

October 24, 2014

Voices from the Great War



• Far away from home, the men were often homesick and ill-prepared for the vagaries of European winters. Photo: special arrangement



• The Hindu

In memoriam: India Gate was built to commemorate the Indian soldier who died in WWI. Photo: S. Subramaniam

Deepa Alexander reports on two BBC World Service Radio broadcasts that celebrate the Indian soldier in WW I

“He was lost, but now he is found.”

Sgt. Gangaram Gurung’s voice is sad and hoarse but his accented telling of The Prodigal Son is still lucid nearly a century later. It brings with it the pungent odour of mustard gas, the feel of cold hard earth in the trenches, the sound of artillery shelling, the sight of blood and gore and the poignant tales of men, far away from home, dying for King and country.

The Great War (1914-1918) ended the reign of Kaisers and kings, destroyed empires, redrew the maps of East Europe and West Asia and scattered headstones covered in poppies across the continent. A hundred years on, as memory turns into history, the echoes of the First World War can still be heard in centennial projects that hope to keep alive the soldier only “known unto God”.

For long, multiple versions focussed only on the white man’s war. But the truth is that men from almost every race fought alongside their colonial masters. India sent nearly a million troops, with 74,000 dying in places as far flung as Mesopotamia, East Africa, Gallipoli, France, Flanders, Persia and Palestine. While the stories of the British soldier were documented in diaries and memoirs preserved by the Imperial War Museums, the stories of the Indian troops died with their deaths. The boom of battle was drowned in the nationalist feelings that supplanted memories of an imperial war. But the bravery of these men still pierces the silence.

To put the spotlight back on them, BBC World Service Radio broadcasts two documentaries — *India’s Forgotten War* (presented by Anita Rani, produced by Jo Wheeler) and *Ghostly Voices of World War I* (presented by Priyath Liyanage, produced by Mark Savage).

Anita begins her journey under the sandstone arch of India Gate, erected in memory of soldiers of the Indian Army who died in WWI and the Third Anglo-Afghan War. As she asks day-trippers its significance, it is evident that WWI has slipped from public memory. Military historian Rana Chhina, Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research, Delhi, says in the documentary, “As a nation, we have no memories of any conflict before 1947. Anything prior to Independence was seen as colonial history...” He concedes though that this view is changing now.

Anita then meets the relatives of men from the villages of Haryana, Punjab and Rajasthan who took the King’s shilling and went on to win weepy plaudits from the soldiers they served with. At the United Services Institution, Delhi, she meets the grandson of Subedar Negi Ram who died in November 1914. He still preserves the letter of condolence that his illiterate grandmother received from the King-Emperor, George V. Brigadier (retd.) Sukhjit Singh of the royal family of Kapurthala says “Men joined up for the honour of the clan and the honour of their faith.” As a result, India sent more men to war than any other British colony. There were also those from the Imperial Service Troops, drawn from the princely states. Along with men and money, the maharajas also sent “horses, aeroplanes and mufflers”.

M.S. Jodha, grandson of Lt. Col. Thakur Aman Singh Jodha of the Jodhpur Lancers, has preserved the silver coins paid as war salary and a sepia photograph of the proud Rajput taken in a Paris studio. And then there is Capt. Manindranath Das whose courage won him a Military Cross.

In Punjab’s villages, an entire generation of women wove new words like Basra and Germany into their songs of separation. Many men joined the labour corps as cobblers, bakers and toilet cleaners. Some, however, had to be coerced, others deserted.

Far away from home, the men were often homesick and ill-prepared for the vagaries of European winters. Censored letters spoke of racism, rivers of blood, and longing for home.

This longing is the subject of the second documentary. From the backrooms of the Humboldt University and the Ethnological Museum in Berlin come the sounds of over 2,000 recordings, a unique archive of the voices of ordinary soldiers. Says German academic Britta Lange: “Recordings such as that of Gurung’s were made by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission. Germany dreamt of being a colonial power. When Indian troops were captured along the Western Front, German academics realised this was fertile ground for research into languages.”

The recordings at the Halfmoon Camp were obviously rehearsed before being recorded as the material was expensive and the procedure complex. The voices speak about their women, their villages and the loneliness of war. Some soldiers died and were interred in Berlin, others returned home and seldom spoke about the War.

It was in search of these forgotten heroes that Priyath travels to India. Of the English-speaking Gurung there is some memory in a village near Dharamshala, but of the mouth-organ playing Lachhman Thapa, hardly any. More stories are resurrected in Punjab. Dalit soldier Santa Singh died a lonely man, shuffling around the village in his uniform.

Others like the folktale-telling Chandan Singh emigrated to the U.S., while Sunder Singh who sings religious songs in the recordings is the only one who left behind a tangible memory — a wooden trunk filled with his things.

All these men have now joined their comrades whose names line tombstones in foreign lands under arches that proclaim “their name liveth for evermore”.

And some like Gurung who were lost have now been found.

India’s Forgotten War will be broadcast on October 29 (8 p.m.) and Ghostly Voices of World War I on November 8 (8 p.m.)