

Voices from the Prison: Indian Soldiers in German Prisoners of War Camp, 1915-1918

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Abstract

Over 1.4 million Indian soldiers joined the Indian Army during World War I. They were deployed at various war fronts including France, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Egypt, Palestine, and Gallipoli. Despite their important role, the stories of these soldiers remained almost unstudied until the turn of the century. The fact remained that the Indian soldiers were generally not literate enough to record their experiences. Colonial rulers also kept them as extras on the 'stage' of the historical narrative. During the centenary commemoration of the War (2014-2018), some studies about Indian participation have been conducted leading to some good publications. This Paper was also part of one such study. The Paper seeks to study the voices of Indian soldiers recorded during their internment at a POW camp in Germany during World War I. These voices were recorded between 1915 and 1918 by researchers of 'Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission' with an aim to study different languages for phonetics, dialects, and linguistics purposes.

Introduction

Some voice recordings of Indian soldiers interned in Prisoner of War (PoW) camps in Germany, during World War I, are archived at Humboldt University in Berlin. These voices were recorded between 1915 and 1918 by researchers of the 'Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission'. The objective was to study different languages for phonetics, dialects, and linguistic purposes and teach foreign languages in German universities. Strategically,

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the production of knowledge on colonial races and languages could help train the German officers to be posted to these colonies to set up a bigger German empire after winning the war. The voices captured in shellac discs have survived for over a century despite Germany being ruined by two world wars. Perhaps, these are the oldest voice recordings of Indian soldiers anywhere in the world.

Unfortunately, we were unaware of these voices even after the turn of almost a century. These recordings became known thanks to some German scholars who dug out and brought forth this rare material.¹ These voices have acquired a tremendous historical value over the period. Thomas Edison's invention of phonograph, in 1877, led to capturing of voices in disc which could be heard even after the life of the person. These voice recordings are an unusual source for compilation of history of our soldiers of the Great War. As Franziska Roy and Heike Liebau point out that the colonial soldiers were doubly marginalised, they are forgotten in memory and left out of history.²

The Indian soldiers, indeed, were not literate enough to leave behind written records. Their history, therefore, remained mostly blurred. Despite their crucial role in this war, they were kept as extras on the 'stage' of historical narrative. These voices break the historical silence and register their presence, reminding the historians about Indian participation in the Great War. This article endeavours to revisit the Indian soldiers of World War I by probing some of their voice recordings archived at Germany.

Who were these Internees?

Who were these internees? The British Indian Army was mobilised and deployed on the western front (France) soon after the declaration of the war in August 1914. They landed at Marseilles, France in October 1914 and fought some fierce battles at Ypres, Festubert, Givenchy, Loos, and Neuve Chappelle during the next one year.³ Over 130,000 Indians were deployed on this front of the war.⁴ While fighting the Germans here, about 1,000 Indians were taken prisoners and brought to Germany.⁵ They comprised men mainly from Punjab, United Provinces (present day Uttar Pradesh), and Nepal.⁶ The Germans had hundreds of POW camps for Entente (Britain, Russia, and France) powers and their dependencies. The South Asians were later segregated,⁷ and

shifted to Wunsdorf camp, near Berlin, along with other colonial POWs for political indoctrination.⁸ The camp was setup in temporary hutments, surrounded by a barbed-wire fence. Subsequently, the Indians interned here were sent to Romania in 1917.⁹

The main purpose of the Halfmoon camp was to turn its internees against their British and French colonial rulers, and recruit them for German and Ottoman forces. Simultaneously, the camp also became the site of extensive anthropological research, carried out upon prisoners interned there including Sikh and Muslim soldiers from India, Gurkhas from Nepal, and African soldiers from French colonies.

Process of the Voice Recording

The prison camp with men from different ethnicity were considered as colonial laboratory on German soil.¹⁰ In 1915, some professors of Berlin University approached the military authorities for permission to conduct research on the prisoners to study their race, languages, dialects, etc. The initiative led to the appointment of a body called 'Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission' in October 1915 by the Prussian Government. The Commission included some thirty academics working in the fields of linguistics, anthropology, and musicology, among others. They selected 31 POW camps among hundreds in Germany. One camp was Wunsdorf (also called Halfmoon camp)¹¹, where Indians were interned. This camp was more widely covered and visited because of the rich socio-cultural diversity of POWs here from the Indian subcontinent. Wilhelm Doegen, a researcher (a Philologist) in the Commission, looked after the task of voice recordings. The recordings were done very systematically as follows:

- **Preparation of script.** First the prisoners were asked to prepare a script of the material they desired to speak about. They could seek the help of their fellow internees in this work.
- **Recording process.** Then, each POW was asked to stand in front of the phonographic funnel and read out the script. He could also sing a song or tell a story on the funnel of the gramophone.
- **Details of records.** The research team would then fill in a designed proforma detailing the name, age, caste, language,

permanent address of the internee, as also the date and type of recording like poem, song, story, etc.

- **Preparation of Phonetic notation of recorded voice.**
- **Fair copy of the original script.**
- **German translation of the script.**

German researchers were very meticulous in documentation. The Commission recorded 2,672 audio-media (gramophone discs and wax cylinders) of about 250 languages, dialects, and traditional music of PoW interned in Germany. The recordings ranged between few seconds to about four minutes. As for the Indian recordings, the collection at Lautarchiv (Sound Archives) comprises 282 titles on 193 shellac discs. These cover more than a dozen languages and dialects, including Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, Bengali, Baluchi, Pashto, Khasi, Limbu, Magari, Gurung, Sylheti, Rai, etc.¹² Mass of the Indian POWs in this camp belonged to areas like Fatehpur, Gonda, Etawah, Rai Bareilly in United Provinces; Amritsar, Patiala, Ferozepur in Punjab; Gurkhas from Nepal, and Baluchis from Baloch region (of present-day Pakistan). The men from United Province generally recorded *chhand*, *bhajans*, *choupai*, etc., in Hindi with their local dialect.

The Content of the Indian Recordings

The recordings of the Indians include legends, fairy tales, fables, poems, religious content, biographical content of speaker, about their home country, and their experiences of war, etc. As the prisoners formulated their own texts, some chose to record folk stories. Sepoy Seoraj Singh, a Thakur from Sairpaur, Rai Bareilly, of 9th Bhopal Infantry, on 03 January 1917 recorded one of the famous *kissas* from Akbar-Birbal stories.¹³ Sib Singh, a soldier from Amritsar revealed his ignorance about the rulers of the world. He recorded:

“The German *Badshah* (Emperor) is very wise. He wages war against all *Badshah*. The Englishman is *Badshah* in India. We did not know that there were other *Badshah* also. When the war began, we came to know about several *Badshah*. In India, people do not know anything on this aspect”.¹⁴

Sib Singh here observes that contrary to the general perceptions of ordinary Indian villagers, besides the British

Emperor, there were other emperors also and they were equally wise and powerful. He points to the ignorance of many Indians in that regard.

The scrutiny of the voice recordings indicate that most internees were uncomfortable narrating their stories before the phonogram. They found singing songs and writing poems easier and, therefore, most chose to recite. Many sang religious songs. To illustrate, Sepoy Chhote Singh, from Fatehpur, United Provinces, recited the story of Lord Rama from the Ramayana.¹⁵ Some group songs were also recorded. In one recording, three Indian POWs, Mahtap Singh, Shivdular Singh, and Baldev Singh from United Provinces, sang a group song related to different avatars of the God Vishnu. Some recordings relate to ghost stories. On 08 December 1916, one Bhawan Singh, from Almora recorded that when a person dies, he turns into a ghost and his soul constantly roams around in the air. He claimed to have encountered many ghosts of his colleagues who had died in the war.¹⁶

The study of the recordings suggests that Indian soldiers generally chose to narrate stories or songs based on religion, classical tales, and mythology. However, as we know, the soldiers were young, in their late teens or twenties, and away from their families, and we find some stories and recitations related to romance and the pain of separation. Sepoy Kalikadin Pande, a 27 years old soldier from Sultanpur (United Provinces) who belonged to the 9th Bhopal Infantry, described the beauty of a damsel in his recitation.¹⁷ The use of similes in his articulation compared the black dye of eyes with dark cloud *bhado* (rainy month); shining of *bindi* with the sunshine of *Kartik* month, and the shape of her chest with moulding of a goldsmith. Suffering from pangs of separation, the soldier expresses his pain to his fiancé that he is in prison in a foreign land, like a bird in a cage, adding that his flesh and blood might be in the German camp but his heart is always with her.

While narrating his story of being made POW, Sepoy Mal Singh of Punjab spoke about his fondness for home-made food. He wished to eat it again when repatriated after the war. Nevertheless, he did not mention the condition of food at the POW camp. He had been away from his home for the last three years and was apprehensive about when the war would end. He

wished to return to his home as soon as possible.¹⁸ A Gurkha soldier reminisces the beautiful Himalayan terrain stating that he did not want to live in Europe anymore. He wished to reach out to his home as soon as possible.¹⁹ Unfortunately, he died in captivity and could never make it to his village in Nepal. His voice captured in wax disc became last record of his existence and his last will.²⁰ Sepoy Bela Singh, from Amritsar, recorded about his deployment by the British on the war front. He narrated that the weapons of Germany were superior, and he was taken prisoner. He mentions that he felt happy when he met the German interlocutor, Mr Walter.²¹ In fact, Paul Walter was a former missionary who was dispatched to the western front to work as an interpreter and receive the Indian POWs. He later became instrumental in transferring the Indian POWs from various POW camps to Halfmoon camp in Wunsdorf for political reasons and worked as translator to them. Bela Singh explains his story of being captured and taken to Germany.

Recordings Sanitised

It is important to note that recordings are almost silent about camp life, camp conditions, basic amenities, etc. It suggests that the narratives were either censored before recordings on the gramophone funnel or the POWs were instructed in advance on dos and don'ts. POWs hardly mention their units, which every soldier invariably speaks while introducing himself. This trend was in vogue during the era of World War I. *Fauji Akhbars* of the period are full of letters from soldiers and they cited the name of unit every time they made correspondence. Further, hardly ever anyone spoke about mistreatment, hunger, diseases, and deaths in the camp.²² A Sikh soldier, Sepoy Sundar Singh, however, took the Germans to task by recording his pain.

Expressing his happiness of being provided with the Guru Granth Sahib, Sepoy Sundar Singh pointed out that the *Rumala Sahib* cloth did not accompany Granth Sahib, and this hurt the sentiments of Sikhs in the camp. He also revealed that the food was not adequate for the prisoners in the camp. Sepoy Sundar Singh, perhaps, dared to record his feeling despite the fact that he knew that the recordings ultimately would be translated into the German language.²³ About 226 Indians out of some 1,000 died in German captivity. According to a report, mortality rate of POWs was highest amongst the South Asians.

Conclusion

One fact common in all narratives of the Indians, is, that there should be an end to hostilities, and they should be repatriated to their motherland. But none of them could be sure whether they would live to witness the end of the war. They suffered the forced labour, scarcity of food, the recurring diseases, and the emotional torment. The possibility of imminent death always loomed on their mind on a daily basis. Some Recordings speak of the mental state of the soldiers in the PoW camps. The voices, in all, conclusively touch upon contemporary tastes. Interestingly, some of the recorded *bhajans* and stories (*kisse*) are still in use, notwithstanding the test of the time, and people take much interest in them.²⁴ The change and continuity in folklore and tradition, thus, can be gauged by these voice recordings. One of the *bhajans* which I heard, in one recording of 1917, is sung in villages in north India even today.²⁵ There could be some more such songs and stories.

Endnotes

¹ See Franziska Roy, Heike Liebau & Ravi Ahuja, *When the War began We heard of several Kings: South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany*, Social Science Press, New Delhi, 2011. Also the documentary film 'The Halfmoon Files: A Ghost Story' by German filmmaker Philip Scheffner. Irene Hilden has also worked extensively on the subject in her book 'Absent Presences in the Colonial Archive: Dealing with the Berlin Sound Archive's Acoustic Legacies', published by Leuven University Press in 2022.

² Roy, Liebau & Ahuja, *When the War began We heard of several Kings*, p. 2.

³ Meerut and Lahore divisions reached Marseilles in Oct 1914. Indians were responsible for manning one-third of the British line in France.

⁴ *India's Contribution to Great War*, Government Press, Calcutta 1924, pp. 96-7.

⁵ Ravi Ahuja, Lost Engagements? Traces of South Asian Soldiers in German Captivity, 1915-1918, in *When the War began We heard of several Kings*, p. 20. Also see Andrew Tait Jarboe, The Prisoner Dilemma: Britain, Germany, and the Repatriation of Indian Prisoners of War, in *Commonwealth Journal of International Affairs*, 2014, 103/2, pp. 201-210.

⁶ Some of the units the men belonged to include the 58th Rifles, 9th Bhopal, 1/3 Gorkha Rifles, 127th Baluchis, and 129th Baluchis. See A Voice recording, a portrait photo, and three drawings: Tracing the life of a colonial soldier, by Heike Liebau, Working Paper, No. 20, 2018, p. 4.

According to a report in *The Tribune*, some of the men were from the 15th Ludhiana Sikhs, 47th Sikhs, and 4th Gurkha Rifles. See Sarika Sharma, 100 Years Later, Voices from World War I, in *The Tribune*, dated 20 May 2018.

⁷ In April 1915, some 400 Indian POWs (95 Muslim, 160 Gurkhas, 65 Sikhs, and 71 Thakurs in April 1915) were interned in Halfmoon Camp. In June 1917, when a large group of South Asians had been transferred to Romania, another 631 Indians (most were lascars/seamen) were registered in Halfmoon camp. Wundorf had some 10,000 prisoners in total.

⁸ Most of the Asian and African colonial soldiers in German captivity were transferred for political reasons to special camps in the neighbouring towns of Zossen and Wunsdorf south of Berlin. In the Halfmoon Camp, they were to undergo political and nationalistic indoctrination and be persuaded to rebel against their colonial rulers. The propaganda was nationalistic and pan-Islamic. See Britta Lange, 'South Asian Soldiers and German Academics: Anthropological, Linguistic and Musicological Field studies in Prison Camps,' in *When the war began we heard of several kings*, p. 150.

⁹ Prisoners of War (India), by Heike Liebau, see https://encyclopedia.1914-1918-online.net/article/prisoners_of_war_india

¹⁰ Roy, Liebau & Ahuja, *When the War began We heard of several Kings*, p. 12.

¹¹ Halfmoon Camp at Wunsdorf was named after crescent of the mosque erected for POWs.

¹² See Website of Lautarchiv <http://www.sammlungen.hu-berlin.de/schlagworte/3687/dokumente/?p=0>. Accessed on 5 April 2017.

¹³ PK 653, dated 3.1.1917, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁴ PK 610, dated 9.12.1916, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁵ PK 648, dated 3.1.1917, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁶ PK 591, dated 8.12.1916, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁷ PK 655, dated 3.1.1917, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁸ PK 691, dated 11.12.1916, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

¹⁹ PK 307, dated 6.9.1916, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

²⁰ Britta Lange, Post restante, and messages in bottles: Sound recordings of Indian prisoners in the First World War, in *Social Dynamics: A Journal of African Studies*, vol 41 No. 1 (2015), pp. 84-100.

²¹ PK 589, dated 8.12.1916, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

²² Britta Lange, Archival Silence as Historical Sources, in *Sound Effects*, vol. 7, no. 3, 2017, pp. 47-60.

²³ PK 676 dated 5 Jan 1917, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

²⁴ PK 648, dated 3.1.1917, Lautarchiv, Humboldt, Germany.

²⁵ Raghuvar Koshalya ke lal, tumhi ho jag rachane vaale ...