

Srinath Raghavan: India's War; The Making of Modern South Asia 1939-1945

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S. Menon

Srinath Raghavan's "India's War" fills a gap in the political-military history of India, and does so magnificently. While we have several excellent histories of WWII dealing with aspects of India's involvement and the effect of the war on India, they have been segmented or fragmentary. Bailey and Harper's "Forgotten Armies; Britain's Asian Empire and the War with Japan" (2005) was a brilliant social history and examination of the role of the Indian Army in the the 'great crescent' from Bengal to Singapore. 'India's War' and 'Forgotten Armies' have a full measure of British complacency and folly in common, but differ in important respects. This is the 360 degree view, including Africa, Europe and the Middle East. Besides, it is the view from India, not Britain or Europe.

Other historians have written of the home front, or of the Indian soldier's individual experience, or of the domestic politics in India relating to the war, or of purely military aspects of WWII. While each is valuable in itself, this is the first integrated, holistic history, free of the shadow of contemporary hero worship and self justificatory memoir, which studies WWII from an Indian point of view. This magisterial book makes the other histories seem parochial by comparison.

"India's War" is the first comprehensive and integrated telling of the story of India's role in World War II, in Africa, the Middle East, Italy and in South East Asia. Seventy-two years after the end of the war, most of the participants are no longer with us and human memory and official archives have yielded what they will. I suppose that the time is now ripe, and that we now have enough distance from WWII, to write its real history and come to balanced conclusions.

In the last few years, Srinath Raghavan has helped to create a new genre of contemporary Indian history which combines diplomatic, political and military history in a seamless whole, that stresses strategic aspects as well. With this book he has made the genre his own, producing narrative history at its best, telling the story of India's WWII.

And what a story it is, full of great characters and grand themes.

This is a story peopled by Gandhiji, whose pacifism was challenged by the war; by Nehru the conflicted thinker; by Jinnah, who appears Machiavellian with considerable British help and luck; by Bose, whose propaganda value to others (ranging from Hitler to Tojo to today's Indian politician) has consistently exceeded his political or military effectiveness¹;

¹ "Hitler had little use for India and even less for the Indian" Bose (page 254).

by Churchill, whose judgement and even grasp on reality are questionable; by underrated generals like Slim (page 108), and by those with overblown reputations like Wingate, whose real contributions to operational outcomes were minimal (page 380).

It tells us something of how we have changed, and of how much more insecure leaders are today. Recall how a divided Congress Working Committee in Bardoloi finally followed Gandhiji's advice to pass a resolution freeing Gandhi and the Congress to go their own ways on the greatest question of the day, whether or not to support the British war against Hitler without a guarantee of Indian independence (page 210).

Raghavan never forgets that ultimately history is made by men and women, by individuals, and that their individuality is on full display in crisis and war.

The book follows five main or grand themes (page 4ff):

- It follows the strategic dimension of the war, and stresses, rightly, the Raj's sub-imperial system of its own, which India and Indian arms sustained within the British Empire. This flowed from the recognition that India must, in her own interest, defend more than her coasts and land frontiers, (page 36), — a theme that is increasingly relevant to a rising India that seeks strategic coherence today in a very different environment.
- It also deals with the international dimension of the war. It was India that provided the bulk of the (British Indian) Army that defeated Japan in south-east Asia, that held Iraq and the Middle East for Britain during the war, and that was used after the war by Britain to restore the Dutch and French colonial empires in Indonesia and Vietnam (page 447). There are fascinating accounts of Roosevelt and Churchill's exchanges on India and Indian independence (page 216 ff), and on Chiang Kaishek's conversations with J Nehru and Gandhiji during his February 1942 visit to India (page 224 ff).
- The domestic politics of the war, which gave Indians a chance to perform roles that they had never been permitted to under the Empire, are examined in detail, as also the dilemma it posed to the Congress and other leaders of the Indian freedom movement. It could be argued that the war, the way that Linlithgow and Churchill reacted to it, and that how Jinnah used it, made both independence and Partition inevitable. The war weakened the British imperial position (page 436), and the British were convinced in 1946 that they could no longer rely on the Indian Army as an imperial instrument after widespread disturbances in the armed forces (page 444 & 448 ff) and their reaction to the INA trials (page 446). The British were no longer convinced of the political reliability of the Indian army (page 448) and truly feared that the Congress would use the INA to spearhead another revolt (page 446). Without these multiple elements, Indian independence would have come later and in a very different form. In other words, our independence was not the gift of great men but a result of greater forces, many of them

strengthened or unleashed by the War. Even the widespread escalation of communal violence during Partition cannot be understood without the impact of WWII and the training in the use of weapons and methods of organising logistics and violence that it gave a generation of Indian youth (page 459).

- Raghavan also looks at the economic and social dimensions of the 'home front', and draws our attention to the great extent to which India's urbanisation, and its planned and mixed economy were a result of the unprecedented wartime mobilisation of a desperately poor economy, and of the privation and starvation that made this possible, — the Bengal Famine (page 350) which was actually a national famine. The Bombay Plan and other approaches to post-war development came straight out of the wartime experience of Indian industry.
- On the war front itself, Raghavan stresses the transformation of the Indian Army, from a post-1857 constabulary to a adaptable and capable fighting force. From not allowing Indian units any field artillery after 1857 the British were forced to allow the Indian Army to become the modern fighting machine that defeated the Japanese in Burma. Beginning the war unprepared and ill-equipped (page 37), the Indian Army showed a capacity to learn and change, evolving tactics, doctrine, training and equipment as it learnt from defeat, despite the prejudice and shabby treatment it faced from its British commanders, with very few honourable exceptions². The ability to learn, adapt and evolve seems to be a lesson that each military generation has to learn for itself the hard way.

Most significantly, the book looks at the effect of the War on South Asia and India and successfully makes the case that modern South Asia is in very many ways a product of WWII.

Overall, the book also struck me as truer to life than other histories which seek logical explanations for all of history, including the irrationality of human and state conduct in war. In fact, the levels of incompetence and strategic confusion that he describes are revealing. The allies were still debating their overall priorities at the summit level in mid-1944 while the battles of Kohima and Imphal were going on!

The book also left me with a very strong impression of how abiding India's strategic interests are, and of how deeply our permanent geography determines those interests, (Iran page 143 ff; Iraq page 123). But Partition to our west and the abject condition that Burma to our east was left in by the war, ravaged and isolated, effectively limited India's strategic horizons. In effect, Pakistan has stunted our thinking and partitioned our minds.

² For example: Monty and senior British officers prejudices against "sepoys soldiers" (page 362); Monty's shocking treatment of the 4th Indian Division (page 367); and the instances of differential treatment to the Indian Army (page 374) extending to rations and other scales (page 385 ff).

The book reminds us repeatedly that an integrated subcontinent is essential to India's security interests and for India's rise.

Lest you think that this is a book that is dull and overwhelming, it is also a well written book full of nuggets. Did you know that the Government of India still went up to Simla for the summer of 1941, when Britain's very existence was under threat (page 122)? Or that the Middle East only accounted for 5% of world oil production in 1941, and that the US accounted for 83% (page 123)? Or that *rava iddly* and the spread of Chinese restaurants throughout India were a direct consequence of WWII (page 269)? (Hint: there were over 40,000 Chinese troops training in Ramgarh and Wavell refused Chiang Kaishek's offer of Chinese troops to liberate Burma in 1943 (page 203 ff). But that is not how or why our diet was enriched. It was because the overseas Chinese could no longer follow their traditional vocations in war time India.) But I will not spoil your pleasure by revealing all here. For that you must read the book.

It is rare that at the end of a 553 page book on a serious subject you are left still wanting more. This is a calm, steady, and objective (insofar as that is possible) look at a key determinant of what we are today. As such, we need more books like 'India's War' to promote our study of history and our self awareness.

Questions:

1. The long term effects of Gandhi's pacifism and Nehru's wavering?
2. Were "coloured" regiments kept out of Germany as a matter of policy?
3. Did Churchill's obduracy hasten Indian independence, stiffen India's resistance, eliminate the middle ground (like Rajaji etc)?
4. Did the 'Quit India' movement make Pakistan inevitable?
5. Does the Indian Army still display the same ability to learn and adapt as it did after the Arakan campaign? Is it only after defeat (like 1962) that armies learn?
6. You seem dismissive of the INA's contribution.
7. Did the War make India ungovernable by the British?
8. Rate Wingate, Slim, Auchinlek, Wavell.

— Gul Hassan Khan