

Book Reviews

Radhika Singha. 2020. *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in Global Conflict 1914–1921*. Noida: HarperCollins.

In this book, Singha brings out a consolidated history of hundreds of thousands of laborers from the Indian subcontinent (henceforth laborers) who contributed to the First World War in multiple regards. This book narrates the stories of construction workers, porters, muleteers, stretcher-bearers, cooks, sweepers, water-carriers, and grooms, among others. The word “coolie” in the book title entails them all. In Singha’s words, the book is “...a less Eurocentric, more transnational account of World War One” (p. 3) where the involvement of the Indian laborers plays an important role in understanding the subaltern view of the War. As Varnava (2017) explains using Homi K. Bhabha’s idea of “liminal space,” Singha too describes not just the exploitations and oppressions during the War but also the negotiations between the colonized and the colonizers. The book highlights that battles are fought not just with arms, but also with the help of numerous individuals who work tirelessly in the background with or without their will. While explaining the contributions of the laborers, the book also engages with the power dynamics involved among the laborers and white and colored soldiers and officers.

The book is divided into six chapters in addition to the introduction and the concluding “afterword” section. Chapter One discusses the formation of the “Coolie Corps” and the “Indian Porter and Labour Corps” for filling the positions of workers in the Great War. (Ab)using their power, the British enrolled the Indian laborers through the Indian Army Act under the label “war service.” Singha explains in detail how the British played around with the criticisms faced for the irregularities they had committed during the recruitment of indentured workers who were sent to overseas occupied territories by the British. Similarly, the British also had to satisfy the concerns brought forth by the Indian elite groups who believed that the indentured system did not follow the norms of caste hierarchy and female chastity, not because of the menial working conditions of the indentured workers per se (pp. 35–36). Likewise, Chapter Two highlights the categorization, extraction, discrimination, resistance of the Indian laborers. This chapter brings forth the

fact that the role of non-combatants is crucial in the overall performance of the combatants. The conversations of better pay and benefits were initiated after this realization.

Chapter Three talks about the contributions made by the Indian coolies in Iraq and the nearby areas between 1916 and 1921. This chapter details the often-forceful recruitment of Indian prisoners and those registered by the colonial authorities as “criminal tribes” (p. 104). Although portrayed as voluntary, the recruitment process, especially of the prisoners and those deemed criminals, was extremely extractive and fraudulent. Chapter Four talks about racism ingrained in the British in understanding and categorizing the Indians. The chapter also details how recruitment was done, with the help of missionaries and village heads, even at the margins of India, especially in the Northeast.

Chapter Five provides an account of the involvement of Indian laborers in France. While the racism ingrained work conditions meant harsher work conditions for the laborers, they also faced problems in repatriation even after their contract had ended. Finally, Chapter Six highlights the armistice and the return of the Indian soldiers and laborers. While the war ended in 1919 itself, the homecoming continued up until 1921 as many Indians were redirected to sustain the British occupation of Iraq and to suppress the Arab uprising. This chapter continues to portray how discrimination continued against the colored soldiers and laborers even when the War ended. Even while the soldiers received some degree of benefits, the laborers were held in the lowest fringes.

The ruling British not just had the extractive entitlement to deploy Indians at their will from the total population of 320 million at the Great War, but they also had the power to categorize and distribute the colonized according to the perceived mental and physical capabilities. The British were already biased against the Indians for their hypothetical physical and mental frailty. Furthermore, the orientalist construction of the “martial race theory” facilitated the recruitment of “martial races” and “hill tribes” from South Asia, Africa, and Scotland in combatant roles (Streets 2004). Because of their discriminatory attitude towards the colonized, and for maintaining “labor efficiency,” they hired certain groups of Indians for specific works. The British continued with the casteist and discriminatory policies targeted at the so-called “lower” Hindu castes and “untouchables.”

Singha starts her book on the premise that in a confidential letter dated March 1916 the British asked for some latrine sweepers to be sent to Mesopotamia from India (p. 1, 103). The letter was undisclosed because there was an outbreak of cholera, and the British wanted the Indian sweepers to take care of the risky and menial job in the frontline. The “untouchable” castes were kept at the lowest status and assigned the most stigmatizing works. Similarly, between October 1916 and July 1919, 15,234 prisoners were hired or conscripted as followers directly from the prison (p. 97). Likewise, many “criminal tribes” were also forcefully made to work for the government as sweepers not just during, but also before and after the War (p. 104). Furthermore, Singha gives detailed accounts of corporal punishment targeted at the follower ranks through court-martial that resulted in imprisonment, flogging, and fines for “wrongdoings,” if the recruits denied enrollment, or for desertion. The chances of Indian laborers being court-martialed were so frequent that they could be subjected to one even asking for a leave (p. 259).

Apart from the sepoy, there were at least four categories of followers created. The mule-, bullock- and camel-drivers were called “higher followers;” they had better pay and benefits as their services were deemed riskier (pp. 50–52). Similarly, those who were assigned to regiments, but also worked as cooks, sweepers, grass-cutters, water-carriers, and leather workers, were called “attached followers.” The barbers, dhobis, mess waiters, tailors, and blacksmiths were “private followers.” Finally, there were “officer servants” who took care of the personal housekeeping affairs of the officers. The sepoy-follower distinction was always held through various means such as wages, pension benefits, disability benefits, kit, rations, fuel allowance, etc. While the Gurkhas were the most favored among South Asian soldiers and received Christmas gifts like the British, the *bhistis* (water-carriers) were the most neglected followers (p. 53). Despite the long hours of work, the followers were given poor quality kits, their rest and cleanliness were not taken care of, their rags were not fresh, their tents were flimsy and cramped, they were not given milk, cigarettes, tobacco, or presents (p. 67).

In the hypermasculine fronts during the war, the non-combatants were treated lower in the hierarchy than the combatants particularly in terms of the “sacrifices” they had made although there are multiple stories of the brave and heroic acts of the followers who picked up the guns of dead sepoys and fought. Also, given that many followers were selected from those who were rejected as combatants, they could have some skills that were found

in the sepoy. The acts of bravery might be true in some cases and might be exaggerated in others. However, it is appalling to note that everyone had to pass through the hypermasculine tropes of being a “war hero.” The works of the followers were often discriminated against as “feminine jobs,” and their contributions in the War was better acknowledged for taking over the position of a fallen soldier rather than for caring an injured sepoy or supplying the necessities or cleaning. Furthermore, because of the caste-based discrimination and the “inferior” positions of the non-combatant like the sweepers in the caste system, it was “unimaginable” for the white and colored officers and combatants that “the sweeper to be cast as a war hero” (p. 45). Consequently, although it was difficult to completely undermine the contributions of the non-combatants, there was a hierarchy that deemed the hypermasculine works of soldiers more important than the “feminine” roles of the non-combatants.

This book is important for Nepal Studies too. The book breaks the myth that all Gurkhas (read Nepalis) participated in the War as soldiers. While there was a direct order to not recruit Gurkhas (and other “martial races”) in the follower ranks, there could be many blurry lines when it came to identity and representation. Although Singha does not tell the readers how these individuals were enlisted as non-combatants, it could be that the Nepalis who failed to get recruited as soldiers in India were hired as followers. Similarly, there could have been multiple possibilities that Nepalis living in various parts of India, such as Assam, Dehradun, Darjeeling, Sikkim, or elsewhere were hired as laborers. Separate studies will have to be carried out to better understand this complexity. The book has opened avenues for Nepal scholars to focus on the non-combatant roles of Nepalis in the First World War. While Singha only touches upon the roles of non-combatant Gurkhas during the War, scholars could examine the recruitment processes of such non-combatants and the interactions that the non-combatant Gurkhas had with Gurkha military and other officers and sepoys at length. The same could be done for the Second World War too.

The book has brought forth a rich set of historical facts, figures, and evidences to portray the bleak conditions in which the Indian laborers were involved in the War. While sometimes the figures and historical details might be taxing for the readers, the same could be of enormous benefit to someone who is looking for the specifics. With a rich set of footnotes and descriptions, Singha has completed the tedious job of marching through the archive and

secondary resources and consolidating an enormous number of historical facts. The book has attempted to do a lot by bringing all the followers from the subcontinent together that it sometimes feels that the diversity within the followers is not as well explained as it should have been.

When it comes to the involvement of women non-combatants, the book fails to satisfy the readers. Although Singha mentions that there were several coolie women who contributed to the Great War in various means, she limits those to a handful of anecdotes (p. 18) and does not go into the specifics. For instance, on page 73, Singha talks about the involvement of women as followers in some military locations but explains neither the kind of roles they played nor their positionality in the hypermasculine setting. As Cynthia Enloe (2000) explains, women have always faced an exploitative response from the military and Singha fails to portray the gender dynamics during the Great War.

Although the book claims that it covers the “lived experience” of those who were engaged in the Great War, the book does not exactly narrate the experiences as such. In one instance, between pages 218 and 220, Singha gives a detailed account of the men who had never seen the seas before, and this is where the lived experiences of the Indian laborers are best portrayed in the entire book. This section reminded me of Bahadur’s (2014) writing of the history of Indian indentured laborers through the experience of her great-grandmother. While the book has narrated the history of the invisible contributors of the Great War, the author had no choice but to extensively use the books and journals maintained by the white officers. As writing and preserving the manuscripts was not usual in the Indian subcontinent during that time, Singha could possibly have found out information from folklores and oral histories from areas that sent vast numbers of followers and sepoys. Similarly, the accounts of prisoners of war are missing in this book. The archive of prisoners of war, including those from the Indian subcontinent, maintained at the Humboldt University of Berlin could have been an incredible repository for that. The works of Chudal (2020) and Lange (2015), for instance, are some of the explorations done with the sound recordings, literature, and artworks maintained at the archive.

Overall, this book is an important addition to the subaltern history of the Great War and has the potential to substantially contribute to further works in uncovering the situations, governance, discrimination, negotiations, and gender relations from that time.

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