The Voice of Haryanvi Soldiers from the Great War

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Over 14 lakh Indian soldiers fought for the first time on various battlefront in Europe, the Middle East, and East Africa during World War I. And yet, even today, we know so very little about them. It is essential to acknowledge the history of Indian soldiers. The brave, sturdy Indian soldiers who left Indian shores for distant and strange parts of the world to fight a war they had little understanding of. They discharged their duty diligently and mostly with distinction, thousands of them dying far from home. Throughout their stay, Indian soldiers wrote and received letters. The stories of soldiers and their families continue to be shared and passed down from generation to generation.[1] September 25, 2014, to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of Loos, the major last battle fought by the Indian infantry on the Western Front before they were transferred to Mesopotamia. September 25, 2014 to mark the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of Loos, the major last battle fought by the Indian infantry on the Western Front before they were transferred to Mesopotamia.

This research paper does not aim to detail the heroic achievements of Indian soldiers but instead to provide, briefly, what is needed. The source for this study is letters written by those soldiers. The British Library's India Office Records contain the Reports of the Censor of Indian Mails in France, 1914-1918. The Censor was responsible for letters to and from Indian troops serving in France and Mesopotamia, and his reports include translated extracts from soldiers' letters. The government was concerned that uncensored letters could

give military information to the enemy. Accounts of Indian soldiers suffering in France might upset their families back home and potentially cause political instability in India. There was also a goal to prevent seditious material from reaching the troops. The collection holds many letters (censored) from Indian Sepoys. The Jat Gazette has published a few of these letters, as well as some original letters collected by the HAHC.

Throughout their time in France, Indian soldiers (and their families) made full use of the military postal service, not least because letters to and from were carried free of charge.[2] The censored letters of the Indian soldiers were dictated by the sepoys to the scribes or occasionally written by the sepoys themselves. These scribes may have been Indian company officers or company clerks who were literate. Soldiers' families in India may have used professional letter writers or village school teachers. Many soldiers and their correspondents must, however, have been aware of the significance of writing.

We know so much about Indian soldiers' letters because they were censored. As in the colonial army, regimental officers read soldiers' letters to ensure that they did not reveal information of possible military value to the enemy.[3] The second layer of censorship was set up in November 1914 at the Indian Base Post Office in France to monitor "inward" mails to the Indians because of concern that seditious literature might be sent to the troops.[4] This censorship was then extended to outward mail because of concerns about evidence of depression in the hospitals. The main objective of this censor was to gather intelligence, particularly about the morale of the troops, rather than to prevent them from writing. The censor produced short, weekly reports on the contents of the Indian soldiers' letters. These reports included appended extracts from forty to ninety examples translated

into English. The entire censorship archive runs to around 4,000 pages.[5] There was a slogan used during WWI that helped remind people not to pass information too freely the slogan was '*Loose Lips Sink Ships.*' Because it was so important not to let out information that might reach enemy forces, letters were censored.

Indian soldiers know about the regimental censorship because they saw it being done. They later worked out the existence of the central censorship. Indian soldiers soon tried to find a way of subverting the censorship. They could evade the military censorship altogether by using the French civilian post and secondly, handed over to the Indian soldiers, who are going home. This was against army rules and was punished when detected, but was difficult to prevent.

Prof. Parmar has emphasized that exploring these letters of soldiers is of real importance because they provide an understanding of the human side of the war. 'They also give us a glimpse of who these soldiers were, where they came from, why they went to war and what sociological conditions persisted at that time in India. They tell us what the journey to the war front was like, and of what happened to these men in the war.'[6]

The letters of Indian Sepoys echo the voice of a homesick, war-weary soldier and a dynamic agent of socio-cultural change, eager to effect the transformation of his people back home through modern ideas and education, whose value they came to grasp through observation of and interaction with people (soldiers) from European countries.

Indian soldiers were on a mission to transform their homeland even as they faced machine guns on the front lines in Europe and West Asia. Thousands of recruits left crushing poverty in Punjab and present-day Haryana to fight in the war.[7] These soldiers went beyond caste

barriers, discovered the value of education, and learned about everything - from architecture to nutrition. When they returned, many of them became agents of social and political change in their regions. A century later, the development and prosperity in the region are the result of the seeds sown by those soldiers. The exposure to France, England, and the other modern societies of Europe led them to question our condition. Even while they were still on the front-line, they began to work to bring reforms in the form of education, equality, cleanliness, and hygiene to their villages.

Morale and Battle Experience

The very fact of the war and the experience of battle understandably loomed large in soldiers' letters home.[8] Conditions at the front in the very cold winter of 1914-15 were appalling; Indian soldiers did not initially have the full complement of warm clothes.[9] Soldiers used religious and agrarian imagery in their letters to convey to their families the horrors. One wounded Punjabi Rajput wrote home *This is not war. It is the end of the world. This is just such a war as was related in the Mahabharata about our forefathers.*[10] In the same way, a Veterinary Doctor, named Daya Ram (Jat) of 2nd Lancers, wrote Kalu Ram, Ambala, about his war experiences, i.e., casualties, poisonous gases used, climatic conditions, etc. Now we can say that these letters are the eyewitnesses to the battle.[11] In his second letter wrote to School master Neblu Ram of Ambala, saying that, *we have no opportunity of bathing, sometimes we cannot bathe for a month, & we are in regular hell and tired of life, yet our souls are so shameless. They do not leave our body. There are many other things which I cannot write.*[12] The improvised trenches were often waterlogged, and some men developed trench foot. Indian soldiers were warmly received by the people of France and Belgium and their interaction with rural Europeans helped

break the carefully constructed barrier of racial supremacy advocated by the colonial authorities in India.

In the battlefield of France, an Indian soldier composed a letter, *'There is no telling whether the war will be over in two years or in three, for in one hour, 10,000 men are killed. What more can I write?'*[13] A sense of wonder pervades some of their letters, which have been published online by the British Library and archives, *'What is Paris? It is heaven!'*, one wrote. In another letter, a soldier wrote, *'Today I saw a museum in which all the living fishes of the world were kept in boxes of water and a magnificent palace which cost millions of pounds'.*

Many soldiers resorted to coded writing.[14] For example, several men used the image of black pepper and red pepper to represent Indian and British troops, respectively. One Jat soldier wrote home that '*black pepper*' was '*very pungent*' but the '*red pepper*' was '*not so strong*', meaning that Indian troops fought more fiercely than British troops.[15] Shadma Khan, an Indian soldier, wrote about the war in 1915 from an English hospital, where he was recuperating from bullet wounds. '*There is a full crop of ripe barley,'* he wrote. '*Crowds are gathering around the woman who parches the grain. She parches the whole lot at once. Her stove is very hot. I hope you will read very carefully what I have written so badly.'* The woman who parches the grain referred to German forces, according to a censor report from the time.[16] Zamindar Nehal Singh from Gurgaon wrote a letter to Dafadar Sri Ram (Jat), Meerut Cavalry Brigade at France, in which he described, '*there is no scarcity of paper or scriber'*, and again he says, '*if you write about the event that is taking place, write in signs and symbols.*' Indian soldiers used code in their letters.[17]

Some of the Indian wounded were sent to Brighton Pavilion, which was converted into an Indian military hospital. Royal visits were

the subject of many favourable comments. England is a fine country, '*the King and Queen talked with us for a long time*', wrote the wounded Subedar-Major (Sardar Bahadur Gugan) of the 6th Jats, in January 1915. '*I have never been so happy in my life as I have been here.*'[18] Sepoy Lal Chand from Brighton hospital wrote to Fath Singh, Zamindar of Rohtak, '*This is not a war that will allow us to return* (home) … *This is the business of the military caste; if they are killed, it does not matter.*[19] Shiv Ram (Jat) from Indian Military Depot, Milford-on-Sea, wrote to Shri Dutt, Sheriya village, Beri in Rohtak that *there is only one regiment of Jat* (in France), *but it has wave renown, there is no doubt that there is a race of Jats. The people say that it is a very brave race and has done very well, who have suffered heavy losses.*[20]

Dafadar Ramji Lal (Jat) of 6th Cavalry, France, wrote to his friend Mola Mistri, Rohtak, that *he served eighteen years' service now may go on pension. He asked, 'either I will remain in service or otherwise, I will return on pension. There are two sides to the question: either save money and risk one's life, or preserve one's life and miss the profit.*'[21] One sepoy named Gugan Singh (Jat) from 20th Deccan Horse wrote to the Mohar Singh, editor, *Jat Gazette*, Rohtak, on 8th April 1917. On this day, Lt. Governor of the central Provinces visited the 20th Deccan Horse – asked each one, he asked me, '*where I came from*, and I said 'Rohtak'. He said, '*Rohtak had given much help, and Jats had won a great name for themselves.*[22]

Education

The soldiers were preoccupied with education. According to the 1911 Census of India, however, only about 11 percent of all Indian males were literate, a figure which fell to 6.3 percent in the Indian army's main recruiting ground of the Punjab[23] but Prof. K.C. Yadav, former Director of Haryana Academy of History and Culture,

highlighted that before the war, Haryana's literacy rate was a mere 4 percent.[24] Literacy rates must have been still lower for the Haryanavi soldiers, who were recruited in rural areas where fewer people could read and write than in the cities. During the war, a 'Jat Boarding House' was built in Rohtak on the appeal of community leaders to accommodate school students.[25] The Jat Officers, Non-Commissioned Officers, and *Jawans* of 20th Squadron also read the appeal for donations for the building of the Boarding House (Jat School, Rohtak). They considered the matter seriously, keeping in view the well-being of the community.

The appeal spread to the regiments fighting in France, Palestine, Turkey, and Mesopotamia, and they began to collect funds to support the project, and with great pleasure, each one of them had desired to take part in the mission. But their only regret was that because of their busy schedule, they could not do anything earlier. For the belated decision, they offer their sincere apology.[26] The money was being sent through the Depot Commander, and they were hopeful that action would be taken. The Jat Regiments (6th Cavalry) have most gladly collected funds and contributed Rs. 400[27] to Headmaster Baldev Singh of Jat High School, Rohtak. All Jat soldiers raised funds on the appeal of Ch. Chhotu Ram.[28]

Rooms at the Boarding House bore memorial stones recording the names of the regiments that contributed to their construction.[29] A similar boarding house was funded for Ahirs also in Rewari, as were other educational institutions.[30] Later, when they returned from the war, the soldiers made sure their children, even the girls, were educated.

Girls' Education

During this period, the rate of girls' education is very poor.[31] People didn't concentrate on girls education. They noted that French

women seemed much more independent than those in India. Some instructed their families in India to value women more. Dafadar Ramji Lal, 20th Deccan Horse, wrote a letter to his grandfather from the French battlefield, in which he blames that, '*I know very well that a woman in our country is of no more value than a pair of shoes, and this is the reason why the people of Indian are low in the scale.*[32] *You educated Ramjas and got him a situation, but you never thought of educating any of the girls. I should like to write to my wife, but she would have to get the letters read by somebody else, and all the home secrets would come out. When I look at Europe, everyone – man and woman, boy and girl – is educated. You ought to educate your girls as well as your boys and our posterity will be the better for it*.'[33] The troops were struck by the fact that most France women could read and write.[34] Noting this, several men wrote home to their families in India, urging them to send their girls to school.[35]

Ressaidar Bishan Singh (6th Cavalry from France) wrote a letter in Urdu to his friend Choudhary Dobi Dayal in Jalandhar District, Punjab, on August 28, 1917. In it, he strongly opposed foolish customs and advised him, 'You will give up your foolish customs and extravagant expenses, and if you love your country, you will get others to follow your example.' He asks them, 'What have we done to educate our children, and if we don't, we are fools, and our children will also be fools. Give up bad customs and value your girls as much as your boys.'[36]

Architecture

Before World War I, the income rate was very low, but unfortunately, during the war, cash was the source of income. The Indian soldiers had been inspired by the architectural styles of the brick houses in the village, which they had seen in France and whenever they came back to their villages, they designed *kachcha* bungalows that

were much better ventilated. The soldiers drove social, political change at home, and had better sanitation than the village houses then.[37] The small village Kosli (then in Rohtak, now in Rewari district), which sent 246 soldiers to the Great War[38] (at least one from almost every family in the village), became known after the war as *baawan bangley ki Kosli* (Kosli of 52 bungalows).

Social Barriers

Military life also helped break down their traditional social barriers. *Jamadar* Tek Chand of the 6th Jats Cavalry has sent a letter to Ch. Chhotu Ram, editor, the *Jat Gazette*, from France, showing what good impact foreign exposure has made on our soldier-brothers. The *Jamadar* says: 'Since the people of other countries form their opinion about our country on seeing us, it is incumbent on us that we give the best possible account of ourselves before them.' After that, he gives details of the bad social customs, which stood in the way of different communities in India getting along with each other and keeping us away from forming independent relations with foreigners. He says that 'in the beginning, people of France formed a poor opinion of us on seeing our retrograde inter-caste social behavior.

But now, after seeing others, we – at least 25% of us – have been able to discard our social barriers. Now people belonging to different castes dine together at the same table. Our minds have opened up... First people from different Hindu castes ... and after that Hindus and Muslims learned to live together.'[39] During wartime, prices are very high. Wheat is 19 *seers,* grain 25 *seers*, *ghee* one and three-quarters *seers,* maize seven *seers,* wrote Lewa Singh, 89th Punjabis, to Naranjan Singh in the same unit at the front on Sep. 1915.[40] It shows that during WWI, the prices of goods were very high, and people on the Indian continent suffered due to this high alteration.

Dafadar Ram Nath (Jat) of 20th Deccan Horse France, wrote a letter to Baldev Singh, Headmaster, Jat School, Rohtak on 4th Nov. 1917. In his letter, he pointed out the social issue of rural society. '*Since four years, I have not gone to my home, my wife should, if she wishes it, be allowed to have connection according to Vedic rites with some other man, in order that children may be born to my house. If this is not done, then the family dignity will suffer. Indeed, this practice should now be followed in the case of all wives whose husbands have been absent for four years or more. It is permitted by Vedic rites if the wives are willing.*'[41]

Requesting his leaders to help our people to get rid of social evils, he says that 'we leave everything to you because you are leaders of our community. No army (community) can move without the permission of its leaders. You have held over the community. God has given you prestige. This will help you to serve your community well. Leaders with foresight always try to inculcate freedom of thought and action. This is necessary. Highlighting the effects on our people of interaction with the peoples of other countries during the course of their stay in foreign lands, from 1914 to 1918, in breaking the shackles of social backwardness. Our minds have opened up. Please, take such decisions and sow seeds of freedom at home soon. Don't leave anything to tomorrow, for tomorrow never comes. He wished this war to linger on for more time so that our people get an opportunity to come out and have new experiences, which would, after inculcating love for their community and their people in their hearts, enable them to build up healthy relationships among themselves.' The writer emphasizes that first, different Hindu castes, e.g., Sikhs, Jats, Brahmans, Rajputs, Dogras, etc., and after that, Hindus and Muslims learn to live together. It may be difficult to develop such ideas and sentiments in a short time

after joining the Army; therefore, these should be inculcated in the schools and colleges so that the time and energies we waste in debating trivialities like what to eat and what to drink and settling social disputes are saved for doing better things.

A soldier wrote to P. Baldev Ram, Rohtak on 15th March 1916, in which he explained that '*I want you to get some of that medicine which attracts one person to another. The sort of medicine, I want is that which would make a woman come to me directly she put it on.*'[42] It is an example of superstitions and illiterate behavior.

Political Changes

Some war veterans retired as soldiers and some were discharged after hostilities ended. The retirees got a pension and other benefits and remained loyal to the British government. The Government of India Act of 1919 gave them the right to vote in, and contest, the Legislative Council elections. In the Haryana Legislative Council elections of 1920, Sir Chhotu Ram, who went on to become one of the tallest leaders in Punjab for more than a decade, was defeated by Rtd. Risaldar Swaroop Singh. Those who were discharged, mostly young people who had not been in the army for long, found themselves suddenly unemployed and felt betrayed. When Mahatma Gandhi and other Indian leaders issued a call to the public to support Britain in the war, it was with the hope that in return, India would be made what Gandhiji called 'a partner in the empire' and India will get *Swaraj*.

The Indian Soldiers, in sum, considered the war a blessing, it was a great teacher. 'I wish this war to linger on for some more time," wrote *Jamadar* Tek Chand in his letter to the editor of the *Jat Gazette,*[43] 'so that our people get an opportunity to come out and have new experiences, which would, after inculcating love for their community and their people in their hearts, enable them to build healthy

relationships among themselves'. The war made the soldiers not only brave worriers but also a great agent of social change and reforms.

Conclusion

Their letters demonstrate that Indian soldiers were able to make use of writing effectively, despite often being illiterate and usually communicating under conditions of wartime censorship. The military postal service may have encouraged soldiers (and their families) to learn to read and write. The military censorship was not an insurmountable obstacle to communication, and its records have served to preserve soldiers' words. These letters are a significant vehicle for the understanding of the history of Indian literacy, as well as of the engagement of peasant-soldiers in World War I. From these letters, we can learn about soldiers' reactions – both positive and negative – to the encounter with wartime. The soldiers' letters offer a window into the mental and cultural life of peasant-soldiers, which might otherwise have been closed to the historical record. At the centenary of the end of World War I, a new appreciation for the role of Indian soldiers among the Allied troops is beginning to emerge.

The names of these Haryanavi soldiers have disappeared from public memory, but their despondency, amid a war that they were dragged into, survived in their letters. The letters were censored, but they still provide a vivid picture of the experiences of the soldiers, who wrote to them from India.

References

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2. Omissi, *Indian Voices,* p. 369.
3. Philip Mason, *Matter of Honour: An Account of the Indian*

Army, its Officers, and Men, London, 1974, p. 412.

4. Omissi, *Indian Voices,* p. 369.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 370.
6. Prof. Prabhjot Parmar, University of Fraser Valley, Canada presented a paper in the International Seminar 'India and the Great War' held at USI, New Delhi on 5-7 March, 2014.
7. *The Rohtak's War Work: The Report of a Punjab District* (*1914*-1919) published by the Rohtak District Board. The principal fighting races are Jats, Gaur Brahmans, Muslman Rajputs, Ahirs, and Hindu Rajputs. Among these, the Jats come first and constitute more than thirty percent of the population. In the First World War Rohtak supplied 16,741 total combatants and distributions are as follows: Hindus 13,826 i.e. 82.6 percent, Mohammadans 2,867 i.e. 17.1 percent and last Christians 48 negligible.
8. Susan Van Koski, 'Letters Home, 1915-16: Punjabi Soldiers Reflect on War and Life in Europe and their Meanings for Home and Self', *International Journal of the Punjab Studies,* 2/1, 1995, p. 45.
9. Corrigan, *Sepoys in the Trenches,* 1999, p. 45.
10. David Omissi, *Indian Voices,* p. 32.
11. *Ibid.,* p. 231.
12. *Ibid.,* p. 283.
13. Samanth Subramanian, 'The forgotten Indian soldiers of WWI's European battlefields', *The National,* 9 March, 2014.
14. Rozina Visram, *Asians in Britain: 400 Years of History*, London, 2002, p. 176.
15. David Omissi, *Indian Voices,* p. 49.
16. *The National,* 9 March, 2014.

17. David Omissi, *Indian Voices,* p. 183.
18. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
19. *Ibid.* p. 71.
20. *Ibid.* p. 95.
21. *Ibid.*, pp. 246-47.
22. *Ibid.*, pp. 284-85.
23. *Census of India, 1911*, vol. I, Calcutta, 1913, pp. 294-295.
24. The Paper presented in the International Seminar held at Ypres, Belgium on 24 October, 2014.
25. The Jat High School, Rohtak, maintained the high reputation of the community whose name it bears by sending four teachers and 100 students to the colours. In the same way, Middle School of Kalanaur supplied 52 recruits to the Army and was true to the traditions of the proud (*The Rohtak's War Work: The Report of a Punjab District, 1914*-1919, p. 26).
26. *Jem*. Lahri Singh, *Jem.* Jhanda Singh, *Jem*. Bharat Singh, *Jem.* Dalip Singh, all *Risaldars*, N.C.Os and Jawans, B. Squadron of 20th Deccan Horse wrote a letter to the editor *Jat Gazette*, Rohtak from Warfield. This letter was published in the *Jat Gazette* on 01.07.1918, p. 8 and translated by Prof. K. C. Yadav.
27. The copies of these letters are preserved in the Archives of Haryana Academy of History and Culture, Kurukshetra.
28. *Risaldar* Mam Chand of 6th Cavalry, C-4 Squadron, from battlefield sent a letter to Headmaster Baldev Singh, Jat High School, Rohtak, in which he had mentioned that 'I wish to state that we also want to contribute whatever little we can towards building a Boarding House for the School. The 6th Cavalry most gladly collected their own funds and sent you Rs. 400 in

August-September 1917 but no receipt has reached us. Nor do we know whether or not it had reached you. Please, tell us the total amount you have received date wise.' (*Jat Gazette,* Rohtak, 4 June, 1918, p. 15) translated by Prof. K.C. Yadav.

29. 22 donation tablets were fixed on the 22 rooms of Jat High School, which are now lying in a neglected condition. These were the original source material, which co-relates the soldiers' letters written to the editor *Jat Gazette* from the battlefield.

30. Bhaskar Raman & Aditya Sakorkar published an article on 'World War 1 Indian soldiers drove social, political change at home,' on the bases of Prof. K. C. Yadav's interview, *The Guardians*, New Delhi, 20th July, 2014.

31. For detail, see Jagdish Parshad and Col. Atul Dev, 'Military Heritage of Haryana', *Newsletter,* INTACH Haryana Chapter: August 2016, pp. 22-25.

32. Van Koski, *Letters Home,* 1995, p. 52.

33. David Omissi (ed.), *op. cit.,* pp. 257-58.

34. Visram, *Asian in Britain,* 2002, p. 193.

35. Van Koski, *Letters Home,* 1995, pp. 52-53.

36. *Ibid.,* pp. 315-16.

37. *Ibid.*

38. A tablet was set affixed on the Kosli village, in which mentioned that 'From this village 247 men went to the great war 1914 – 1919 of these 6 gave up their lives'. In the same way, every village of the country that has sent more than 100 soldiers from their village, deputy commissioner of the said district, had affixed an inscribed stone tablet on the legible place.

39. Original letter in Urdu language but here I have used

translation version got by Prof. K.C. Yadav (*Jat Gazette,* Rohtak, 4 June, 1918, p. 8).

40. David Omissi (ed), *op. cit.,* p. 103.
41. *Ibid.,* pp. 330-31.
42. *Ibid*, p. 164.
43. *Jat Gazette*, 4 June 1918, p. 8

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