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Altered Allegiances: Indian Soldiers, Non-Combatants, and Revolutionaries during the Balkan and First World Wars

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Abstract

At the beginning of the 20th century, in the years encompassing the First World War, diverging views on colonial rule and securing self-rule were spreading in the Indian subcontinent. When the First World War broke out, many leading revolutionaries encouraged allegiance to the British in their war effort as a means of proving capability for self-rule. Nevertheless, among Indians from different social classes, allegiances were mitigated or reified according to various situations that arose, including the treatment of Indians under British command on the battlefield and official British attitudes towards the Ottoman Caliphate before and after the war. By examining the life work of Dr. Mukhtar Ansari, who led a medical mission from India to the Ottoman Empire during the Balkan Wars, and that of the Indian sepoys in Mesopotamia in 1915-1916, this paper explores the changed and bargained allegiances affected by religious, ethnic, and colonial contexts.

Keywords

allegiance, Indian soldiers, self-rule, Mesopotamia, First World War

Introduction

During the initial stages of the Balkan Wars in 1912, Dr. Mukhtar Ansari, who was trained in medicine and surgery in London and had worked at Charing Cross Hospital, led a medical mission from India to the Ottoman Empire to provide medical aid to wounded Turkish soldiers and Ottoman refugees. Although only one of such missions, Dr. Ansari's was decidedly the most popular, given the detailed correspondence that he maintained with Muhammad Ali, the mission organizer and editor of the Delhi-based newspaper, *The Comrade*. *The Comrade*, which published the exchange, wrote to the "Indian Mussulman", with the aim of supplementing local knowledge and advice with connections to coreligionists outside of the subcontinent.¹ One such editorial found in the newspaper reads thus:

Once more we see the Indian Mussulman showing unmistakably his 'extraterritorial patriotism' and illustrating the living force of a religion... His heart throbs in unison with the Moor of Fez who sees his country passing into alien hands, with the Persian of Teheran who feels the grip of the Russian Cosack on his throat, and with the Turk of Stamboul who has to watch an act of shameless brigandage with impotent rage... But he need abandon no jot of his fervor simply because he owes allegiance to a European and a Christian sovereign whose rule is a blessing that Providence has vouchsafed to him in order to work out his material and moral salvation. His loyalty is not such feeble stuff that the least political disturbance in Asia or Europe in which one party is Moslem and another Christian could effect it adversely.²

This editorial was published in 1911, a year before Dr. Ansari's mission. By his return from the Ottoman Empire, frustrations with British colonial allegiance seemed to be more apparent. One can attribute this to knowledge of the experiences of Muslim communities elsewhere, at the hands of 'Christian Europe':

the bombardment of Meshed (Mashhad) by the Russians, the descent of Italy on Tripoli, the onslaught of the Balkan Allies on Turkey, with all their attendant horrors, have made the Moslems of India a changed people. They are not what they were two years ago.³

¹ Burak Akçapar, *People's Mission to the Ottoman Empire: M.A. Ansari and the Indian Medical Mission, 1912-13* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2015), 2-4, 133.

² "Great Britain and the Moslem Kingdoms," *The Comrade* (Delhi), Oct. 14, 1911 in Mohamed Ali and Ra'is Aḥmad Ja'frī (eds.), *Selections from Mohammad Ali's Comrade* (Lahore: Mohammad Ali Academy, 1965).

³"Indian Mussalmans and Pan-Islamism," *The Comrade* (Delhi), June 14, 1913 in Ali and Ja'frī (eds.), *Selections*.

Undercurrents of resistance were beginning to stir in India, but in an undefined form. In late December of 1912, curiously between the first editorial and in the middle of those two years that the second editorial mentions, an assassination attempt was made by revolutionaries on Lord Hardinge, the then Viceroy and Governor-General of India. Dr. Ansari condemned the attack in a letter back to India and submitted the write-up of the telegram that he sent to the viceroy to convey his “sympathy and deep concern.”⁴ Many within *The Comrade* community were sympathetic to Lord Hardinge’s leadership and likewise condemned the attack.⁵

However, it is still difficult to reconcile this assassination attempt with the contents of an interview that Lord Hardinge gives at the end of his executive term in 1916, in the middle of the First World War. In the interview, he cites the offering of Indian resources and people to the British war effort during the First World War as demonstrative of *absolute* loyalty among the Indian people. Any minor dissent he associated with marginal anarchists with no real recourse to organized revolution. This anarchy he chalks up to German or American influence, either German invocation aimed at provoking Muslims and colonial subjects to revolt against imperialism, or revolutionists like the Ghadr party returning from the US and Britain. Lord Hardinge considered the help of the Indians to be invaluable to the British crown and applauded their efforts and unquestionable allegiance. He says in the interview:

To put the matter in a nutshell, had India been as disloyal as the Germans would doubtless have liked it to be, our policy would have been tantamount to an evacuation of our Indian Empire... Yet again, in every case where attempts were made to suborn Sepoys [soldiers] of Indian regiments from their allegiance, information was given to the Government by the soldiers themselves.⁶

Here he neatly references the allegiance of the soldiers at a time when the number of British personnel in India was at an all-time low, given their transfers to areas of active duty. Perhaps Hardinge’s comments were timed and calculated to influence public opinion towards allegiance to the Crown. Hardinge further notes that the “educated and political classes” suspended political controversies for the sake of the war and cooperated with the British government as citizens in the empire.⁷

⁴ Dr. Mukhtar A. Ansari, letter to editor, December 30, 1912 in Akçapar, *People’s Mission*, 240.

⁵ Akçapar, *People’s Mission*, 222-223; Mushirul Hasan, *M.A. Ansari: Gandhi’s Infallible Guide* (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2010).

⁶ The London Correspondent of the New York Times, *Loyal India: An Interview with Lord Hardinge of Penshurst* (London: Sir Joseph Causton & Sons, Dec. 8, 1916), 5, 8.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 11.

Ironically, the experiences of Indians abroad, particularly those of the “educated and political classes” in the years leading up to the First World War, indicate that they were often not treated as first-class citizens of the empire in the colonies—South Africa being a prime example. One has merely to read the autobiography of Gandhi to get a glimpse of this in practice.⁸ And yet, Gandhi, who himself led an Ambulance Corps for the British in the Boer War in South Africa, was a leading proponent of Indians participating in the British war effort during the First World War (primarily in non-combatant roles).⁹ Hardinge, in his short interview, emphasizes a dynamic of mutual trust that enabled the Indians to contribute wholeheartedly to the British war effort and hints at the possibility of some reward, along the lines of self-governance, for their efforts. It is not hard, then, to imagine that there were alternative motives at work among the Indian educated elite as well.

The polite tension that comprised attitudes of these Indians and British towards each other, at least in speeches on the ground in India, resulted in initial volunteerism by Indians joining the British army. Indian princes, also, to show allegiance, sent recruits from their villages to the Indian regiments, whether these men came voluntarily or not.¹⁰ The British army itself did what it could to encourage recruitment: racial and ethnic equality among the troops was a proposed incentive. This change was greeted with warmth, as Indians potentially saw a day in the future when they would be viewed as capable of self-governance. Recruitment efforts led by Indians like Gandhi were actually undertaken with this in mind; Indians, in fighting with Britain would in effect, “earn” the right to Home Rule.¹¹ Because many Indians saw the war as a way to demonstrate equality by literally fighting on the same battlefield with the colonial power, the British were granted a temporary reprieve from major

⁸ “I saw that South Africa was no country for a self-respecting Indian, and my mind became more and more occupied with the question as to how this state of things may be improved.” Mohandas K. Gandhi and Mahadev H. Desai, *An Autobiography: The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (Waiheke Island: Floating Press, 2009), 252.

⁹ “Suffice it to say that my loyalty to the British rule drove me to participation with the British in that [Boer] war. I felt that, if I demanded rights as a British citizen, it was also my duty, as such, to participate in the defence of the British Empire. I held then that India could achieve her complete emancipation only within and through the British Empire. So I collected to gather as many comrades as possible, and with very great difficulty got their services accepted as an ambulance corps. The average Englishman believed that the Indian was a coward, incapable of taking risks of looking beyond his immediate self-interest... There came a greater awakening amongst [the Indian community], and the feeling that Hindus, Musalmans, Christians, Tamilians, Gujaratis and Sindhis were all Indians and children of the same motherland took deep root amongst them.” Gandhi and Desai, *An Autobiography*, 507-510.

¹⁰ Sonya O. Rose, “The Politics of Service and Sacrifice in WWI Ireland and India,” *Twentieth Century British History* 25, No. 3 (2014), 378.

¹¹ “I knew the difference of status between an Indian and an Englishman... If we would improve our status through the help and co-operation of the British, it was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their hour of need.” Gandhi and Desai, *An Autobiography*, 819-820.

revolutionary activity in India for the duration of the war. Any claim to trustful relationship has to be couched in this setting, where stirrings of revolution were already sweeping throughout India, particularly as Indians became aware of their status within the empire and sought to demonstrate their merit.

Therefore, I am skeptical about the claims of Hardinge that the Indian subjects, both the educated elite and the non-elite, were willing to provide support to their colonial leaders unswervingly and without reward. General Charles V. F. Townshend of the 6th Division in Mesopotamia would claim that this relationship of “mutual trust” to be a far cry from the realities of warfare in the battles that engaged his combined force of British and Indian troops. Based on his memoirs, the relationship was far more complicated. At one point, during the siege of Kut, his concern about the loyalty of his Indian soldiers, particularly those of a Muslim background, became so great that he “ordered Brigadier-Generals to mix Mohamedans and Hindus on all outlying picquet and outpost work and to take whatever other measures their experience of Indian troops might indicate.”¹² In the tradition of shifting blame, Townshend indicates that it is the army of which he was in command that facilitated his regiments’ defeat at Kut.

The want of British officers, owing to heavy casualties in Indian units at the Battle of Ctesiphon, was a most dangerous and serious factor in the defence of Kut... Had the system of the Indian Service embodied a full complement of British officers on the scale of a British line regiment, as in the days of the East India Company, I should never have had the least doubt in my mind as to the result of any attack whatever.¹³

Moreover, he writes angrily about the actions of some of the Indian soldiers who were in his regiments and the fear that he had about their defection to the side of the Ottomans for religious or duplicitous reasons. In defense of Townshend’s claims, this paper proposes that he had legitimate reason to add the conduct and actions of the Indian soldiers, at least from the 6th division, as reasons for his humiliating defeat, linking the actions of the Indian soldiers to mitigated allegiance.

I argue in this paper that the motives of the Indian soldiers were, in fact, very different from those of the British, motives that gave them the strength to fight valiantly and endure terrible experiences, but also gave them the freedom to leave the action and relinquish their allegiance when the time called for it. The unswerving loyalty that Hardinge speaks of was not to the British for the sake of their relationship, but perhaps to the Indian people, facilitated through a desire to prove themselves capable of independence. Sometimes, this was demonstrated by greater allegiance to a religious or cultural community that

¹² Charles Townshend, *My Campaign in Mesopotamia* (London: T. Butterworth, 1920), 295.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 221.

translated into the motley environs of the battlefield. The desertions and actions that Townshend speaks of, then, were not signs of absolute disloyalty or conspiracy, but evidence of Indian soldiers' own agencies and set of priorities. Racial theory, social stratification, and justification for imperial control were challenged in the actions of the soldiers themselves. It is useful, then, to pose the question that was asked by Ottoman captors of Indian captives after Townshend's surrender at Kut, "What is your gain in this war?"¹⁴

One can begin to ask this question by looking at religion, Islam in particular. Further research would be able to identify distinctive actions within the context of war between those who identified as Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, Parsi, Christian, etc., but these are beyond the scope of this paper. While many of the key actors in the story are of Muslim background and Islamists served as a topic of criticism by Townshend, it is not fair to designate the religion as the only source of contention indicated here. Strains of thought linked to independence, including that of Muslim, Hindu, Sikh, etc. cooperation were also very much present at this time. Dr. Ansari's legacy, as we will examine later, hints at this.

Recruitment for War

Official records of Indian Involvement in the war indicate that "up to 31 December 1919 [Indian soldiers in the British army amounted to] 877,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants". Mesopotamia was one of the major theatres for Indian troops, "some 588,717, including 7,812 officers, 287,753 other ranks and 293,152 non-combatants (often forming porter and labour corps)—served there."¹⁵ At the onset of the war, the general attitude in India towards the war, and the King of England's message on September 8, 1914 thanking the Indian people for their support, was overwhelmingly positive.¹⁶

On the battlefields of Mesopotamia, the discourse concerning the Indian sepoys was markedly different. Concerning the siege of Kut, the battles leading up to it and the capture afterwards, General Townshend presents in his memoirs, entitled *My Campaign in Mesopotamia*, a disparaging view of the average native troops that had been brought from India to be under his command. By the time of the Siege of Kut, he states that many of his troops were largely untrained recruits. However, in this memoir and others produced by British officers, "the uneven performance of the Indian Corps is understood

¹⁴ Santanu Das, "Indians at Home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: Towards an Intimate History," in Santanu Das (ed.), *Race, Empire and First World War Writing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 81, referencing and translating the diary of Sisir Sarbadhikari, *Abhi Le Baghdad* (Kolkata: privately printed, 1957), 158.

¹⁵ Das, "Indians," 70, 78.

¹⁶ Santanu Das, "Ardour and Anxiety: Politics and Literature in the Indian Homefront" in Heike Liebau (ed.), *The World in World Wars: Experiences, Perceptions and Perspectives from Africa and Asia* (Leiden: Brill 2010).

not in terms of inadequate military training but instead attributed to the Indians' 'natural inferiority'.¹⁷

General Townshend's memoirs, however, must be read critically. They were written after one of the most disastrous events in British history, and after the post-war revolutionary events had begun to take place in India. They could be interpreted as an apology written in defense of his actions and those of his forces in Mesopotamia. The writings could therefore be understood as an attempt to shift blame from his hands to another's. His comments regarding the Indian soldiers must then be understood with this in mind. Texts contemporary to Townshend's reference the experiences of the Indian sepoys in Mesopotamia, including the issues of contention that Townshend indicates (desertions, self-mutilation, etc.). Letters sent from the Western Front in France speak of the actions of the 15th Lancers, who were supposed to join Townshend's troops in Mesopotamia, but had refused to fight. All of this will be looked at in reference to India's desire to attain autonomous rule by participation in the European war. One such letter from a sepoy in France, after telling of the mutiny of the 15th Lancers (discussed later) and the greatness of England, writes to his fellow countrymen in the Punjab in this vein, "Add to the renown of your race! You will never have so good an opportunity for doing so."¹⁸

The War

The tensions that led to the onset of World War I erupted in the assassination of Archduke Franz Ferdinand in June 1914. Germany then, backing Austria-Hungary, began its advance west across Europe, passing through Belgium and entering France. It was there that French and British troops stopped the advance of German troops on the Western Front. Germany also sought to proceed east and invade Russia, but Russia fought back on the Eastern Front. However, Russia's participation came to an end in 1917 with an armistice signed with Germany after the revolution led by the Bolsheviks.

Germany, recognizing the vulnerabilities of the Allied Powers, tried to incite their subjects to revolt and exert self-rule. It also tried to expand the theatres of war such that Allied forces would be stretched thin. The Allied troops, then, would need more manpower in order to fight well on the major fronts and other theatres. As the Ottoman Empire acquiesced to join sides with Germany in October 1914, the Allied powers felt the need to, or felt justified in their attempts to, enter Mesopotamia to protect their interests. As previously stated, although Indians fought in France, many of the Indian troops were relegated to fighting in Ottoman lands, introducing complications only later realized, and it is there that we pick up Townshend's account.

¹⁷ Das, "Indians," 77

¹⁸ David Omissi (ed.), "Letter 259, Ressaïdar Khann Alam Khan to Jemadar Sirdar Sultan Khan (Punjabi Muslim, 18th Lancers, France) 4th March 1916," *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-18* (London: Macmillan, 1999), 159.

Indian Expeditionary Force D, primarily consisting of the 16th Indian Brigade of the 6th Division of the Indian Army along with the 18th Brigade, victoriously occupied the city of Basra on November 21, 1914 by traveling up the Shatt al-Arab. Pleased with its rapid success, which marked the first victory of British troops in the Great War, the India Office in London and the Government of India actively encouraged the advancement of Force D to Qurna, Ahwaz, Amara, and Nasariya. Holed up in these locations, Force D was able to witness the terrestrial conditions (flooding, mud, desert) that would be to their detriment later. The two brigades used in these advances were consolidated to become the 6th Infantry Division under the direction of General Charles Townshend.¹⁹

In September 1915, Townshend's Regatta slowly made its way up to Kut al-Amara. His 16th Infantry Brigade consisted of the 2nd Battalion Norfolk Regiment, the 7th Rajputs, the 110th Mahrattas and the 120th Rajputs.²⁰ He spoke of his 18th Infantry Brigade in this way:

I was certainly not impressed with the physique of the three Indian battalions, which, together with the Norfolks, made up the 18th Infantry Brigade. They were all Bombay infantry battalions and could not compare in appearance with the North of India regiments; but it must be said that, when submitted to the test of regular artillery fire, they were in no way inferior to the Northern Indian regiments, and in some cases were even their superior.²¹

Under his leadership, the first battle of Kut al-Amara was won in the night retreat of Ottoman forces in September 1915. Pursuing the enemy, Townshend and his forces pushed past Kut al-Amara, despite information from the Government of India prohibiting him to move any further.²² Townshend's forces continued to advance until they were stopped at the Battle of Ctesiphon and pushed back towards Kut. In this section of his memoirs, the reader begins to see the discontent of Townshend regarding his troops, particularly his Indian troops.

Thakur Amar Singh, an Indian aristocrat and aide-de-camp in the Lahore Division (who had fought in France and been transferred to Mesopotamia) writes about this characteristic sentiment towards Indian sepoys as expressed by British officers:

The great trouble under which we have laboured is that whenever we fail in the slightest degree anywhere people raise a hue and cry whereas if the British troops fail under the same

¹⁹ Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, *The First World War in the Middle East* (London: C. Hurst, 2014), 125-127.

²⁰ Townshend *My Campaign*, 42.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*, 115.

circumstances no one mentions it. The Indian troops had done very well all along but when we had the reverse at Givenchy and Festubert there was a hue and cry... Plainly the thing is that if there is a success it is due to the British element but if there is a reverse then it is all put down to the Indian troops. I do not know what is expected of the Indians.²³

This perception can be observed in Townshend's memoirs; he writes about how his British troops had done splendidly and emphasizes the weakness of his Indian troops.²⁴ At one point he writes, "My three British battalions were the backbone of my division. I relied on them for victory," and at another point, "All who were under my command had one hope—to hear of the arrival of all-British troops, for the Indian troops cannot be compared with the British, even when those British were soldiers hastily raised and improvised."²⁵ We see these accusations against Indian troops expressed acutely in Townshend's memoirs. His sentiments may be justified in some ways, but they were also largely cast in racist terms.

The Battle of Ctesiphon, according to Townshend, was a point in his campaign when most of his troops were "raw and untrained Indian recruits," rather than the skilled and trained regiments that had previously been at his disposal and were now employed elsewhere.²⁶ These untrained troops brought unforeseen problems during the battle that he felt would have been avoided with a greater number of British soldiers in his regiments or even better-trained Indian soldiers.

Here were hundreds of Indian soldiers streaming to the rear, because there were not enough white officers to keep them steady and in hand. I utilized all my staff and borrowed Sir John Nixon's—even General Kemball—to gallop about and lead, and even *drive*, the men back to the combat.²⁷

The retreat upon the death of British soldiers or in the absence of British soldiers was not an isolated event among Indian troops in World War I. Jeffrey Greenhut's military analysis of the relationship between Indian and British soldiers within the context of the war attributes this to the methods that the British used to set up their military in India. He cites the practice of

²³ Das, "Indians," 76-77.

²⁴ "The conduct of my British troops here is splendid, their discipline and physique unimpaired, cheery and quite patient. I cannot say the same of all the Indian troops, i.e., the Mohamedans, and some of the Hindus also," and "The effect of a siege is demoralizing on all troops, but on Indians it is especially so. They seemed to lose spirit very quickly. On the other hand the British soldier was simply splendid." Townshend, *My Campaign*, 298-299.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 144, 276.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 176.

the British army to only take soldiers from certain classes, usually uneducated and “martial classes,” with the assumption that they would never acquire leadership abilities or desire to be officers in the British army. This kind of selection and process reiterated certain class distinctions and behaviors that carried over into the theatre of war. Greenhut writes that because of the hierarchical setup and the lack of leadership training, the default position for Indian soldiers is uncertainty in how to proceed when their immediate commanding officers died.²⁸ While to the British eye, the fault lies with the Indian troops who seem to exhibit disloyalty to the cause, the actual situation is perhaps simpler, a practical reflection of the recruitment policies of the colonial power.

General Townshend goes on further to say that there were problems of a religious nature that he had to address in Mesopotamia at Ctesiphon, problems that contributed to his retreat.

There were also troubles as regards the Mohammedan element in the Indian troops at this time. There existed a widespread spirit of unwillingness to advance against the Holy Place of Salman Pak, the tomb of a devoted servant of the Prophet, at Ctesiphon. In this connection, I had to send back to Basra one Indian battalion, composed in the bulk of trans-Border men of the North-west of India, owing to numerous cases of desertion to the enemy. It was a danger to my force, and I decline to have it any longer in my command.²⁹

Bengal Ambulance Corps worker Sisir Sarbadhikari writes about this, or a similar, event:

Yesterday (23rd October) a Pathan sepoy of the 20th Punjabis deserted after firing on a Sikh havildar. There were many Pathans in the 20th Punjabis: they had said quite clearly that they would not fire on Baghdad-sharif. So the 20th Punjabis have been sent back to Amara.³⁰

The battle raged in such a way that Townshend and his troops were forced to retreat, walking over 90 miles to eventually get back to Kut.³¹ Townshend decided to hold and fortify his position there to prevent the Ottoman forces from advancing on Basra and expelling the British from Mesopotamia.

²⁸ Jeffrey Greenhut, “Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between the British Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army,” *Military Affairs*, vol. 48, no. 1 (Jan. 1984), 16-17.

²⁹ Townshend, *My Campaign*, 143.

³⁰ Sisir Sarbadhikari’s diary as referenced in Amitav Ghosh, “On to Baghdad: The Battle of Ctesiphon,” Archive for the ‘On to Baghdad’ Category (blog), August 20, 2012.

<http://amitavghosh.com/blog/?cat=12#sthash.uP8TdFGV.dpuf>

³¹ Townshend, *My Campaign*, 200.

Townshend held the Ottomans back from December 3, 1915 until his surrender on April 29, 1916 due to the immediate lack of supplies, food, and military support.

Relief of Kut and the 15th Cavalry

General Townshend, in effect, began seeking relief and support for his position at Kut al-Amara from the day he made his stand there in December 1915. After his request for help, Indian troops from the Western front were deployed in Mesopotamia to relieve him. Among these forces were the 15th Lancers, a regiment of the 3rd Lahore Division that had been stationed, and saw action, in France, and was sent to Mesopotamia in January 1916. Upon arrival in Basra, some of the soldiers in this regiment felt it improper to fight on sacred Muslim land. This was reported to the commander of the division and they were stripped of their weapons and some of their personal goods, placed back on ship and tried by court martial for three days.³²

The result of the court martial was that 429 of the soldiers would be penalized, with some sentenced to imprisonment, including, in some cases, to hard labor; all were sent away from Mesopotamia. Maulvi Ghulam Sarvar, from whose memoirs we learn of the details of this case, was brought to Bombay, where he and many others had to complete manual labor such as building roads, houses and bridges.³³ Eventually they were released from their tasks, ironically by the Viceroy of India, who had succeeded Lord Hardinge.

If we look at this mutiny in conjunction with the siege of Kut, perhaps it could be said that if this troop had not mutinied, relief efforts would have reached Kut earlier, a concession that would lend support to Townshend's claims:

My force has now been besieged some four months; the Indian troops are weak and dejected on the total ration of ten ounces of unclean barley meal, and depressed by the two unsuccessful attempts of the relief force to relieve Kut. Had the relief force arrived in January, we could have co-operated with vigour; but now it is very different, and it is the same in every case in history of a beleaguered force.³⁴

The mutiny, however, may exemplify British officers' misunderstandings of their colonial subjects and demonstrate the differences of stance towards the war. The Muslim Indian soldiers had agreed to fight with the British, but did not think that their refusal to fight in Mesopotamia was an issue. Other sepoy in France agreed with them, all hoping for the 15th Lancers' release from hard

³² Gajendra Singh, "Throwing Snowballs in France: Muslim *Sipahis* of the Indian Army and Sheikh Ahmad's Dream, 1915-1918," *Modern Asian Studies* 48, no. 4. (July 2014): 1059-60. Here he is quoting from the memoirs of Maulvi Ghulam Sarvar.

³³ *Ibid.*, 1060.

³⁴ Townshend, *My Campaign*, 230.

labor. Chelmsford, the Viceroy of India at that point, was mentioned as stating that the actions of the Lancers didn't constitute refusal to fight for Britain, but just against the Ottomans, and that they should be given other battles to fight rather than be punished.³⁵ His comments again have to be taken in light of the fact that he was the British Viceroy in a country stripped of British manpower.

Food

During the siege of Kut, there were also problems concerning the diets of many of the Indian soldiers. As the siege began to bear down and last for much longer than Townshend expected, food became an issue. Horses were killed for meat for all soldiers, but many of the Indian troops refused to eat it.³⁶

Townshend desperately wanted his troops to eat the horseflesh as he noted that it would provide them with nutrients that would enable them to hold out longer in the siege. As it was, many of the Indians were dying from starvation, scurvy, and other diseases. Townshend requested that the religious leaders of the different Indian communities send reports giving permission for the soldiers to eat the meat, and they did. Despite this, many of the Indian soldiers still did not eat the horsemeat. Townshend records that some of the soldiers indicated that part of the reason was caste prejudice.³⁷ They believed that upon return to their village, they would be mocked for having eaten horsemeat and their daughters would not be able to get married. On their behalf, Townshend wrote a letter to the Government of India on April 15th, 1916, in order to procure a promise from the government that these soldiers would not be looked down upon for eating horsemeat in a time of war.

Five days prior to this letter, he made an appeal to his Indian troops, reminding them of the permission of their religious leaders and the general necessity of all of the soldiers to eat smaller rations. "The result of the above appeal was that on the very next day 5,135 Indians, including followers, were eating horse-flesh".³⁸ Then he turned to threats. The Indian officers and NCOs who did not eat the horsemeat were threatened with replacement by those who had so done. This threat and its implementation, in a few cases, resulted in 9,329 Indian soldiers eating the horsemeat, leaving only 1,500 who did not.

The refusal of the troops to eat horsemeat in Townshend's opinion was directly linked to his ability to defend Kut.³⁹ He notes in a telegram to

³⁵ Singh, "Throwing Snowballs," 1061.

³⁶ The Gurkhas did eat the horsemeat.

³⁷ "I considered it necessary to send this telegram, as the Indian officers and soldiers were undoubtedly greatly prejudiced against eating horse-meat. As they said: 'The fact will always be thrown in our teeth in our villages, and we shall not be able to marry our daughters' – which anyone acquainted with Indian caste prejudices will readily understand." Townshend, *My Campaign*, 329.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 322.

³⁹ Nikolas Gardner, "Sepoys and the Siege of Kut-al-Amara, December 1915-April 1916" *War in History* 11, no. 3 (2004), 324. I unfortunately began reading the work of this historian *after* I had completed a preliminary draft of this paper; I found his work to provide further analysis of some of the points indicated.

headquarters, after the failure of Gorringe to break through Ottoman forces to relieve him on April 9, 1916, about the disadvantage of this aspect of the Indian soldiers' specificities:

I have ordered the reduction of all rations, British and Indian, still further, to five ounces of barley meal. I can no longer favour the Indian troops in the matter of meal. There is the horse-meat, which their religious leaders in India have authorized them to eat, and, by their not having taken advantage of this, they have weakened my power of resistance by one month at least, so I have no sympathy left for them in that direction.⁴⁰

The refusal to eat the horsemeat, to the point of illness and starvation, seems to indicate that there are allegiances greater than that of the British cause, and greater than death. Food that would be detrimental to social and religious standards upheld in India would not be eaten. Letters from Indian Muslim soldiers at the Western Front, for example, had encouragements, apologies, and accusations aimed at making Muslim soldiers adhere to religious standards even in the context of war.⁴¹ Nikolas Gardner writes of differing views on why Townshend waited to enforce the eating of horsemeat through threats. One such speculation was that the Great Mutiny of 1857 was too close in recent memory.⁴² One alleged incident that sparked the mutiny was the Indians' belief that the British specifically having them, unknowingly, bite shell cases soaked in the grease of animals that were considered improper for them to eat (beef for Hindus, pork for Muslims). So, in a theatre where the most sacred sites of Islam were located, where food was scarce, and where there was the active courting of Indian soldiers by Ottomans, there was a hesitancy to force a change in diet that could lead to increased resistance.

Seditious material had already made its way into Kut while the soldiers were under siege in December 1915. One set of materials that Townshend describes as particularly disconcerting was written in Hindi and made promises to the Indian soldiers for defecting. Townshend recalls the well-founded nature of his concerns:

Two or three bundles of seditious documents in Hindi, signed 'Bande Mataram', were discovered laid against our wire entanglements. These called on the Indian troops to rise and murder the British officers and join their brothers the Turks, who would pay them better and give them grants of land. Several cases of self-mutilation were detected about this time among the men in one of the Indian battalions, who shot off their trigger fingers and pretended they had been wounded. In order to prevent the powder scorch from showing, they had in each

⁴⁰ Townshend, *My Campaign*, 319.

⁴¹ Singh, "Throwing Snowballs," 1052-1053.

⁴² Gardner, "Sepoys," 322-323.

case bound a piece of thick cloth round the finger and hand before discharging the rifle. All these men—twelve or fourteen of them—were tried and received heavy sentences.⁴³

Of course, Mesopotamia was not the only theatre where seditious documents were found among the troops. Censored letters from the Western Front revealed uncertainty about Muslim participation in the war, especially in light of Ottoman Empire's entry into the war in October 1914.⁴⁴ In November 1914 came the Ottoman call for jihad, further facilitating the anti-British, pro-Islamist sentiments that were already entering into Muslim-founded newspapers, such as the *Comrade*, *the Hamdard*, *Al-Hilal*, and *the Zamindar*, distributed in India at that time.⁴⁵ The *Hamdard*, after the news of Turkey's entry into the war, offered some reprieve to the British government in India in the form of a compromise.

The paper remarked that the war was *temporal* (emphasis mine) and that the Muslims may be expected to do their duty to the British Government, provided that, "The holy land of Arabia is treated as sacrosanct."⁴⁶

The Indians saw their allegiance as conditional, their loyalty only extending to a certain degree. In the quote above, the use of the word 'temporal' illustrates Greenhut's point:

The expectations of Indian soldiers were that they would serve in garrisons in India and, on occasion, in colonial campaigns and minor frontier skirmishes in which battles would be short and casualties light. But suppose that were not the case. Suppose the regiment was called to serve in a major war, far from India, in which battle never really ended, and casualties were continuous and heavy. What would happen to the bond between officer and soldier in such a case?⁴⁷

This is what can be said to have happened in Mesopotamia in the armies of General Townshend.

After the call to jihad, the type of loyalty presented by Indian Muslim advocates of the time, according to Yuvaraj D. Prasad, can perhaps be qualified as being one of "inferior standard" based primarily on the "sacrifice of life and property."⁴⁸ This meant that the Indian Muslims would fight for the British

⁴³ Townshend, *My Campaign*, 236.

⁴⁴ Singh, "Throwing Snowballs," 1055-1058.

⁴⁵ Yuvaraj Deva Prasad, *The Indian Muslims and World War I: A Phase of Disillusionment with British Rule, 1914-1918* (New Delhi: Janaki Prakashan, 1985), 63.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁴⁷ Greenhut "Sahib and Sepoy," 16.

⁴⁸ Prasad, *The Indian Muslims and World War I*, 70.

Empire, as long as they were not required to fight against their co-religionists on sacred ground.

In addition to native stirrings, there was also international pressure placed upon Muslims to take their place in the war, particularly on the side of revolution against their colonial masters. Germany saw the benefits of the call to jihad and hoped to use that as a strategy to provoke Muslims to fight the Allied Powers. “Enver Pasha [to] Kaiser Wilhem II on 22 October 1914... offered... to have the Sultan-Caliph call on all Muslims under British, French, and Russian rule to rise up in rebellion.”⁴⁹ The desire for independence among Indians in India at the time was already there: in the formation of secret societies among Muslims, who were working in both India and in Mesopotamia, and among Hindu reformers who overtly called for self-governance.⁵⁰ Voiced tensions subsided as the war went on but underlying tensions remained.

Kristian Ulrichsen indicates that the factors leading up to the surrender at Kut were a combination of ill-managed plans by the Government of India and the India Office in London, and General Townshend’s gross underestimation of the supplies that he retained, which caused a blockage at Basra, as relief was rushed to Mesopotamia without the proper access to Kut.⁵¹ Townshend, in his defense, says that only by finding grain in the town of Kut and slaughtering horses was he able to sustain his army for longer than previously thought possible. And even these efforts did not proceed without challenges, as the dietary restrictions of the Indian soldiers took precedence over their desire to remain strong in the war effort they were engaged in.

Townshend also sought to identify endemic characteristics in the Indian troops that contributed to their failures and ultimately his failure:

Of course there were many exceptions among the Indian troops. The 7th Gurkhas, for example, behaved splendidly, and I counted on them as on British troops. But I must say that *towards the end* of this long siege most of the British officers had little confidence in the Indians. Not their fault. They are not constituted by nature to stand misfortune and reverse with the same stoicism as Europeans.⁵²

Instances like cowardice and desertion can hardly be unexpected in battles that were extended in length, fought in harsh conditions, and that were not battles that Indian soldiers were particularly invested in. And yet, ironically, of the four Victoria Crosses (the highest honor that any soldier in the British army could obtain in combat) that were won in Mesopotamia, three were awarded

⁴⁹ Mustafa Aksakal, “‘Holy War Made in Germany’? Ottoman Origins of the 1914 Jihad,” *War in History* 18, no. 2 (2011), 195.

⁵⁰ Hasan, *M.A. Ansari*; Rose, “The Politics of Service,” 369-370.

⁵¹ Ulrichsen, *The First World War*; Gardner, “Sepoys,” 324.

⁵² Townshend, *My Campaign*, 320-321.

to Indian sepoy. One such account of honorable action was of a soldier in the 9th Bhopal Infantry in the battle of Wadi. His commanding officer had been hit and “To his aid went Sepoy Chattar Singh over a spot within two hundred yards of the enemy, who kept up constant fire. He shielded the Colonel with his body. Sepoy Chattar Singh with his entrenching tool slowly and for hours, made a bullet proof shelter for both. For his gallantry, he was awarded the Victoria Cross.”⁵³

This particular account is striking because in the face of his commanding officer being struck down, he did not retreat but sought to protect the officer from greater injury. Greenhut suggests, not without controversy, that this contradiction is demonstrative of a cultural relationship, that of sahib and servant, that is mimicked in the closeness of the relationship between direct commanding officer and the Indian soldier.⁵⁴ However, the desertions, malingering and seditious material compounded with cases of extreme gallantry demonstrate a complexity not mentioned by either Lord Hardinge or General Townshend. If these actions are framed within a larger story of empire and independence, masculinity and emasculation, self-assertion and assimilation, they may take on a clearer meaning.

Sonya O. Rose, in her analysis of the language of service and sacrifice during World War I in both India and Ireland, writes about how the language of gender was used by the British to emasculate Indians, and, similarly, the language of gender was taken up by Indians in regards to service as a way to demonstrate masculinity. Gandhi, in his recruitment of soldiers for the army, articulated that in fighting for the British Empire, India will have already obtained “Home Rule”.⁵⁵ The war, then, became a way to demonstrate that Indians were capable of governing themselves. They were to exemplify honor and maturity in the fight, which is demonstrated in such extreme acts of bravery. But can this also speak for the desertions?

Rose implies that because of the nature of the recruitment (either involuntary conscription or persuasion to enlist for honor), “it is not at all clear to whose allegiance or in whose name [the sepoy] dedicated their sacrifice and service.”⁵⁶ Therefore, the goal was simply to *enter* the battlefield, and to fight to demonstrate honor and manliness. Perhaps defection itself came to represent conflicting views on how to maintain that honor: is honor demonstrated in unquestionable allegiance and service in the war, or was there a level of service and sacrifice higher than allegiance to the British Empire? According to Townshend, honor was demonstrated in commitment to battle, whatever that required (eating food that was not in the normal diet or fighting even when a commanding officer was injured or killed); according to his records, he saw this most consistently among his British troops and was

⁵³ Shyam Narain Saxena, *Role of Indian Army in the First World War* (Delhi: Bhavna Prakashan, 1987), 158.

⁵⁴ Greenhut, “Sahib and Sepoy,” 17.

⁵⁵ Rose, “The Politics of Service,” 380.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 388.

not sure where the allegiances of his sepoy lay. Rose notes that the language of sacrifice and service was not one that was written about much in the letters of Indian soldiers on the Western Front, but honor (*izzat*) was a major key.⁵⁷ There were also struggles on how to reconcile proper Islam with fighting on sacred ground against co-religionists. It was fine for the British to fight another Christian power, but fighting a Muslim power was different, especially a power that would then be subjected to the same kind of oppression from the colonial powers that the Indians were subjected to back home.

Practically speaking, for some of the 15th Lancers, the dishonor of fighting a co-religionist power (in particular, the Caliphate on sacred territory) seemed to be greater than any honor obtained through allegiance to the British Empire. When they were finally released, Maulvi Ghulam Sarvar felt that they should be considered blameless.⁵⁸ Letters from France also demonstrated sympathy with the Lancers in this regard, although some called for total allegiance to Britain.⁵⁹ Many, however, despite the assertion of allegiance, thought that the regiment should not have been punished so harshly, for reasons that should have been obvious to the British.⁶⁰

Conclusion

This paper sought to elucidate the actions of the Indian soldiers under General Townshend's leadership in Mesopotamia from his viewpoint and to place those in the context of a larger story of prestige, honor, gallantry, independence, and masculinity. The actions that Townshend so despised and considered to be actions of cowardice, can perhaps be framed by the Indian soldier's greater allegiance to India and/or his faith or religion. The opportunity came for the sepoy to fight with the British in order to demonstrate capabilities for self-governance. Issues like not eating horseflesh, then, can perhaps be explained in this way: that the Indian soldiers were not as desperate to win the war as they were to fight in it. Temporally, the Indians may have recognized the battle as merely a foray that would allow them to enhance their lives upon return to India. Strong allegiance to social norms and ideals (particularly in demonstrating capacity for self-rule) back in India, then, presided. The British saw these views as cowardly or disloyal.

Clearly, further research will enhance the ability to find these connections within the actions and words of Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia,

⁵⁷ Ibid., 385-386.

⁵⁸ Singh, "Throwing Snowballs," 1060-1061.

⁵⁹ Omissi (ed.), *Indian Voices*, 168. References can be found in Letters 259, 276, 313, 315. Excerpt from Letter 276: "The Risaldar-Major in charge of the depot, an universally esteemed and straightforward man who has been in the regiment thirty-three years [Muhammad Amin Khan, Sardar Bahadur, 51], lamented what had happened to the Colonel, who said, 'don't worry, the deeds of the regiment in France have been written in letters of gold, but it is fate that this should have happened'. The list of men punished, and their punishments, have been published in the regimental orders." It is worthwhile to note that these letters were censored.

⁶⁰ Singh, "Throwing Snowballs," 1061.

particularly if sources are found that elucidate the thoughts of sepoys in Townshend's army.⁶¹ Another avenue for research could be the viewpoint of recruiters and members of the educated elite, such as Gandhi, who continuously saw the war as a chance to earn Home Rule and demonstrate loyalty to India, encouraging Indians (of elite and non-elite background) to participate. It would also be interesting to note the greater sympathies that the Indian soldiers may have had with the Ottoman soldiers outside of religion, particularly as they saw the British advancing to conquer in a land that was not their own. In fact, commiseration in the relationship between Ottoman captors and Indian captives in Mesopotamia after the surrender of Kut was part of the story, and it is perhaps linked to mutual aversion to external imperial force and a desire for self-governance.⁶²

Dr. Ansari's mission to the Ottoman Empire provides us with a neat way to frame the story of Indian soldiers in Mesopotamia; his medical mission led to his eventual fame in India, and propelled him into the political limelight as a spokesperson for the Delhi community in the movement towards self-rule. He became one of the leaders of the Khilafat movement, which was a movement to protest the British acquisition of power from the Ottoman Sultan, arguing that Islamic sacred sites should remain under control of the Caliph. The Khilafat movement, however, could also be seen as a movement towards self-rule; India could be more of an asset to the Caliphate once freed. With the abolishment of the caliphate in 1924 and the subsequent contestation in the Hijaz shortly afterward, ideas concerning pan-Islamism and Muslim suzerainty began to shift. Dr. Ansari left the Delhi Khilafat committee in 1926, essentially with the belief that religion and politics need not have the same role in society, nor the same leaders at their head. He sealed his allegiance to the Indian National Congress by becoming president in 1927, with strong emphasis on Hindu-Muslim unity. In fact, he was considered an 'infallible guide' on this issue in the eyes of Gandhi, although it was clearly not without complication.⁶³ During his life, Dr. Ansari felt the tensions of his allegiances during his work towards independence, because of the cultural and religious communalities in India and in Delhi, specifically. But in his case, as perhaps in the case of the Indian sepoys in the British army in Mesopotamia during the First World War, unswerving allegiance is often mitigated, or challenged, in response to the circumstances—including the failure of political and military sovereignty, like the British, and religious suzerainty, like the Ottoman Caliphate.

⁶¹ Gardner, "Sepoys," 308.

⁶² Santanu Das, "Indians," 81.

⁶³ Mushirul Hasan, *M.A. Ansari*, 110, 152-153, 161, 281.

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