mesopotamia, providing medical services to injured soldiers.

Objectives of this Paper

This study aims to explore lesser-known aspects of the First World War conflict with an upward emphasis on the Global South. While India's involvement has been acknowledged with considerable attention, the specific contributions of Bengali soldiers, especially the 49th Bengalee Regiment, remain underexplored in mainstream war studies. This paper aims to shed light on this overlooked area by focusing on Kazi Nazrul Islam's enlistment in the 49th Bengal Regiment and examining how his wartime experiences shaped both his personal life and literary work.

Literature Review

The involvement of Indians in the First World War and its historiography is very important for all the war historians, scholars, professors and other readers. The writing history of the First World War in India was basically a Eurocentric perspective. There is a growing demand for narratives that include the contributions of South Asian soldiers, moving away from the Eurocentric perspective. The historian wrote the history of war in terms of military operations as seen from the commanding heights of monarchs and their courts, politicians and their cabinets and on the battlefield, generals, and their staff. The historiography of Indians' contribution in the First World War has evolved significantly revealing the complexities and importance of their roles in the conflicts.⁴

In earlier years, war historian J.W.B Merewether and Frederic Smith published a book in 1917, which is '*The Indians Corp in France*', purely focused on Indian involvement on the Western Front. General Sir James Willcocks published "With the Indians in France" in 1920, expressing concerns about the proper recording of Indian soldiers' stories from the trenches of the war.

A more prominent work of Mulk Raj Anand, that is '*Across the black waters*', first published in 1939, is based on a trilogy, charting the life of Lalu, a Punjabi villager, and embeds his life story in a wider narrative of India's move towards independence.⁵ Besides this, a renowned war historian David Omissi's '*Indian Voices of the Great War*' provided a platform for Indian soldiers' contributions in the First World War through their letters, countering traditional heroic narratives. In 2008, the '*Flanders Fields*' Museum's exhibition highlighted the multicultural

aspects of the war, including South Asian soldiers, which made a clear concept about the contribution of the Indians in the First World War. Apart from, a broader understanding of the Indian war experience in a multicultural framework has been drawn in *'Indians Troops in Europe'* by Santanu Das. On the other hand, Shravani Basu's *'For King and Another Country Indian soldiers on the Western Front 1914-1918'* narrates a different literary genre of the historical account for the common consumption of the Indian soldiers in the First World War.

Methodology

This study is based on the qualitative research approach. For this study, I have used analytical methods and also used the historical research methods. I have collected data especially from the published primary sources and secondary sources like books, journals and published or unpublished dissertations. I reviewed so many literatures which already mentioned in the literature review part to find out the gap of my research questions. I also studied the newspapers and visited the West Bengal State Archives and National Library of Kolkata to learn more about the involvement of the Bengalis and the Indians in the First World War.

From Trenches to Verses: Nazrul and the First World War

The Great War broke out in 1914. During this time, India was ruled by the British government. Initially, the Indian Government was reluctant to join in this war, but later Indians massively participated in the First World War. They participated across the various theatres which had already been discussed at earlier. But here we should focus on the Bengalis' involvement in the war. Bengalis actively participated in the First World War. Before World War 1, the Bengalis were declared cowardly and fearful races by the British rulers. Although they have served as military soldiers or as sepoy under the control of the British Government, they have been used to break down the revolt of 1857 by the British Government. Between the 1857 revolt and the Great War, Bengalis were identified as a cowardly or 'effeminate' races; they did not prove themselves as a 'masculine' personality. Thus, the First World War provided an opportunity for Bengalis to blur/erase their slur. As a result, in 1917, the 49th Bengalee Regiment was formed, and many young Bengali men from middle-class families came to join this regiment to prove their ethnic identity and were willing to go to the warfront. Now, Bengali leaders began to mobilise support for the war effort, they had a dual task: to salvage Bhadrolog identity and to prove Bengali Masculinity as capable of heroic deeds.⁶ Here, this research paper is going to focus only on the military life and war front situations of Kazi Nazrul Islam.

As we know, Kazi Nazrul Islam (1899-1976) is a strong pillar in the field of Bengali literature. He created many prose, poetry and songs which were anti-British colonial rule in India, but before he became a literary person, he was a soldier, which is the prime reason that Kazi Nazrul Islam was known as 'Rebel Poet'. He is also the first Indian writer to be called a 'War Poet'.

Kazi Nazrul Islam was not only a writer, but also a soldier. He joined the British Indian Army and participated in World War I. He was the first Indian literary figure to join the First World War as a soldier; however, it is vital to highlight that he never went to Mesopotamia and did not engage directly on the battlefield. He stayed in various army camps and learnt to use firearms.⁷

In the early twentieth century, several secret armed revolutionary movements (like Anushilan Samiti, Yugantar, and Abhinav Bharat) began against British rule in Bengal and other parts of India.⁸ At this time, Nazrul was aware of these movements and was inspired by their anti-British thoughts and the dream of India's freedom. So, his inner desire for independence and opposition to British rule made him interested in joining the army. As a student, Nazrul believed that Bengalis were not cowardly or fearful races, they were courageous, they knew how to fight, and they were not afraid of war. This was the way to prove that Bengalis were not cowardly and fearful on the warfront, and anti-British thoughts influenced him to participate in the First World War.⁹

In 1914, the First World War started, just before that, the armed revolutionary movements in Bengal had become very active. At Shiarsol School, Nazrul was deeply influenced by his favourite teacher Nibaran Chandra Ghatak, who was a member of the revolutionary group 'Yugantar'. He came to know about the 'Yugantar' revolutionary activities and their philosophy of liberation through the armed rebellion.¹⁰ This influence sparked in Nazrul a rebellious mindset, a hatred of British rule, and a strong sense of patriotism. Later, out of curiosity and inspiration, Nazrul would decide to join the British Indian Army and take part in the imperial war service, rather than Bengalis Anti-British Nationalists. In this Situation, one day, while Nazrul was gone outing along with his friend Shailajananda Mukhopadhyay near Raniganj station, both of them had seen a train full of young men heading off to war. Nazrul asked himself, "Why should I stay behind?" Both friends decided to enlist. They took part in the recruitment measurement test, but only Nazrul passed.¹¹ Thus, Nazrul officially joined the 49th Bengalee Regiment in 1917, which was the complete form of the 'Bengali Double Company', formed in 1916. At that time, he was just 17 years old.¹² The '49th Bengalee Regiment is also called Bengal Paltoon'. Here, important to remember one thing that, according to biographer Priti Kumar Mitra, Nazrul didn't join the war out of loyalty to the British, his goal was to learn the art of war so that one day he could fight against British rule. After joining the Paltoon, Nazrul was first sent to the Naushera Military Training Centre for three months. From here, Nazrul wrote letters to his friend Shailajananda, saying, "It's good you didn't come, you couldn't have handled this much hardship" (Khub Valo hoyechhe je tumi asoni, ato kosto ar porishrom tumi soite parte na). After that, Nazrul was sent to the Military Camp in Karachi for three years for proper training and remained in Karachi until the disbandment of the '49th Bengalee Battalion' in 1920.¹³ Having demonstrated great efficiency in the army, he was promoted to the rank of soldier, then Havildar and finally 'Battalion-Quartermaster Havildar' within a short period of time,¹⁴ and he was familiar with Havildar Nazrul. While training in the Karachi camp, he was touched by various international war-related events. As a result, his thinking grew beyond Bengal or India; now he was observing things from an international point of view. In spite of this, two major events that deeply influenced him during this time were the Russian Revolution and Turkey's national struggle in the Middle East. These events touched his heart and inspired his ideas.¹⁵

During his stay in the army cantonment of Karachi, Nazrul started learning and reading Persian and Arabic literature with the help of a Punjabi Moulavi.¹⁶ At the same time, he has read many journals which were secretly collected from Calcutta, and he discovered the poetry of Hafiz and started practising singing and the use of musical instruments with the collaboration of

music-loving military colleagues. He has been influenced by reading many notable scholars' writings like Rabindranath Tagore, Hafiz, Rumi and Umar Khaiyyam.¹⁷ These writings helped to bring out the hidden talent of Nazrul, and gradually Nazrul transitioned from a soldier to a writer or Poet.

However, after the war, Nazrul returned home in March 1920 and joined the office of the Bengali Muslim Literary Magazine at College Street, 32, Kolkata. Here he came into touch with Muzaffar Ahmed, a believer in Marxist philosophy.¹⁸ At this time, Nazrul decided that he would not take any government job, he would become a writer. As a result, Nazrul started to attend multiple rallies and meetings with Muzaffar Ahmed and there he sang patriotic songs, delivered lectures on multiple purposes to conscious people about the independence and anti-British thoughts. Thus, Nazrul emerged from a British Indian soldier to a nationalist rebel poet. Then Nazrul Islam captivated the Bengali public as a poet.¹⁹

Bengali Goes to War: 49th Bengalee Regiment and the Question of Masculinity

During the colonial period, the revolt of 1857 was a milestone in the recruitment policy of the British Military regiment. Rand and David Omissi emphasize that the martial race theory developed as a result of the 1857 revolt/ uprising.²⁰ The Bengali soldiers showed their courage during the Great Revolt of 1857 and before the revolt. After that, the British government banned the Bengal Soldiers regiment due to the 'Martial Races' theory. Among the important 'Martial Races' were the Sikhs, Punjabi Muslims, Pathans, Rajputs, Gurkhas, Dogras, Garwalis and the Jats.²¹ According to the British Government, Bengalis were not a superior race to fight as compared to the other races. Yet Bengalis did not prove their courage and bravery to the British before the First World War. This war was a great opportunity for Bengalis to show their bravery and manliness; they were not coward and fearful race.

The First World War was not fought in India; however, as a British colony, India was compelled to take part in the conflict indirectly. Consequently, numerous Indian soldiers were involved in the war, with the Gorkha Regiment and the Punjab Regiment being the primary groups with significant participation. Earlier, Bengalis did not possess their own regiment in the military. However, during World War I, a significant number of young Bengalis expressed a keen interest in participating in the conflict. They believed that by mastering military skills, they could later combat British rule in the quest for India's freedom.²² At that time, the British government required a larger number of soldiers for the war effort. Consequently, on August 7, 1916, Lord Carmichael declared in a gathering in Dhaka that a new unit called the 'Bengal Double Company' would recruit Bengalis into the Indian Army.²³ This unit primarily enlisted both skilled and unskilled Bengali workers, as well as combat soldiers. Recruitment started on August 30, 1916, at the Fort William Cantonment in Kolkata, attracting numerous young Bengalis. These recruits initially went to Nowshera to undergo training with the '46th Punjab Regiment'. After a four-month training period, 228 soldiers from the 'Bengal Double Company' were dispatched to Karachi in January 1917 for additional training. Later, on June 26, 1917, 'the Bengal Double Company' was enlarged and renamed as the '49th Bengalee Regiment',²⁴ its only army unit to be composed entirely of ethnic Bengalis.²⁵ It is commonly referred to as the "Bengali Palton", Palton meaning soldier in several Indian languages. Many notable Bengali personalities of Bengali Palton have gone to participate in the Great War,

including some important Bengali soldiers among them, Zamindar Nawab Khaza Abdullah, Kazi Nazrul Islam, businessman Ranoda Prasad Saha, Lawyer Kumar Adhikaram Majumdar, Haridas Basu, Kalyan Kumar Sarbadhikari, Abdul Majid Sikdar, Tafaz Uddin, Jatindranath Sen, Haripada Banerjee, Mahiruddin Mandal, Subedar Major Shailendranath Basu and Mahabubul Alam.²⁶ Indian soldiers from other regiments respectfully call them ‘elemdar paltan’, meaning very capable soldiers who have joined the war not out of necessity but of personal interest.²⁷

The 49th Bengalee Regiment had three army centres or depots; the first one was Karachi Depot, where the first battalion of the 49th Bengal Regiment was sent for military training in 1917; the second was Kolkata Depot, where new Bengali soldiers were recruited and enrolled, and the third was Dhaka Depot, set up in September 1918. Many Bengalis from East Bengal were recruited here.²⁸

Initially, 228 soldiers became part of the Bengali Paltan. They participated in the campaign in Mesopotamia, where they successfully quelled a Kurdish rebellion in the region. Unfortunately, 63 soldiers lost their lives during this operation.²⁹ The majority of these soldiers were from middle-class Bengali families. The 49th Bengalee Regiment was distinct from typical military units, as approximately half of its members were educated Bengali Brahmins; they held several professions, such as lawyers, doctors, journalists, and even the sons of nawabs and zamindars enlisted in the regiment.³⁰ Once the war concluded, the Bengali Battalion returned to Kolkata in August 1920, and later in that same month, the regiment was officially disbanded.³¹

Conclusion:

At last, it can be said that the involvement of Indians, particularly Bengalis, in the First World War is very important. This war challenged the long-lasting belief within the British Indian Army that only specific ‘Martial Races’ were suitable for soldiers. Bengalis, who had previously been considered weak or cowardly and not fit for war, managed to reshape this perception by joining the war. As a result, a distinct army unit known as the 49th Bengalee Regiment was formed on the basis of ethnic Bengalis. After the war, the British government acknowledged the courage of Bengalis by conferring upon them prestigious military honors and medals. Another important point is that the famous poet Kazi Nazrul Islam, first joined the war as a soldier. His transformation from a soldier to a poet reflects the deep impact of Bengali involvement in the First World War.

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