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La Guerre Mondiale n'a pas eu lieu: The War India Forgot

The story of India's participation in the Second World War is among the most consequential to the allies, but it is also one of the least known. Indians at the time were not keen on remembering their part fighting alongside their colonial oppressor, so the memory was buried shortly after Partition. This mass forgetting was extremely effective. In any other anglophone country, where the War has been lionized since before it had even been won, Raghu Karnad's Farthest Field would be the thousandth entry into the well-trod ground of World War Two memoirs. In India, however, the book stands all but alone as a testament to a War the country would rather forget. [1] The British were by and large happy to ignore India's role, as it conflicted with the dominant view in the west of the war as a white man's victory. India in the Second World War existed at the intersection of racism and colonialism, a status that simple loyalty to Empire was unable to conquer. India's refusal to acknowledge her part in the war and Britain's willingness to indulge her means that, in practice, India's role in the Second World War is robbed of much of its historicity.

The relationship between colonialism and race, in the novel as in reality, was closely intertwined. Bobby and Manek were Parsis, a Zoroastrian ethnic group that had immigrated from Iran after the Islamic invasion in the 7th century AD.[2] Parsis were among the most well-respected communities in India, both by the British and other Indians. Karnad describes them as,

[1] Raghu Karnad, *Farthest Field* (New York: Norton, 2015).
[2] Karnad, *Field*, 5.

"Devoutly civilized, consummately lawful…polite and helpful…the exemplary race, making the best of British command without any desire to usurp it."[3] However, even the most respected Indian communities were considered racially inferior to the British. The ideology of white supremacy underpinned the British Raj and cannot be separated from it.

Many British officers who had served in India adopted a paternalistic view of the subcontinent and took it upon themselves to look out for the wellbeing of the country and her fighting men.[4] General William Slim, General Claude Auchinleck, and Admiral Lord Louis Mountbatten were three such Britons. All three men strove to ensure the welfare of the Indian soldier, even when they were not directly responsible for them. General Auchinleck, serving in North Africa, had warned that "Two hundred thousand Indian soldiers in the Middle East is very nice for us, but hardly in keeping with her own apparently very urgent need…we can still hold India without the Middle East, but we cannot for long hold the Middle East without India."[5] There is no doubt that their affection was genuine, but the power imbalance between a colonizer and the colonized- the master and the slave- prevented this from being an equal relationship. This faction was, by all accounts, in the minority. Most British officers and civilian officials expressed little but contempt for the Indians, asserting that they were simply incapable of handling command or advanced technical knowledge.[6]

Regardless of how loyal to the Empire an Indian soldier might show himself to be, they were still regarded as immutably lesser than their white British counterparts. Racial prejudices against Indians were institutionalized and long ingrained among the British administration.

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[3] Karnad, *Field*, 5.
[4] Karnad, *Field*, 156-7.
[5] Karnad, *Field*, 157.
[6] Karnad, *Field*, 18.

Individual Indians proving themselves equal to individual Britons was not enough to counter systemic biases that had been learned and internalized over the course of the Raj. Loyalty to the Raj, as a strategy for liberation, was therefore futile.

India's role in the Second World War was quickly swept under the rug. The Indians wished to forget, and the British were more than happy to indulge them. The trauma of Partition in 1947 came quickly after the war and overshadowed the war in India's memory of the decade. The myth of the white man's war was easier to preserve if the Indian's were not in the picture, and this is the route that the British and Indians both took. Memory is closely linked to history and, when collective memory is suppressed, history suffers too. "History" is not such because it is an event or series of events that have transpired. History is what is chosen to be recorded and what is chosen to be remembered, and what is recorded and remembered is ultimately a political decision. In post-partition India association with the outgoing Raj and the British in general was politically undesirable, therefore the Indian military association with the British was minimized and anti-British events, such as the Rebellion of 1857, were lionized. India participated in World War II and there is plenty of documentation that they did. But, when Indians reject en masse a period of their history it genuinely does, over time, lose it historicity. The war is lucky to be a footnote in an Indian textbook and is glossed over in elementary and secondary education. When a critical mass is reached of people denying that an event has occurred, it is materially the same as if it had indeed never occurred.

While cognizant of the horrors of fascism and the destruction that followed in its wake, the Congress was initially unwilling to support the War.[7] It appears that, because of the Partition

[7] Karnad, *Field*, 24-25.

that shortly followed, coming around to supporting the War was the right decision. War or not, India had become increasingly burdensome to the British and her advocates for independence had become increasingly vocal. Supporting the War was the right thing for the Allies and world at large, but the same answer cannot be given with as much surety for India itself. The benefit to India from supporting the War was marginal, and the cost in blood and treasure was high. I consider India's participation in the War, and the Congress' approval of it, to have been the right decision only because it is what happened. Different forks in the road could have been taken, and these may have led to different outcomes, but the path that was followed was one that led the British out of India, so it must therefore be classified as necessary, if not emphatically "right."

The title of this paper is a reference to Jean Baudrillard's *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place*, a series of essays penned during the Gulf War in late 1990-early 1991.[8] Both the Gulf War and the Second World War occurred- neither Baudrillard or myself argue to the contrary. But, the representation of either conflict is wholly alien to its reality. Baudrillard sees the Gulf War as a massive war crime playing dress-up as a legitimate war, whereas the Second World War from an Indian perspective is akin to an embarrassment cloaked in nothingness. If the Gulf War was characterized by the media spectacle, then the Second World War could be characterized by the lack of one. When it is unmoored from memory, history has the potential of being twisted from the real to the hyperreal, which is an inability to distinguish to simulation from that which it simulates. History without memory is quite like a copy without an original. In that way, the Second World War was a simulacrum in Baudrillard's sense.

[8] Jean Baudrillard, *La guerre du Golfe n'a pas eu lieu* (Paris: Galilée).

History, without memory or material evidence, is essentially fiction from a trusted author. History is an active process, one that lives and dies by the exposure or suppression certain events and periods receive. As Raghu Karnad states in the novel's prologue, "Countries keep alive the memory of the war dead… usually the war dead are remembered best of all… but sometimes even countries try to forget their wars, and the second death, of the idea of you, closes in."[9] India's refusal to acknowledge her part in the war and Britain's willingness to indulge her means that, where India is concerned, the Second World War did not take place.

[9] Karnad, *Field*, xvii-xviii

Bibliography

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