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Reframing life/war 'writing': objects, letters and songs of Indian soldiers, 1914–1918

Undivided India (India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma) contributed to the First World War more than one million men, including combatants and non-combatants, who fought in places as far-flung as France, Gallipoli, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Egypt, Palestine and Central Asia. But these peasant-warriors have largely been deleted from the annals of 'Great War and modern memory' which till recently had remained Eurocentric. But how do we write the lives of men who were largely non-literate and did not leave us with the super-abundance of diaries, memoirs, poems and journals? Based on intensive archival research, this article unearths a variety of material sources – trench artefacts, mutilated letters and sound-recordings – not only to recover the sensuous world of the Indian sepoys but to ask for a reconceptualisation of the nature of life-writing with its hitherto textual bias. The article at once challenges the colour of war memory and conventional ways of reading – and writing – lives in times of war.

Keywords

India; First World War; empire; sepoys; letters; objects; life-writing

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A tremulous yet incantatory voice – interrupted by awkward silences and sharp intakes of breath – crackles from an old phonograph record as the needle scratches against the disc. The speaker refers to himself in the third person, as he narrates his life story in Punjabi, with the voice rising and pausing and rising again till it reaches, and almost spits out, the final word at the end of each line:

> There was a man who would have butter back in India
>
> He would also have two *sers* of milk.
>
> He served for the British.
>
> He joined the European War.
>
> He was captured by the Germans.
>
> He wants to go back to India.
>
> If he goes back to India then he will get that same food.
>
> Three years have already passed.
>
> There's no news as to when there will be peace.
>
> Only if he goes back to India will he get that food.
>
> If he stays here for two more years then he will die.
>
> By God's grace, if they declare peace then we'll go back.[1]

This is the story of Mall Singh, an Indian prisoner of war in the 'Halfmoon Camp' at Wünsdorf outside Berlin. The recording was made on 11 December, 1916. He was forced to stand in front of a phonograph machine held before him by his German captors and instructed to speak. More than the 'warm scribe my hand'[2] – lurking behind the manuscript, souvenir or artefact – this bleak voice-recording touches us on that fragile spot where categories collapse. A voice calls out from the phonograph, strains itself in the act of recording: the trepidation, the timbre, the laboured enunciation, the slight breathlessness seem to bridge the gap between technological reproduction and lived experience. Listening to it now, the body and emotion of the speaker seem insurgent, filling in, flowing out, authenticating an encounter with a disembodied voice from 100 years ago.[3] The effect is powerful and uncanny: we are in the presence of the 'real', in whatever way we may define the term.

What is the relation between the sensory (here the sonorous), the testimonial and the 'authentic'? Or, to put the question another way, what is it to listen or to view or even to touch rather than to read in the act of recovering past lives and bodies? 'To listen is *tender l'oreille* – literally, to stretch the ear – an expression that evokes a singular mobility, among the sensory apparatuses, of the pinna of the ear – it is an intensification, a curiosity or an anxiety' notes Jean-Luc Nancy.[4] Exploring the relationship 'between a sense (that one listens to) and a truth (that one understands)', Nancy comments on the age-old hierarchy of the senses, with the visual privileged over the aural, in their relation to the 'conceptual' and yet, the hierarchies shift as we consider questions of contact, trace and affect. Sound and touch, clinging more to the body than vision, pertain to the domain of the intimate; 'visual presence', Nancy notes, can pale before 'acoustic penetration'.[5] But the question that surely must also be asked, in our context, is whether Mall Singh's voice penetrates us because of the way it sounds, or because of the poignant story it tells, or because, in some undefinable way, Mall Singh is *present* in it. The borders are porous; 'sense' and 'truth' (to use Nancy's terms) are fused and often confused in the affect of 'hearing', as it joins 'listening' and 'understanding' (and hence the importance of 'translation', inter-sensorial and linguistic).

What is being said can disturb the pinna as much as the voice. Mall Singh's was among the 2677 audio recordings made by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission between 29 December 1915 and 19 December 1918, using the First World War prisoners (POWs) held in Germany.[6] They included a large number of colonial prisoners, including Singh. I shall come back to these men and the recordings later in the article, but for the moment, let us examine the voice-testimony at hand. Desolate, homesick and hungry, Mall Singh distils all the pain and longing into the images of *ghee* (butter) and the two *sers* [a form of measurement] of milk. Home is remembered as taste; but the image conjures into being, beyond memory and desire, the socio-economic conditions of the society he comes from: the agricultural–martial world of colonial Punjab (today divided between India and Pakistan).

Mall Singh's voice is not just a fresh and tantalising source but opens us new ways of 'reading' – and writing – life in times of war: it confronts us with the role of the sensuous, the material and the intimate; it forces us to the weave together a narrative of fugitive fragments, the flotsam, jetsam and lagan of life wrecked by war; it points to the importance of relicts as zones of contact between warm life and historical violence, sacral sites where testimony is born. The wavering of the voice, the blood and bullet-holes on trench artefacts, the creases and crinkliness of trench-letters are in many ways the hand-prints and face-prints of war in the act of writing its own violent life – its peculiar mode of communication – as it slices through human lives and reduces them to piece-meal narratives. What I am arguing for is a mode of reading that goes merely beyond 'reading' – a more active engagement with the material, the aural and the haptic; to *sense* life, as it were, while being alert to the traces of violence; to how, in a fragmentary, tentative, hesitant way, a narrative is built up; to be alive to the role of affect in the relicts and the 'reader'.

Forms and genres are informed by their own histories and hierarchies. Are the different kinds of source material, belonging to different media, to be given equal value? Does materiality invest testimony with the aura of authenticity and if so, what is the relation between affect and the politics of 'combat gnosticism'?[7] Here I shall examine some of these issues with relation to a specific community – the Indian soldiers who served in the Western Front between October 1914 and December 1915. While I have written elsewhere about the small but powerful body of Indian war literature – poems, memoirs and the war novel *Across the Black Waters* by Mulk Raj Anand – here my focus is on fugitive fragments which impinge on our senses and thought.[8] If life-writing involves, as Hermione Lee notes, both 'making up' and 'making over' a 'quasi-fictional story-like shape', with the 'need for accuracy' pulling against it,[9] a project like this one is even more precarious and ramshackle, tipping over to the world of 'make-do' with its assemblage of half-known sonic, textual and material fragments. Such a mode of engagement, as I seek to demonstrate, challenges our notions *both* of life-writing and war-writing, raising questions about agency, posthumous presence and reception. In the colonial context, they take on, as I shall argue, even more vital intensities of meaning. I shall first provide a brief background about these men and then go on to examine three different kinds of testimonies: objects, letters and songs.

Indian soldiers on the Western front

The nineteenth century saw the extensive militarisation of the agricultural and dairy farming communities of the Punjab through the construction of the idea of 'martial races' and the system of rewards of fertile 'canal colonies' for military service. In the post-Mutiny years, the British colonial army had decided that certain ethnic groups – such as Sikhs, Punjabi Mussalmans, Pathans, Gurkhas, Dogras, Jats – were 'naturally' more war-like than others and thereby restricted the recruiting pool of India's vast military to a narrow strip of land along the northern and north-western part of the country, particularly the Punjab. In return, these men – traditionally farmers and dairy-producers – were given agricultural lands. Locking land-grants onto military service was the perverse genius of the British colonial administration that propelled hundreds of thousands of young men, such as Mall Singh, to join the British army and venture into the wide unknown.

The production of ghee and milk back home depended – literally – on their service abroad.[10]

The military-agricultural nexus shaped the texture of everyday life and its narratives; army cantonments sprang up in the heart of rural Punjab. For this community, soldiering was a profession; their life stories became war stories as they grew up in the army and travelled, like their fathers and forefathers, to places such as Cyprus, Egypt, Somalia and China for various 'small' wars – though few knew for whom or what they were fighting, except for those 11 rupees at the end of the month. In 1914, undivided India (comprising today's India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Burma) had the largest voluntary army in the world. And of all the colonies in the British, French and German empires, it contributed the highest number of men to the war. Between August 1914 and December 1919, it sent overseas over a million men, including 622,224 soldiers and 474,789 non-combatants, who sailed to France, East Africa, Mesopotamia, Salonika, Palestine, Suez, Gallipoli, Aden and the Persian Gulf.[11] They were the twin conscripts of colonialism and modernity for it was the conjunction of cheap labour-markets and modern modes of transportation that facilitated their mobilisation. Of them, some 140,000 were sent to France and Flanders where they served between October 1914 and December 1915, when the Indian infantry was withdrawn and sent to Mesopotamia.

The Indians were among the almost four million colonial troops (from French, German and British colonies) who served in the war.[12] Yet, these men were also the most 'silent' of communities – their experiences have remained largely 'incommunicable' not just because of their traumatic nature but, more immediately, because they did not know how to read or write. The erasure of four million lives from the annals of the 'Great war and modern memory' because of their non-literacy – the absence of written testimonies – also exposes the crippling inadequacy of terms such as 'war-*writing*' and 'life-*writing*', with their textual elitist bias. Indeed, to focus narrowly on the scripted and the literary would leave out the experiences of the majority of soldiers across the world even today and indeed through history (Britain had its first literate army only in the Boer War) and reduce their life stories to the ventriloquism of a select literate cognoscenti. In a context where the colonial soldiers did not leave us with an abundance of diaries, journals, poems and memoirs, it is necessary to go beyond the textual to other forms of evidence – the material, the visual and the aural – and establish a dialogue between them. Mall Singh's voice-recording is not just a fresh source but puts pressure on the very scope and definition of 'war-*writing*' and 'life-*writing*' and underlines the absolute need to 'expand the frame' – both in terms of source material and methodology.

Touching things

In the centre of Kolkata, the former capital of British India, stands the Cenotaph-like memorial (Figure 1) to the soldiers killed in the First World War. Surrounded by statues of the leaders of the Indian nationalist movement, the memorial – with its Latin dates and the statues of the English Tommies marked by their Saxon features and Western military uniform – is for the local people a relic of the Great European war. It is also symptomatic of the cultural amnesia that marks Indian metropolitan middle-class memory (except in the Punjab) about the country's own participation in the conflict.

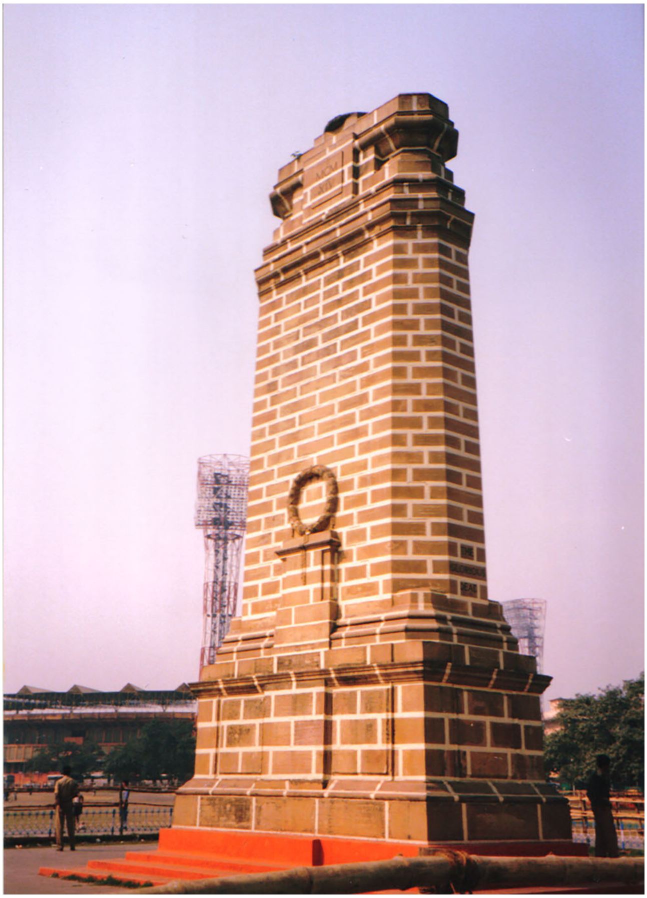

Figure 1. First World War memorial in Calcutta. Copyright Santanu Das.

Yet memories exist silently, stubbornly, privately. The Flemish countryside continues to throw up traces of its Indian past. A couple of years back, a body was exhumed and identified as that of a Gurkha sepoy when a new road was being built near the Irish cemetery outside Ypres; just last year, I visited a barn in the small village of Ouderdam which was used as a casualty-clearing station for the Indian sepoys.[13] Artefacts of the Indian sepoys can be found around the world. In Ypres, I came across *lotas* – brass water-mugs – with the names of sepoys inscribed on them (Figure 2), and on one of them, an etching of a peacock; in the recruiting village of Bondsi in present-day Haryana (part of colonial Punjab), a man turned up during an interview with a cigarette case his great-grandfather, serving in France, had received from Queen Mary in 1914 as a Christmas gift; in the Australian War Memorial, I chanced upon the diary of an Australian private where an Indian sepoy had signed his name in Gurmukhi, Hindi and English.[14]

A search through my own extended family in Kolkata revealed the war memento of Colonel Dr Manindranath Das (Figure 3): his uniform, whistle, razor, brandy bottle, tiffin-box and album, as well as the Military Cross he was awarded for tending to his men under perilous circumstances. Alongside it was also a German shell-case he had found and which had been locked up in the family wardrobe for nearly a century – almost a metaphor for the subterranean way the memory of the First World War functions in India. Das was one among several distinguished doctors

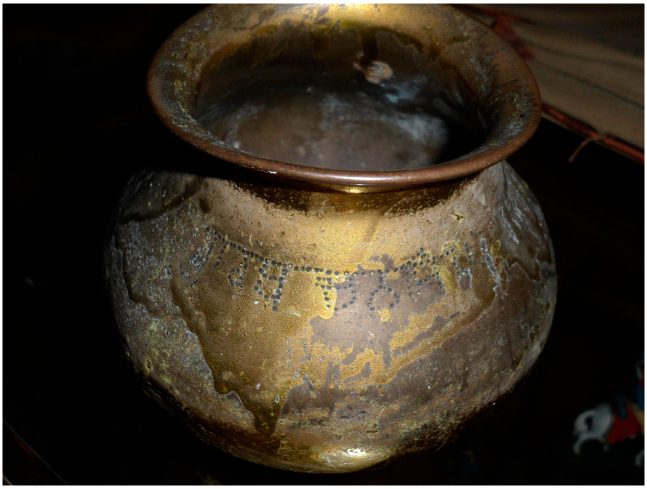

Figure 2. Lota or water vessel. Private collection. Copyright Dominique Faivre and Santanu Das.

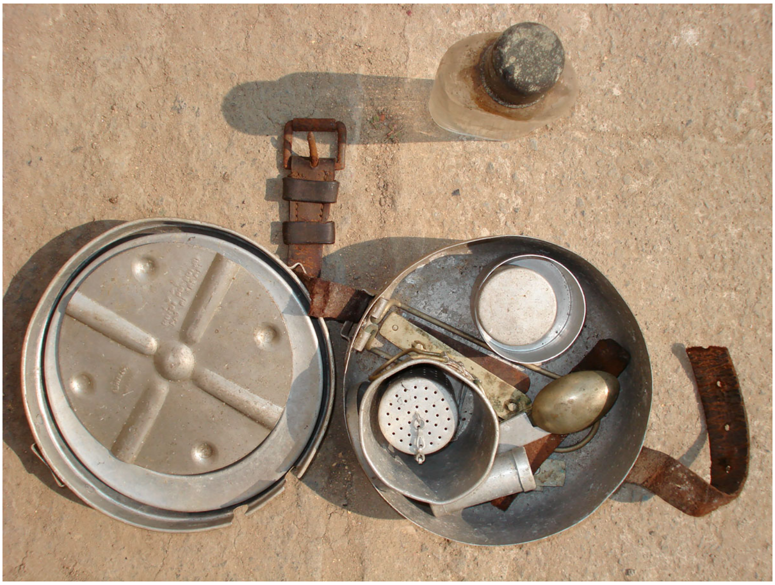

Figure 3. 'Tiffin-box' used by Captain Dr M. N. Roy. Private collection. Copyright Santanu Das.

from the Indian Medical Services who served in Mesopotamia. But most moving of all the artefacts I have come across were those belonging to Jogen Nath Sen in a small archive in the former French colony of Chandernagore in West Bengal: a dog-tag (to identify the injured), a photograph of a young European woman, a 'Book of Friendship' possibly given by this lady (signed as 'Cis'), a small leather wallet and finally a pair of broken glasses, placed next to a photograph of Sen wearing them. The label said: 'Broken and bloodstained glasses belonging to J. N. Sen, Private, West Yorkshire Regiment ... he was the first Bengalee, a citizen of Chandernagore, to be killed in 1914-1918 War' (Figure 4).[15]

Why do these objects touch and move us? Like the crackling voice of Mall Singh, these artefacts have a precious, living quality for they are the archives of touch and intimacy. The inscribed *lota*, the rusty cigarette-box, the diary, the tunic, the tiffin-box, the whistle, the brandy bottle or the broken glasses evoke the body of the user or possessor, hand-prints and face-prints – quiescent but palpable. They not only congeal time but also conceal processes of care. Like its more famous European cousin, the pocket-watch on Edward Thomas's wrist, its hands perpetually fixed at 7.36 am as it recorded the time of its master's death, the broken and bloodied glasses of Sen had borne testimony to the final moments

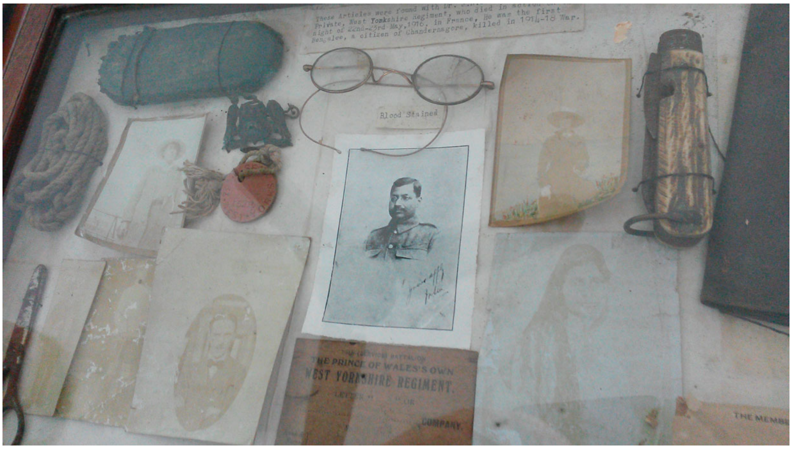

Figure 4. Objects belonging to J. N. Sen. Copyright Chandernagore Museum and Santanu Das.

of his life. The fragility of the glasses intensifies their Ozymandias-like persistence, particularly when seen next to the photograph of Sen wearing them: the effect, like the voice of Mall Sigh, is uncanny. The poignant materiality of the objects results from a constant frisson between presence and loss: a constant reminder both of the sensuousness of the life they had known and of its absence. In his celebrated essay on museum culture, ‘Resonance and Wonder’ (1990), Stephen Greenblatt points out the ‘resonance’ that certain material objects of the past hold for us – the threadbare fabric of an old chair or a vase broken by Marcel Proust – not because of their aesthetic value but because ‘of use, the imprint of the human body on the artefact’. More recently, he has suggested that historical anecdotes and vignettes provide for him the ‘touch of the real’, giving insights into ‘the contact zone’, the ‘charmed space where the *genius literarius* could be conjured into existence’.[16] Similarly, Susan Stewart has noted how, in glass-cases in museums, ‘the contagious magic of touch is replaced by the sympathetic magic of visual representation’ and observes ‘the constant play among deixis, tact, proximity and negation’.[17] Indeed, war-objects and life-objects are sensory palimpsests where multiple bodies, experiences and time-scales touch and rub against each other in a series of fantasised encounters. And yet, the most visceral of encounters are dependent on the surrounding information, on the power of narrative and context.

Consider, for example, the glasses of Jogen Sen. Our responses are largely determined by the information in the label: ‘broken and bloodstained'. But that single label led me to a research-trail and the gradual unravelling of a remarkable life. Jogen Sen, son of a widowed mother, had come to the University of Leeds in 1910; by 1913, he had taken a degree in Engineering and was singing in the choir of the Mill Hill Unitarian Chapel; he volunteered in the opening months of the conflict in the Leeds Pals Battalion and was the only non-white member of the West Yorkshire regiment; he was gunned down on the night of 22 May, 1916, and his death as reported in *The Times* on 4 September 1916 as 'A Bengali Soldier's Death'. During an interview in 1988, Arthur Dalby, a Leeds Pals veteran, remembered his Indian comrade:

> We had a Hindu in our hut, called Jon Sen. He was the best educated man in the battalion and he spoke about seven languages but he was never allowed to be even a lance corporal because in those days they would never let a coloured fellow be over a white man, not in England, but he was the best educated.

More revelations followed in 2001, when a wartime letter surfaced, written by another Leeds Pals comrade. Private Burniston, just before his own death on July 1, 1916, wrote: 'I heard poor Jon Sen had been brought in killed. He was hit in the leg and neck by shrapnel and died almost immediately.'[18] In 2004, almost by accident, I had discovered the glasses of an unknown young man tucked away in a small, dark, dusty glass-cabinet in the Chandernagore archive; exactly ten years later, in 2014, I revisited the archive, armed with the story of his life and a film crew. This time, the glasses were no longer in the cabinet but had been taken out for us. They looked different from what I remembered, transformed undoubtedly by all that I knew now. I lifted with my naked hands Jogen Sen's glasses which looked uncannily like my own – the standard gold-rimmed glasses worn by the Bengali *bhadralok* ('gentlemen') over generations; the process was intimate and unsettling.

Letters

Two photographs from the Imperial War Museum archives accost each other with particular poignancy. The first image is a close-up of hands: a white hand – uniformed, confident and bureaucratic – grasps and guides the fingers of the 'coloured' hand to get a thumb impression. The caption says: 'An Indian, unable to write, is putting his thumb impression on the pay-book'[19] (Figure 5). Insurgent under this touch is not just the body of the participants but the weight of colonial history. This brisk, bureaucratic touch is answered in the second photograph by a more

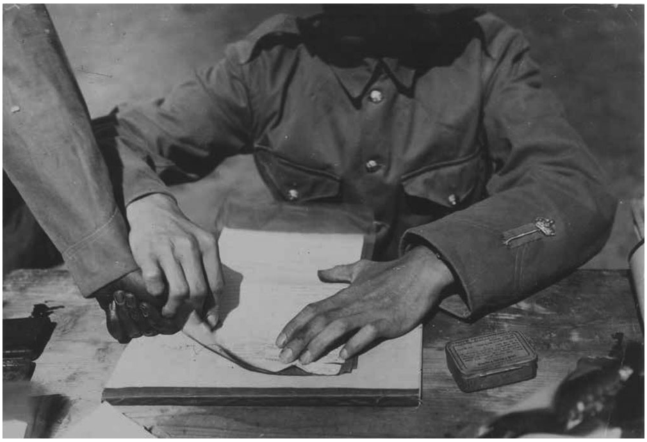

Figure 5. 'An Indian, unable to write, is putting his thumb impression on the pay-book'. © Imperial War Museums.

lingering, tender moment. Here, a wounded (and semi-literate) sepoy dictates to a scribe or a fellow-sepoy a letter (Figure 6).[20] The violent traces of war are all too evident in his wheelchair-bound body; but the clunky

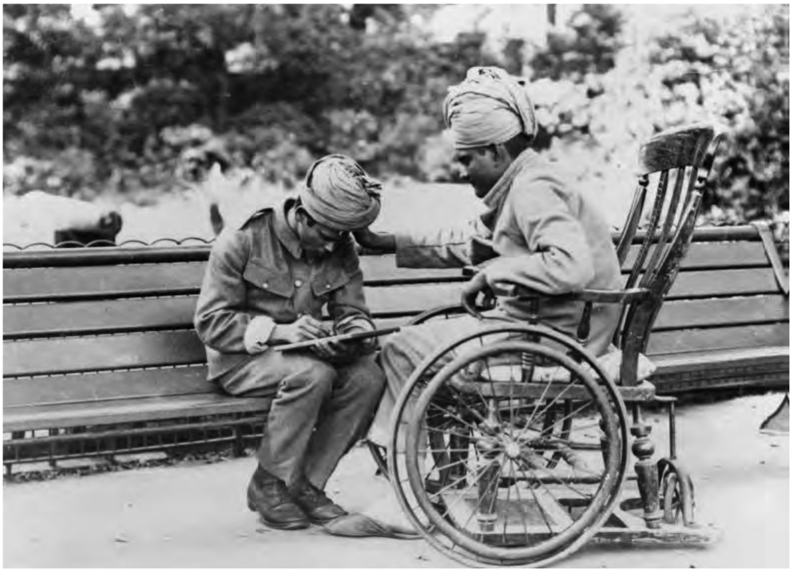

Figure 6. A wounded sepoy dictates a letter to a scribe or fellow-sepoy. © Imperial War Museums.

mechanism is offset as the sepoy leans across to touch the scribe or fellow-sepoy. As opposed to the impersonal rub of fingers in the first photograph, this is a gesture of gratitude, trust and intimacy: thank you for writing, the hand says, as the body fills in the gap left by language. It also provides insights into the collaborative and oral processes through which the letters – our main sources of information – were composed.

The most substantial yet tantalising sources remain the censored versions of these letters by the Indian troops. Between March and April 1915, the Indian soldiers from France were writing around 10,000 letters a week. What have survived are substantial extracts from the letters, as selected and translated by the colonial censors at the time to assess the 'morale' of the Indian troops. Their heavily mediated nature thus undermines their testimonial value but, as David Omissi notes in the introduction to his anthology *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918* (1991), 'The crucial issue is, surely, less what we cannot learn from these letters, than what we can learn from them.'[21]

However, given their multiple sites of textuality – mouth to hand, hand to print, Hindi, Gurmukhi, or Urdu to English, whole to part – these letters put pressure on the very concept of 'authenticity'. Are these letters private or public? How far can one generalise about Indian war experience on the basis of textual fragments? It is tempting to read these letters – incomplete, fragmentary, tantalising – as the sign of the necessarily partial knowledge we have of trench-life, the material trace of the impossibility of ever fully understanding trench experience. By early 1915, the soldiers realised that their letters were being read and censored, and they drew on elaborate codes to avoid censorship, as in the following letter written in April 1915, after the battle of Neuve Chapelle, advising against further recruitment: 'The black pepper which has come from India has all been finished, so now the red pepper is being used. But the red pepper is little used and the black more.'[22] The 'black pepper' refers to the Indian troops while the 'red pepper' refers to the English.

These letters are best read not as transparent envelopes of sepoy experience but as *palimpsests* where underneath accretions by different agencies, one can hear the echoes of the sepoy heart. Neither the transcript of trench experience nor just scribal embellishment, these letters are among the earliest examples we have of South Asian subaltern 'writing' - some of the earliest encounters between textual form and plebeian testimony. Life-writing here begins *as* war-writing; at the same time, these missives from France and Flanders bear testimony to a subaltern history of feeling. One can imagine the range of emotions – thrill, wonder, excitement, fear, terror, horror, homesickness, grief, envy, religious doubts – that the sepoy must have experienced as he encountered new lands, people, cultures. For centuries, he had been travelling as an imperial sentinel – in

Somalia, China, Malta, Egypt – but during the First World War, he wrote for the first time and the processes of colonial censorship paradoxically ensured that extracts from his letters survived. Sepoy letters thus have the distinction of being South Asia's first examples of life-writing from 'below'.

These letters open up a whole new world in First World War history and culture, and cover an extraordinary range of topics and emotions, from an initial sense of wonder at the modernity of France ('The country is very fine, well-watered and fertile … Each house is a sample of Paradise'), to comments on the people, their clothes and manners, or the occasional thrilling account of romance and sexual braggadocio ('The ladies are very nice and bestow their favours upon us freely'), to observations on issues such as gender, education and class distinctions. The letters are haunted by the images of the heart: 'My heart wishes to unburden itself,' 'My heart was day and night fixed on home,' 'My heart is sadly failing,' 'My heart is not at ease, for I can see no way of saving my life.' Perhaps because of the censors, or internal pressures of masculinity, honour and patriarchy, feelings are often not voiced directly; instead, they lead to a thickening of language as emotions such as horror, resignation or homesickness express themselves in images, metaphors and similes:

> The condition of affairs in the war is like leaves falling off a tree, and no empty space remains on the ground. … When we attacked the German trenches we used bayonet and the kukri, and the bullets flew about more thickly than drops of rain.[23] (Amar Singh Rawat (Garhwal Rifles) from Kitchener's Indian Hospital to Dayaram Jhapaliyal in Garhwal, 1 April, 1915)
>
> For God's sake don't come, don't come, don't come to this war in Europe. … Cannons, machine guns, rifles and bombs are going day and night, just like the rains in the month of Sawan. Those who have escaped so far are like the few grains left uncooked in a pot.[24] (Havildar Abdul Rahman (Punjabi Muslim) from France to Naik Rajwali Khan in Baluchistan, 20 May, 1915)
>
> As tired bullocks and bull buffaloes lie down in the month of Bhadon so lies the weary world. Our hearts are breaking, for a year has passed while we have stood to arms without a rest … Germany fights the world with ghastly might, harder to crush than well-soaked grain in the mill. For even wetted grain can be ground in time. … We have bound ourselves under the flag and we must give our bodies.[25] (from Santa Singh, hospital in Brighton, to his uncle in India, 18 August, 1915)

The images of 'dry forest in hot wind' or 'tired bullocks' or 'well-soaked grain' are not just communicative gestures or literary embellishments but repositories of feeling: although they have been transported thousands of miles, images from the agrarian world of the Punjab are used as the men try to make sense of themselves, the world and the war; their traditional cognitive and narrative processes are at once drawn upon and pushed to their limits. Realism is eschewed for the metaphoric, the fantastic, the mythical as they bear testimony to life as *felt*. Whether occurring at the level of experience or representation, these letters, freighted with images, similes and allusions, can be read as Indian *literature* of the trenches: these men may have been non-literate but being non-literate does not mean being non-literary.

The letters are often treated as linguistic bubbles on the dark sea of South Asian plebeian history but they are rooted in the extraordinarily vibrant oral culture of the Punjab. In *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (2010), Farina Mir excavates the remarkably polyglot nature of 'literary formation' of the Punjab through its various sites of *oral* circulation: the recitation of qissas (stories), poetry competitions, the singing of *shabads* (devotional songs) or plays in village fairs and religious festivals.[26] Between 1884 and 1901, when the British army officer Richard Temple decided to collect folktales – the basis of his three-volume *Legends of the Punjab* – he hired 'bards' to *perform* these texts, showing the deep connections between orality and memory. What we see in the letters is the remarkable transition from a vibrant and robust oral culture to a textual culture of letter-writing: a whole generation of men who had grown up listening to stories now begin to draw on those structures as they start to narrate their own lives. This possibly explains why Mall Singh refers to himself in the third person, or begins the way he does: 'There was a man.'

Songs

However, of all the sources, the most haunting are the voice-recordings made in the German POW camps. Around a thousand Indian soldiers were taken prisoners on the Western Front and most of them were kept in the twin camps of Zossen and Wunsdorf, south of Berlin (Figure 7). At both these camps, the POWs were studied, photographed, sketched, and their voices recorded for purposes of academic research. Mall Singh's soulful lament, with which we began, was one of the over 300 South Asian recordings in this 2677-strong archive of audio recordings produced by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission between 29 December 1915 and 19 December 1918.[27]

Masterminded by the philologist Wilhelm Doegen, the Commission comprised thirty academics – including ethnologists, linguists and anthropologists – who toured thirty-one prison camps in Germany and made

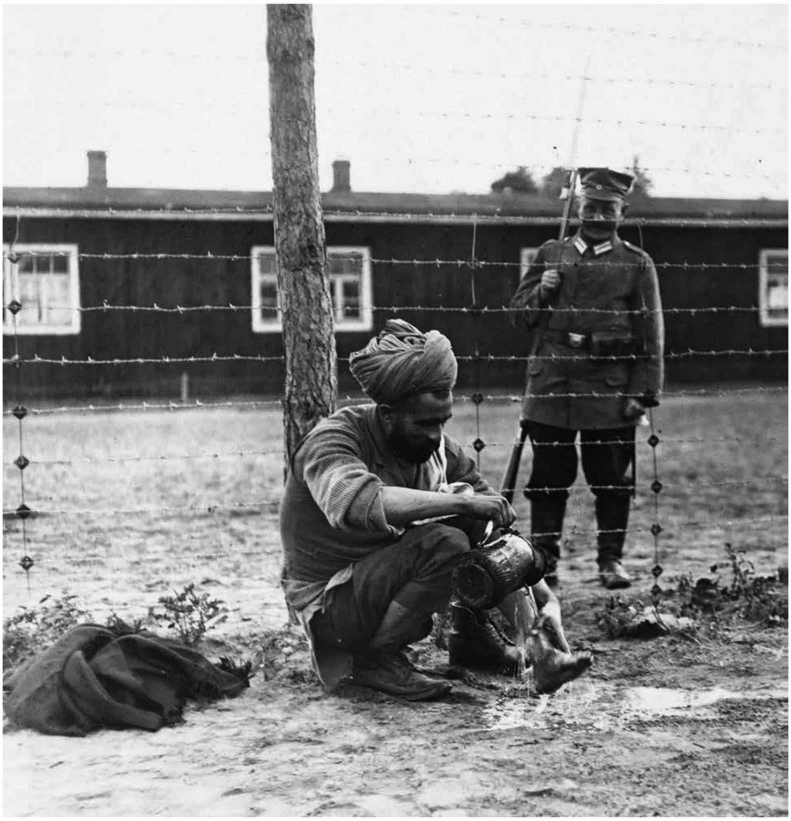

Figure 7. Ram Singh, an Indian POW washes his feet before praying while a German guard watches him in the POW Wünsdorf camp. Copyright Museum Europäischer Kulturen, Berlin.

recordings in approximately 250 languages and dialects. A photograph from a contemporary publication shows Professor Heinrich Luders – a professor of the Oriental seminar in Berlin University, who became quite close to some of the POWs and was concerned about their welfare – interacting with a group of Gurkha sepoys and taking down notes on the language (Figure 8). Yet, the conditions under which many of the sound-recordings were made were harsh: another picture captures the very process. The person whose reading is being recorded is flanked on either side by a German official: a hand on the speaker's shoulders holds him firmly in place so that the voice is projected onto the phonograph funnel while the other hand of the officer holds a sheet of paper from which he is made to read out. A popular text the soldiers were often given to read was the 'Parable of the

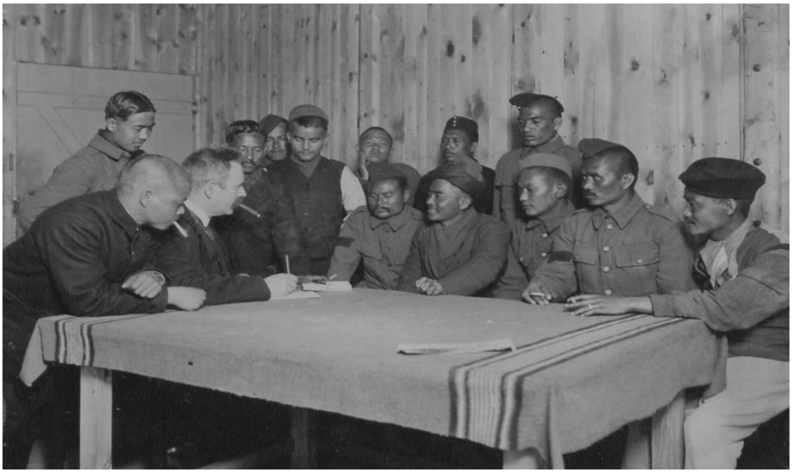

Figure 8. Professor Heinrich Lüders from Berlin University with a group of Gurkha prisoners at the Wünsdorf camp from *Unsere Feinde* (Stuttgart, 1916).

Prodigal Son'. If Friday had his tongue cut out in Coetzee's *Foe*, these prisoners seem to have been muted in the very act of speaking, forced to read out from a text given to them by their captors. But Mall Singh, managing to bypass authoritarian control and communicating to us his plaintive message, seems to defy such formulation: *can* the subaltern then speak?

In her celebrated essay on subaltern speech (first published in 1988 and revised subsequently), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak moves from her critique of the models of Western subjectivity to a note of 'passionate lament', as she tells us the story of Bhubaneswari Bhaduri, with its combination of revolutionary nationalism, suicide and the tragic failure of communication, and makes the controversial claim: 'The subaltern cannot speak.'[28] In this frisson – the over-articulate poignancy of the story brushing against the claim made in the concluding statement – lay the power of the essay, and its seemingly paradoxical nature. Has not Bhubaneswari Bhaduri spoken most powerfully through her dead, menstruating, bleeding body? Of the various responses this essay has spawned, Rajeshwari Sunderajan provides one of the most acute and corrective expositions:

> [Bhubaneswari] serves as the figural example of the subaltern who cannot – but in fact, does speak. 'Cannot' in this context signifies not speech's absence but its failure. . . . In other words and more generally, the locution 'Can the Subaltern speak' is an invitation to rethink the relation between the figural and the literal.[29]

The plangent materiality of the German POW sound-recordings seems to push this differential relation between the literal and the figural to a crisis-point. Here at long last, or so it seems, is the unmediated subaltern voice: archival recovery, the shellac recording, peasant consciousness and wartime captivity touch and blend, speaking to us powerfully across a century. Who was Mall Singh addressing, as he spoke into the funnel of the recording machine? 'By speaking', writes Spivak, 'I was obviously talking about a transaction between the speaker and the listener.'[30] Forced to address a recording machine rather than a responsive individual and locked at the site of failed communication – 'not speech's absence but its failure' – Mall Singh's voice has echoed through the corridors of First World War history for almost a century in its desperate attempt to find a listener. Mall Singh could not speak, even though he spoke so urgently; or, to push Spivak's formulation further, he seems to speak to us so urgently today precisely because he could not speak then.

Spivak's troubling question – 'With what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?' – becomes freshly resonant in the context of these extraordinary recordings.[31] Of the 2677 sound-recordings in the Archive, around 135 recordings seem to be that of South Asian prisoners. The languages used are Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Marathi, Nepalese, Khas, Gurkhali, Bengali and English. They range from minimal linguistic exercises such as the 1.09-minute recording of Karamar Ali reading out the letters of the Bengali alphabet to Bela Sigh describing his arrival in Marseilles to the 3.20-minute-long speech of Mohammed Hossin (Hussain) narrating the story of his capture by a German ship and of his life in the POW camp.[32] Can they be examined alongside the letters to understand more fully the intimate and affective history of these men? To uncover a subaltern history of emotions from so aggressive an ethnological and propagandist an archive is to stretch the practice of reading the colonial archive against the grain to its limit. Any reading has to be necessarily tentative and incomplete. But one wonders why any particular story was selected above others by these narrators? Of course it depended on what the sepoys remembered or wrote down but often these men chose parables and tales that echoed their own predicament. Thus, the story narrated by a sepoy of 'a parrot who died shivering with cold' gathers special poignancy when we realise that it was recorded in December 1916 in the Wünsdorf camp which had a mortality rate were as high as 18 per cent. Or consider the following audio recording:

> Swan and Heron became friends. Swan lived in his own homeland but Heron was staying in Swan's homeland away from his own homeland. Heron used to feel nostalgic about his own homeland. Swan asked him the reason for his unhappiness. Swan said to

> Heron: ‘why are you unhappy and why don’t you eat anything?’ Heron replied that he has received news about his homeland and was therefore nostalgic. Swan thought that perhaps Heron’s home was far better than Swan’s homeland and that was why he was missing it. Swan concluded by saying that one’s nation (vatan) is very dear to one, it may not be very good, but even then, one is desirous to return to one’s own land.[33]

Is it at once an ingenuous plea to the outside world and a desperate form of life-narrative to articulate its own predicament?

An important clue is provided by the German scholar and linguist Heinrich Lüders who closely studied the Indian troops at Wünsdorf.[34] Lüders observed:

> Certainly, the majority did not have the confidence to tell a coherent story. Instead they preferred to sing a song, either alone or accompanied by others. … Old verses are constantly altered, extended and copied until something utterly new emerges. The singer is at the same time always to a greater or lesser degree the poet, and people know that too; ‘if I want to sing a song, I make one up’, one of them admitted.[35]

Indeed, one such song was recorded on 6 June, 1916 – one of the most heart-breaking of testimonies in the whole pantheon of First World War life stories. All that is known about it is that it was sung by ‘Jasbahadur Rai’, a 23-year-old Gurkha sepoy from Sikkim/Darjeeling, and that it was a ‘Gurkha song, own words’. Jasbahadur must have died shortly afterwards for his grave can be found outside the Zossen camp. In the final part of this article, it is to him that I would like to turn.

The song is recoded in two instalments; here is the first one:[36]

Nepali transcription	English translation
Sisai kholā badhi jyān āyo bagāyo bulbule	With the rising of the Sisai river, I came, carried in its bubbling flow
Na ḍuī jānu na basī āunu, man rūnchha durūrū	Neither can we fly away, nor can we arrive while staying put, the heart cries, sobbing
Hai suna suna, sun lāune didī, man rūnchha durūrū	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing sister, the heart cries, sobbing
Pāniko bulbul, yo manko chulbul, bujhāū̃chhau katin din	The bubbling of water, the restlessness of this heart, how many days will it take to console yourself?

Nepali transcription	English translation
Hai suna suna, sun lāune kānchhī, bujhāũchhau katin din	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing little one, how many days will it take to console yourself?
Dui paisa bache tabalmar sigret salkāula mārchisle	If I save two cents, I'll light a Tabalmar cigarette with matches
Hindustān pāri, ke rāmro pahāḍ, ghā̃saiko khaliyo	Across Hindustan, what beautiful hills, storage places for fodder
Baseko pirtī, chutāunam bhayo, man bā̃dha baliyo	The love we've had, we now have to break apart, bind your heart and be strong
Hai suna suna, sun lāune chari man bā̃dha baliyo	Listen, oh listen, gold-wearing birdie, bind your heart and be strong

Like Mall Singh's, the song is interrupted by awkward pauses and sharp intakes of breath. Yet there is a passionate intensity to the singing, a compulsive need to tell: the voice rises and falls, high-pitched, desolate, undeterred. Traumatised by his experience and perhaps haunted by the knowledge of his approaching death, Jasbahadur turns an ethnographical experiment into one of the most haunting examples of life-narrative.

In both metre and melody, Jasbahadur draws on a subgenre of Nepali song called *jheyru*, which was traditionally a feminine lament. The refrain 'Hai suna suna' ('Listen, oh listen', lines 3, 5, 9), Ancient Mariner-like, draws the listener into the song through an intricate sonic structure, combining alliteration (*suna suna sun laune*) with a pattern of repetition with variation centring around the addressee – 'didi' (elder sister), 'kanchi' (little girl), 'chari' (birdie). In the centre of this masculinist universe is its silent interlocutor – a little girl – anxious, weeping, disconsolate; the pain of separation is built into the very structure of narration. Water (*pani*) courses through the song, first entering as memory ('Sisai', a river in Nepal, and then the sea journey) but soon seeps into its every pore as bodily fluid ('cries, sobbing') before being translated back to water for purification of the dying body ('will you wash my body'): memory, metaphor and mourning are knitted together through onomatopoeia and rhyme ('paniko bulbul, ei monko chulbul': the bubbling of the water, the restlessness of the heart) as sound becomes the sense. Cigarettes and matchsticks rub against mountains and flowers, Belgium and Germany are brought together, the year of the war's eruption is remembered through sense perception. Jasbahadur is the First World War poet par excellence for he records history not as grand narrative or even cultural memory but as what Raymond Williams calls 'a structure of feeling', as in the poems of European soldier-poets. Blurring the boundaries between song, reportage, lament, j'accuse, prison-narrative and compulsive testimony, it is also the birth of life-writing as war-writing while a local Nepali genre – the *jheyru* – is called upon to bear lyric testimony to historical trauma.

In her inspired study *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (2010), Hermione Lee notes that the challenge for the biographer lies in the art of evocation rather than narration, in being able to touch life at several points rather than try to capture its complete arc. What life-writing does is to rescue from oblivion not the entire narrative but certain vital moments: 'bodily sensations and memories', 'moments of physical shock' or the 'left-over parts of a life'.[37] The method that Lee suggests is more like the art of the short story than that of the *bildungsroman* – an aesthetics of fugitive fragments. As signalled in her very title, there is an insistent harping on the body, the material, the senses:

> What makes biography so curious and endlessly absorbing is that through all the documents and the letters, the context and the witnesses, the conflicting opinions and the evidence of the work, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life: the young Dickens, bright-eyed and sprightly in a crimson velvet waistcoat, Rimbaud dust-covered and scrawny or Joyce with a black felt hat, thick glasses and a cigar.[38]

If Lee's vignettes are still largely from the realm of written – diaries, letters, novels – what these semi-literate sepoys force us to do is to go beyond the textual. What the *lota*, the blood-stained glasses, the cigarette-box, the scrawl on the diary, the mutilated letters, the hesitant, faltering voice of Mall Singh or the compulsive singing of Jasbahadur Rai evoke – when assembled, matched and made to bear pressure on each other – is not the completeness of one life, one story; instead, they help us to *sense* the life of a whole war-ravaged community whose 'body parts' – like scattered limbs of the Egyptian god Osiris or the Hindu goddess Kali – lie strewn all across the globe.

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Press in 2017 and some of the research is showcased in the short YouTube video *From Bombay to the Western Front* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6stybO5v7SY). This article shares some archival and research material with another recent article of mine – 'Indian Sepoy Experience in Europe, 1914-1918: Archive, Language and Feeling' in *Twentieth Century British History* (August, 2014), but the argument and focus of the present piece is different.

Disclosure statement

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Notes

1 Mall Singh, Voice-recording, Humboldt University Sound Archive, PK 619. Translation from Punjabi by Arshdeep Brar.

2 'The Fall of Hyperion', in *The Poems of John Keats*, ed. Miriam Allot (London: Longman, 1970), pp. 657–8.

3 See Gillian Beer's wonderful reading of Keats's hand in 'Four Bodies on the Beagle', in *Open Fields: Science in Cultural Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), p. 14, which has influenced my understanding of Mall Sing's voice.

4 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), p. 5.

5 Nancy, *Listening*, pp. 2–3.

6 These archival sound recordings are still largely unknown. For the fullest record on the German POWS at Wünsdorf, see Ravi Ahuja, Heike Liebau, and Franziska Roy (eds), *'When the War Began, We Heard of Several Kings': South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2011), particularly Britta Lange's essay on 'South Asian Soldiers and German Academics', pp. 149–86.

7 See James Campbell, 'Combat Gnosticism: The Ideology of First World War Criticism', *New Literary History*, 30 (1) (1999), pp. 203–15.

8 For a different approach, where I *do* draw upon published memoirs and literary texts, see my essay on 'Touching Semi-literate Lives', in Maria Dibattista and Emily Whitman (eds), *Modernism and Autobiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014). Also see my article 'Indian Sepoy Experience in Europe, 1914–1918: Archive, Language and Feeling' in *Twentieth Century British History* (August 2014) which shares some archival material with the present article, but the focus and argument is different.

9 Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Chatto, 2005), p. 28.

10 For military histories of India and the First World War, see David Omissi, *The Sepoy and the Raj, The Indian Army, 1860-1940* (London: Macmillan, 1994), Gordon Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches: The Indian Corps on the Western*

Front 1914-1918 (Staplehurst, UK: Spellmount, 1999), and George Morton Jack, *The Indian Army on the Western Front: Indian Expeditionary Force to France and Belgium in the First World War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); for socio-cultural history, see Santanu Das, *Indians on the Western Front 1914-1918* (Paris: Gallimard, 2014) and the chapters on the First World War in Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), and Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of the Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

11 The above figures are from *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire During the Great War, 1914-1920* (London: His Majesty's Stationery Office, 1920), p. 777 and reproduced in *India's Contribution to the Great War* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, India, 1923), p. 79.

12 For figures and context, see Santanu Das, *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 4 (pp. 1–32).

13 Interview with Paul Jacob for the documentary *From Bombay to the Western Front: Indian Soldiers in the Great War* (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6stybO5v7SY).

14 Interview with collector Domique Faivre, France and villagers in Haryana for Radio 4 programme on 'Recruitment and Resistance', 15 October 2014 (http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b04l0zq5); Charles Stinson, 'Diary', Australian War Memorial, Canberra, PR84/066.

15 J. N. Sen, Artefacts at the Dupleix Museum, Chundernagore, West Bengal. These archival finds as well as freshly discovered documents at Leeds have now inspired a BBC documentary on J. N. Sen (http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-31761904).

16 Stephen Greenblatt, *Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1990), p. 172 (pp. 161–83); 'Touch of the Real', *Representations*, No. 59 (Summer 1997), p. 29 (pp. 14–29).

17 Susan Stewart, *Poetry and the Fate of the Senses* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2002), pp. 174–5.

18 All this information can be found on the web page dedicated to him under the Leeds Pals Battalion website (http://www.leeds-pals.com/soldiers/jogendra-sen), accessed 16 February 2015. In a happy and rare coincidence, I was speaking about Jon Sen and showing pictures of the glasses in a talk at Leeds when I was interrupted mid-sentence by a gentleman in the audience who told me that the subject of enquiry was mentioned just outside the lecture-hall in the Leeds Memorial! There has recently been a whole project on Jogen Sen by a group of scholars at Leeds, and BBC Yorkshire is doing a short documentary on him.

19 Imperial War Museum (henceforth abbreviated as IWM) Photograph Archives.

20 IWM Photograph Archives.

21 Omissi, *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), p. 9. Also see Omissi, 'Europe Through Indian Eyes', *The English Historical Review*, 122 (496) (2007), pp. 371–396; Visram, *Asians in Britain* (London: Pluto, 2002), pp. 169–401.

22 Mausa Ram from Kitchener's Indian Hospital to Naik Dabi Shahai, April 1915, *Censor of Indian Mails 1914-1918*, British Library, India Office Records (abbreviated henceforth as IOR), L/MIL/5/825/2, 208.

23 IOR, L/MIL/5/825/2, 245.

24 IOR, L/MIL/5/825/3, 394.

25 IOR, L/MIL/5/825/5, 758.

26 Farina Mir, *The Social Space of Language: Vernacular Culture in British Colonial Punjab* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), p. 17.

27 See Jürgen Mahrenholz, 'Ethnographic Audio Recordings' and Britta Lange, 'Academic Research on (Coloured) Prisoners of War', in Dominiek Dendooven and Piet Chielens (eds), *World War I: Five Continents in Flanders* (Ypres: Lannoo, 2008), pp. 153–65, and Britta Lange, 'South Asian Soldiers and German Academics', in *'When the War Began, We Heard of Several Kings': South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany*, pp. 149–86.

28 This was first published as Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988). My references are to its reprint in Rosalind Morris (ed.), *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), abbreviated hereafter as *CSS*.

29 Rajeswari Sunderajan, 'Speaking of (Not) Hearing: Death and the Subaltern' in *CSS*, p. 112.

30 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Talk' in The Spivak Reader eds. Donna Laudry and Gerald Maclean (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p. 289.

31 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in *CSS*, p. 255.

32 Mohammed Hossin (Hussain), 'Story from the Gull', Lautarchiv, Humboldt University, PK1151.

33 Lautarchiv, Humboldt University, PK828.

34 See Lange, 'South Asian Soldiers and German Academics', p. 157.

35 Heinrich Lüders, 'Die Gurkhas', in Wilhelm Doegen (ed.), *Unter fremden Volkern. Eine neue Volkerkunde* (Berlin: Stollberg, 1925), p. 135 (pp. 126–39). I use the translation quoted in Lange, 'South Asian Soldiers'.

36 Jasbahadur Rai, recorded on 6 June 1916, Lautarchiv PK 307. I am very grateful to Anne Stirr for the translation.

37 Lee, *Body Parts*, p. 4.

38 Ibid., p. 3.