



Caste and the first world War: Impact in India

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Abstract

More than a million of young men left India for fighting the First World War, and for their well being and care in the foreign land, millions of animals like cows, buffalos, horses, donkeys etc were sent along with tons and tons of food related supplies. The First World War had its impact on the entire world. Social systems were affected across world and being actively involved in the war; Indian society was not an exception. Therefore, this paper is about how the immigration of millions of men and the exportation of tons and tons of supplies had impacted caste system in India during the First World War. As primary resources, I have referred to letters of Indian sepoys who fought during the First World War in the various parts of the world. The source of the letters is David Omissi's book titled *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918*. It is also important to note here that this paper is a section of a chapter of my M.Phil dissertation submitted to the Centre for English Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, India.

Keywords: Caste, the First World War, martial race theory, sepoys

Introduction

The First World War brought many changes in the social structure, culture, politics, economy, religion etc. in the world. All the countries, directly or indirectly, were affected by this 'Second Mahabharata' – the comparison of the First World War with the Mahabharata was made by sepoys in their letters between empires. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 32) Although the First World War was not directly meant to bring changes in the various institutions like caste, religion, race etc. in the world, changes came into force as consequences of it. India, being a British colony, took part in the war with a very large number of soldiers – “up to November 1918; 13,02,394 personals fought the war, many beasts and other assorted sorts of supplies along with the money during the warfare.” (Authority of the Government of India, 78) This very active participation brought many social, political, economic, religious changes in India as well. Immigration of millions of men and exportation of millions of animals and tons and tons of other necessary supplies were major reasons of the impact on caste system in India. Due to the shortage of men of the martial race after 1917, for the first time, whoever was found including lower caste men were recruited. Disbanded Mahar Regiment was again raised towards the end of the war. Urbanization and industrial growth due to the war had positive impact on the lower caste people. Men women ration of regions like Punjab was imbalanced. Thus, this paper is about how the immigration of men, exportation of supplies, industrialization, urbanization and imbalanced ratio of men and women, affected caste system in India during the First World War.

Caste, Martial Race and Recruitment:

Restrictions on recruitment of lower caste men began in 1885 after Fredric Roberts became the Commander-in-Chief of the Indian army, and in 1893 due to the reorganization of the Indian army, lower caste men had no place in the army.

(Basham, 71-74) Recruitment strategy was focused only on Punjab region until the First World War. (Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj...*, 11) Therefore, due to the Martial Race Theory, lower caste men including untouchables hardly had any opportunity to get recruited into the Indian army. However, because of high casualties during the First World War, it was very difficult for the British Empire to recruit men from the so called 'martial castes' alone. So, to meet the increasing need of men during the war, recruiting parties had to find every possible village, and people were recruited irrespective of their caste, faith, race or any other identity. A Punjabi Muslim, Bauli Hasan Khan makes this clear in his letter to Rohimdad Khan, Jhelum on 11th March 1916. He writes, “There is a tremendous amount of recruiting going on in this part of the country. Recruiting parties go from village to village, and the reason is that the famine is driving thousands to enlist. It does not matter what the caste may be – sweepers, oil sellers, dancing girls' attendants – they take them all, even up to forty years of age. Everybody is talking about war, even women and children. There is nothing else on anyone's lips.” (Omissi, *Indian Voices...* 162)

Many scholars have noted how the need of man power forced the British to recruit untouchables and lower caste men during the war. Vedika Kant argues in her book *India and the First World War* that high casualties of men, as the war progressed, opened avenues to men to get recruited out of necessity from all the communities, including untouchables and tribes by keeping the martial races theory and the earlier recruitment norms aside. (24) “Many lower caste men like bakers, blacksmiths, butchers, carpenters, cooks, hammer men, gardeners, herdsman, shoemakers, shoeing smiths, packers, tailors, washer people, etc. were recruited and they were 43,737 in number.” (Authority of the Government of India, 92-93) This recruitment of thousands of lower caste and untouchable men from rural India into the army was a change in the social structure of the Indian society which is based on the caste system that

provides a permanent occupation on the basis of one's birth. The caste system's divine and inherent curse of a forced occupation for lower caste people was violated during the war to a great extent. So-called non-warrior communities got an opportunity to 'choose' a different occupation – *soldiership* – that had been forbidden for them to choose due to their castes. Guns instead of brooms in the hands of sweepers were against the caste system, and this change, I would say, could be the first step in the struggle for the emancipation of untouchables and other lower castes.

There were conflicting views on the Martial-ness of Indians. Millions of soldiers, mostly from the north and north-west of the subcontinent of India, in the British-Indian Army by 1914, were the result of the Martial Races Theory. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 2) According to the Eden Commission report, Punjab was the country of origin of most warlike races of India and the nursery of the best soldiers. Neville Chamberlain, a British military officer believed that the south Indian could never achieve the standard of the Bengal. (Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj...*, 12) However, other scholars, including western ones, thought and believed the otherwise. P. D Bonargee, then an assistant in the military department and the author of *A Handbook of the Fighting Races in India* argues that South Indians including Marathas too were fighting races of India. (150-166, 212-217)

Martial Races Theory was racist and meant to hold the hegemony of the Occidentals over the Orientals. There is no doubt about the racist and imperial nature of this theory, but it was not limited to race alone. Martial Race Theory was also highly casteist in nature. Due to the obsession of this theory, men from the untouchable and lower caste communities were considered unfit for recruitment as warriors and even region like Punjab was also not exception to it. The British tried not to recruit anyone who had previously performed any sort of menial jobs, as caste hierarchy among Hindus would not prefer a soldier from the lower castes. (Basu, 3) The numerical data, therefore, shows that the participation of lower castes, tribes, and untouchable community men, in the First World War and many other wars before and afterwards, was very less. According to Constable, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, the Indian army handbooks' and histories' repeated attribution to the Indian martial characteristics was as "self-sufficiency, physical and moral resilience, orderliness and hard work, fighting tenacity, and a sense of courage and loyalty". (Constable, 439) Mahars of Bombay region were known for their loyalty and courage. (Basham, 26) Although lower caste and untouchable men fulfilled these requirements, they were not recruited after 1885. (Basham, 71-74) During the war also, the British Indian army had very less soldiers of lower castes and untouchables even from the north and north-west of the subcontinent of India. In the First World War only 21,500 Mazabi Sikhs, a group of mainly landless menial, descendants from Hindu untouchables and some other Chamars, and other lower caste Indians fought the war. (Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj...*, 70) In Omissi's book *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18*, most of the letters have been written by high caste sepoys. '34th Sikh Pioneers' is one of the regiments which had lower caste and untouchable Sikhs soldiers (363). The number of lower caste and untouchable soldiers was very less among Hindu. Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and others – lower caste and untouchable soldiers were very less in number. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 367).

Soldiers and other Supply from India

Between 1st August 1914 to 31st December 1914, 24,666 men were recruited. 84,353 93,388; 179,364 men were recruited in 1915, 1916 and 1917 respectively. In 1918 till 30th November 290,687 were recruited towards the end of the World War. Out of 1,272,460 soldiers 826,868 were combatants and 445,592 were non-combatants. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 368) These men took animals and other supplies along with them for the war. Many kings and philanthropists also provided necessary things to make the lives of Indian troops comfortable in the foreign land. India also contributed 100 million pounds in 1914 (approximately 8 billion pounds in today's value) and another 20 to 30 million pounds (roughly 1.5 to 2.4 billion pounds today) each year in cash for the war. India also provided 170,000 animals and 3,700,000 tons of supplies and stores to support the war effort. (Kant, 15) India also supplied thousands of animals like horses – 85,953, ponies and mules – 65,398, camels – 10,781, draught bullocks – 5,061; and dairy cattle – 5,622. (Authority of the Government of India, 95)

A very hard life in the biting cold, mud, rain, shells, bullets, bombs, gas bombs, etc., that the soldiers talk about in their letters to their dear ones, was one of the reasons of exportation of these supplies from India to make the life of the sepoys better with comfort. Chaman Singh, a Sikh, in his letter to Mangal Singh, Montgomery District, Punjab, on 5th June 1917, writes that the soldiers get everything that they get in India – "plenty of milk, sugar, ghee, oranges and grapes.... The Germans have nothing to eat, whereas the Indian soldiers are given more rations of every kind than before." (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 295) A Jat soldier, Risaldar-Major Ganga Dut gives a similar account. He writes the cold is like "if you pour hot water on the ground, it immediately becomes solid like ghee." However, he further says, "still, all the men are well and happy. We get good rations, and sufficient. All the arrangement of the Sirkar for food and clothing are most excellent." (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 273) Kala Khan narrates: "the earth, the sky, the trees, the stones, the mud, the water are white. Spittle freezes into a solid white lump, hard water as stones and bricks, water in rivers and canals is like thick plate glass." But he too mentions that they comfortable with plenty of clothes, oil to rub on feet, two pairs of "strong, expensive boots." (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 342) Jemada Mahomed Yasin Khan also talks about the "excellent arrangements" for the Indian soldiers on their leave and travel. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 272) Zabu Shah tells his mother about the luxurious life of soldiers with Indian supplies in the trenches and during the fast. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 303) Zubir Shah also writes a similar kind of letter about the perfect arrangements of clothing and rations for the Indian troops. (Omissi, *Indian Voices...*, 322)

For the comfort of the large number of Indian soldiers fighting against Germany and the cold weather, number of goods, animals, machines, metal, etc. was exported from India. With regard to exportation of animals, 1482856 total animals, including 1340684 cows, 102165 buffalos and 40007 calves, were exported between 1914 and 1919. (Authority of the Government of India, 115)

Kings, rich people, organizations, and factories in India helped the British Government. Family members of soldiers also sent some necessary things by parcel. The Begum of Bhopal sent thousands of copies of religious scriptures to Muslim soldiers, money, animals and other necessary goods

for all the sepoys. (Kant, 23) The Maharaja of Gwalior sent 40 motor ambulances, 4000 horses, thousands of pounds in donation. (Basu, 12) Coconut oil was sent for Sikh soldiers' hairs and more efforts were made to source it from India. (Basu, 42) The Comfort Committee also ordered Kara (bracelet), Kachcha, Kirpan (dagger), Kangha (comb) and many things for Sikh sepoys. One thousand great coats, a large supply of rubber boots a large consignment of 6000 little pillows, hair dye, electric torches, 39,000 copies of Hindustani-French phrasebook and many things were sent from India. (Basu, 44-45) Apart from these recorded things, there must be many more things which would have been sent to Britain, France and other places where the Indian or British troops were fighting.

Industrial Growth and Urbanization

Pratik Sharma finds industrial growth in India during the First World War in his article, *Industrial Development in India during the British Rule*. (Web) The growth in the industrial production in India would be, I argue, a result of the exportation of goods and other supplies for the war and for making the life of millions of sepoys comfortable who were fighting on the battlefield, lying in the hospitals and suffering in the prisons during the war. Vedula Kant notes that "21 percent exportation increased in 1916-17 over the previous year as Indian industry expanded to meet the war efforts, the share of manufactured goods jumped from less than 24 percent in 1913-14 to 31 per cent in 1917-17." (37) Tata company's 78 percent selling of its steel output to the Government by September 1917 rose to 98 per cent in 1918. The company supplied 1500 miles of rails and 300,000 tons of steel materials that were essential for the campaigns in the west as well as in India during the war. (Kant, 37) According to Pratik Sharma, "during the war-period, industries like cotton and jute made much headway. Steel industry also experienced substantial growth. Consumer goods industries like chemicals, cement, fertilizers, mineral acids, etc., for which India depended on foreign countries, also progressed during the War". (Web) Thus, it is very logical to say that Industrialization and increase in the industrial production must have provoked urbanization in India during the First World War. Therefore, I would argue that apart from the migration of the lower caste sepoys and their families to urban spaces, other lower caste people whose family members were not in the army must have also immigrated to the Indian cities in search of labour. High supply of goods to the West led to increase in production, and this rise in production must have had high demand for labourers in urban spaces. This demand for industrial labourers, without doubt, must have attracted the landless illiterate people and families, especially lower caste and untouchables in villages.

In the changing world of 19th century, untouchables like Mahars from Bombay region already broke their traditional connections with villages and moved to urban spaces for employment opportunities. (Zelliot, 32-34) According to a paper titled "Caste and Evolution in the Industrial Workforce in India", during 1901-1921, proportion of untouchable migrants in Bombay (one of the industrial hubs in India) rose above the 6-7 per cent ratio that untouchables constituted in the city of Bombay. It also notes that the rate of increase of untouchables was greater than other communities. This growth of lower castes and untouchables together constituted overwhelmingly large proportion of migrants to urban spaces. (Morris, 126, 127).

Kingsley Davis says, "If industrialism proceeds rapidly (in India), the caste system will have essentially disappeared by the end of this century" (176) I don't think industrialization alone can annihilate caste system but it would definitely have some impact and it did have on lower caste and untouchables. Thus, the First World War became a driving force behind the Industrial growth and urbanization in India during the war. It provided a different kind of space for thousands of lower caste and untouchable people in the urban spaces. With regard to caste based discrimination, lower caste people might have experienced a new different kind of life in urban spaces, different from the village experiences. This might have affected social, cultural, political, and economic structures of caste based villages.

Endogamy under Attack

Apart from the involvement of the lower caste people in the war, growth in industrialization and the urbanization as a result of the war, there was also a threat to 'Family' as institution. Soldiers left their wives, children and old parents behind. Their return to their dearest ones was hardly possible, as they wrote in their letters. Bhagail Singh, a Sikh soldier, writes, "Consider us as having died today or tomorrow. There is absolutely no hope of our ever returning." (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 171-172)

In the regions like Punjab, only women, children and old people were left. Most of the youths had joined the war, and thousands of them never returned to their families. They died in the war; thousands were missing; thousands were captured by enemy and put in prisons. Since there was no guarantee of the men returning home, their wives lamented their separation. Sepoys doubted their wives of having affairs with other men in their absence. Loyalty and chastity of women were questioned. One of the Rajput soldiers, Dafadar Prayag Singh's wife writes, in December 1915, to prove her loyalty and chastity. (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 129-130) A woman writes to her husband, "...I have no need of money and clothes. I want you." (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 152) Unbearable physical absence of the husband created a space for women to commit adultery or to find a new husband. Qasim Khan, a sepoy, writes to his father regarding his wife's affair with Nur Khan. (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 124) A Woman left her husband's family to get settled with another man without having divorced her first husband who was fighting the war. (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 207)

Some families were left without male members in their family and women of such families were major targets of sexual abuse. Women lived under the fear of 'dishonour'. They repeatedly pleaded their husbands to leave the war to save their 'honour'. (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 151-152, 248) Mostly women, children, and old people remained in many villages in regions like Punjab, especially in upper caste families. The male population was very less. In some villages there were no adult men at all. The ratio between men and women came down. As a result of this unequal ratio, there were no births for years in villages. (Omissi, Indian Voices..., 180)

Control of sexuality is one of the means to preserve the caste system. But immigration of millions of men from India generated a very high number of "surplus women". (Ambedkar, BAWs, Vol.1, 10-11) Such surplus women without having men of their own caste to control their sexuality were considered dangerous to the caste system.

However, the caste system's prescription to treat such surplus category and control the sexuality of women to preserve the caste system during the war was useless. Ambedkar argues, in his paper "Castes in India: Their genesis mechanism and development", that, Sati – the burning of the widow on the funeral pyre of her deceased husband, enforced widowhood, and child marriage were three major customs used to preserve caste system. (Ambedkar, BAWs, Vol.1, 13) However, during the First World War, it was not possible to follow any of these means simply because Sati was already banned, and due to the high surplus women forced widowhood and child marriage were also impossible. Thus, in such situation, socially accepted norms of sexual intercourse to protect the endogamy must have been violated, and therefore preservation of racial purity of castes through endogamous marriages must have been violated by the illegitimate sexual intercourse with men of other castes.

In conclusion, I would argue that: (a) Millions of Indian men immigration to the west. (b) For the welfare for these men and for the war, there was a large amount of goods, animals, money and other supplies were exported to the west from India. (c) The high volume of exportation of goods and other supplies for the war and the welfare of the Indian men in the west led to industrial growth in Indian urban spaces. (d) The industrial growth opened new opportunities of employment for lower caste and untouchables. (e) The new employment opportunities attracted the lower caste and untouchable people to urban spaces and urbanization flourished. (f) The immigration of sepoys to Europe also affected the endogamous family system.

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