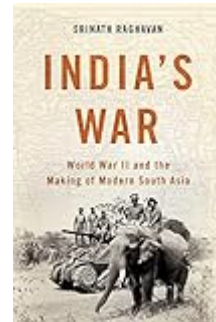




Srinath Raghavan. *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia.* New York: Basic Books, 2016. 576 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-465-03022-4.



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World War II in India

This sweeping historical account of India's role in World War II, and the long-term impact of that war on contemporary Indian history, makes for easy and compelling reading. The overall significance of this volume must be assessed in relation to the sway which monographs and microhistories have come to hold over historiography in our times. This book, unlike the narrowly focused regimental histories, presents a combination of combat history in the overall social, economic, and policy context of the Second World War. It informs us, in significant detail, that to understand contemporary South Asia we must carefully study the transformation of this region during World War II, a fact too often forgotten in the globalized times we inhabit. Further, it does so in a balanced manner—at no point does the author allow an argument to become one-sided. In much of conventional historiography which impinges on the role played by India in Britain's war effort during 1939-45 the tendency to visualize India as a sideshow has remained strong. In India separate histories of the two world wars of the twentieth century are rarely, if ever, taught in schools

and colleges; these wars come and go as events largely peripheral to the history of British colonialism and Indian nationalism in India. In such historiography India is made to engage and disengage with these wars with an ease provided by nationalism, independence, and partition. While the British historians tend to focus more on Britain and less on the commonwealth in their treatment of the world wars, the Indian nationalist historians have usually satisfied themselves by adhering to the familiar image of an unwilling India chaperoned into war by an insensitive master. There are histories of British-Indian collaboration *or* contradiction during World War II but rarely has a single volume focused on *both* of these simultaneously occurring phenomena like this book does. Historians of the Indian military, a subject not taken seriously by Indian academia, have conducted extensive and intensive researches on the subject of India's participation in World War I and II. Almost six decades of historical research, beginning with the official history of India's role in the Second World War commissioned in the 1950s, has produced a detailed and nuanced understanding of

India's multifarious relationship with the world wars of the previous century. The volume under review is the fruit of this immense international scholarship. It will certainly be read and welcomed as a work of great historical synthesis. This reviewer avers that a book like *India's War* makes a strong case for a single-volume narrative history which presents a rounded narrative, bringing in the manifold dimensions of the war (p. 4).

The book has been written by an ex-Indian army officer whose interest in Indian military history made him abandon the seductive rigours of the army for the sheltered groves of academia (p. 3). The foundation on which *India's War* stands is acknowledged by the author. Johannes Voigt's *Indien im Zweiten Weltkrieg* (India in the Second World War, 1978) and the commendable works of Tim Harper, Chris Bayly, and Yasmin Khan are mentioned and used by the author. The corpus of Indian military history put together by the postwar historians Chandar Sundaram, Daniel Marston, T. R. Moreman, Tarak Barkawi, David Omissi, and Robert Blyth among others is acknowledged. A survey of the endnotes, a total of fifty-three pages, and their tracing back to the text reveals the depth of the book. The impact of the Second World War on the future of India in 1945 was profound. This impact can be compared with the effect of the Government of India Act (1935) on the Constitution of India promulgated in 1950. The war economy created in India by the exigencies of the massive war effort launched by the Government of India in 1939-45 produced a practical blueprint for economic management in independent India. It created new opportunities for Indian business and industry despite official reservations and even led to the establishment of new industries, like Hirachand Walchand's Hindustan Aircraft Company in Mysore, which started producing planes in August 1941. However, to assume that the war created a certain egalitarianism in India, as it did in Britain by means of rationing and other measures, would be wrong. India remained a grossly unequal society, with traders profiting from inflation and hoarding while the people, the poor in particular, suffered terribly. The Bengal Famine, caused both by the war and the cruelty of Churchill, is a good example of this.

This gripping story of India's Second World War is spread over eighteen chapters with attractive titles which, in sum, make us understand what the war meant for those who fought it on the fronts and those who supported it from home (p. 6). The book has been carefully constructed and a reading of the chapters reveals the hand of an erudite historian. Ultimately, the blueprint of

modern India mentioned above emerged from a context in which the backwardness of India as a British colony was highlighted by the official perceptions of the coming war in 1939. India, and especially her armed forces (as I have shown elsewhere), was viewed as hopelessly backward by the Chatfield Report of 1938. The rapid Japanese conquest of Malaya and Singapore in 1942 almost proved the pessimists of 1939 right. No one in 1939 could have foreseen the transformation of India during the Second World War. *India's War* is an intriguing story of this process which produced a new and confident India as a consequence of the Indians' myriad associations with World War II. Ironically, this newfound confidence of the Indians' growing belief in their own abilities as a *national people* stemmed not from the nationalist movements aimed against the war but from the professional experience they gained during a war which was essentially Britain's war against the Axis powers. The great majority of the Indian POWs taken by the Germans and Japanese, this book reminds us, refused to violate their oath of loyalty to the British. During the nationalist rebellion of 1942, observers were quick to notice that even the relatively newer Indian army units showed no hesitation in acting against the rebels. For instance: 'The army noted with satisfaction that even new Indian units, such as the troops of the 1st Battalion of the Mahar Regiment raised from the depressed classes, did not flinch at firing on their countrymen—and indeed were very effective' (p. 274).

The balance between nationalism and professionalism, both features of a modernity adopted by Indians, remained largely undisturbed during World War II. Raghavan's section on the Quit India Revolt reveals mixed results. The narrative eschews extremes and disloyalty and loyalty both are narrated in a warning against looking at the World War II experience through either nationalist or antinationalist blinkers. Further, American involvement in and innovation on the Burma front exposed the Indians to new ways of doing things. Finally they reconquered Rangoon with a confidence not lost on contemporary observers. Nonetheless, critics can maintain that defeating the Japanese in 1944-45 was not the same thing as defeating them in 1942. The script was not different in North Africa and, later, Italy, where the Indians gained valuable combat and noncombat experience. They were respected by the Italians, who did not practice racial discrimination. Many wrote in glowing terms of their experiences in Italy.

Indian soldiers were overwhelmed by the jaw-dropping beauty of the country. Sicily, wrote a soldier of

the Z-Craft company, âis the Kashmir of Europe. Wherever you go you will find groves of date palms and innumerable vineyards.... We get for one shilling one bottle of wine and for 1 penny 2 lbs of almonds. Where will you get things so cheap?â The people were âvery sympathetic and kind heartedâ to the Indians. âThey call us often âDESERT FOXESâ and say that we are the fittest soldiers to break the stony head of Hitler.â Equally important, âThe people here display no colour prejudice. The coloured are better loved than the white.â Sex was evidently part of the Sicilian experience. âI am passing some of the happiest hours of my life in a beautiful European island,â wrote an infantryman. âWe are free from every sort of restriction and shall never forget this liberty throughout our livesâ (pp. 372-73).

Above all, participation in World War II gave the Indian men and officers a new sense of comparative history and their defined role in it. Moreover, as this volume reminds us, this newfound Indian worldview was impressed upon the economic and political working of an India led by Nehru until at least the late 1950s: âIf India is today regarded as a major âemerging economyâ, it is worth remembering that the roots of this transformation stretch all the way back to the Second World Warâ (p. 462). Indeed, as the author mentions in the epilogue, modern South Asia is a product of World War II and the sooner its leaders realize this, the better. Further, this war highlighted this regionâs historical strategic integrity. The policy implication of this is clear: âYet if India is to revert to its older role as the âpivotâ of Asian security, it will first have to aim at the economic and strategic integration of the subcontinent: both to its west with Pakistan and Afghanistan and to its east with Bangladesh and Burma. Only then can the rise of Indiaâprefigured in the Second World Warâbe fully realizedâ (p. 462).

Nonetheless the impact of World War II was not free of trouble. I have shown elsewhere how it was easier for the British to raise the largest volunteer army in history than to demobilize it.[1] By 1945-46 millions of young men had received military training in India, with drastic consequences. While military training raised the confidence of the millions of wartime recruits, it also unfortunately prepared the disciplined communal mobs which played an important role in the ethnic cleansing on both sides of the new border in 1947. But while trained and armed men could kill, they could also protect their own

communities; military discipline and leadership sometimes enabled communities to escape the slaughter in localities where the military participation ratio during the war had been high. Understandably, much of this happened in the Punjab, which, with Bengal, bore the brunt of partition violence. The war economy gave India a mixed-economy model, later called the âlicense permit Raj,â whose shelf life ran out in the 1970s. It created the grounds for progressive taxation, import substitution, and public distribution systems. The heavy militarization of the subcontinentâs North West, a consequence of the high military participation ratio recorded by the undivided Punjab, became an important cause of the rise of the Pakistan army as the arbiter of fortunes in the vast area between India and Afghanistan. Further, often draconian antilabor wartime legislation framed under the broad rubric of the defense of India rules was retained and renewed in independent India to suppress civil unrest. The controversial Armed Forces Special Powers Act and the forerunners of the Maintenance of Internal Security Act and the Essential Services Maintenance Act were among the political legacy of the war inherited by the state in independent India and Pakistan. One consequence of World War II and the partition of British and Princely India into two countries was the creation of two national histories of âself-legitimization.â In an act of great disservice to history writing, the rulers of these countries âsought to gloss over the war years of common mobilization and sacrificeâ (p. 461).

The Second World War transformed the world in many ways. When it began in 1939, it was not Indiaâs war but by 1940 numerous Indian politicians and large sections of the people were drawn to the Allied side. From the summer of 1941 the colonial Indian state began to receive the support of the Indian communists as well. In the middle of 1942, when the Axis star was at its zenith, the war effort was opposed only by the Congress. In sum, World War II was seen and received by the Indians as a great opportunity for their political and professional advancement and it was this positive attitude to this great conflict which made this war âIndiaâs war,â with all its consequences.

Note

[1]. Anirudh Deshpande, *British Military Policy in India, 1900-1945: Colonial Constraints and Declining Power* (Delhi: Manohar, 2005).

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