

## BOOK REVIEW

*India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs.* Santanu Das. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. xiii+465.

The past decade has seen a significant deepening in our understanding of the Indian or South Asian involvement in and influence upon European life and culture from the early to mid-nineteenth century onward. Santanu Das's remarkable, compendious *India, Empire, and First World War Culture*, published in 2018 to mark the centenary of the war's end, offers a particularly important contribution to that discussion—an analysis of the participation of around 1.5 million Indians in WWI, in both Europe and Mesopotamia. Though the book subscribes (if at times circumspectly) to the 2010s recovery project of the nonwhite war effort, its readings are at the same time more nuanced and far-reaching than the connotations of commemoration alone might at first suggest. The eight lavishly illustrated chapters analyze with a close, discriminating eye the “sensuous sphere” of the war experience, drawing together literary imaginings, letters, fragments, and oral and aural archives, including those of sepoy mothers (35, 77). In this way the study creates a powerful confluence of two separate if inter-related streams of scholarship and confirms in them a recent changing focus—first, the turn of war studies to cultural history, and then of imperial and global history to its one-time provinces, here India. Das's capacity to read into the finest interstices of lost, buried, and misplaced war archives mean that his book is already being recognized—and justly so—as one of the most important interventions in both fields that we have yet seen.

*India, Empire, and First World War Culture* builds on and extends the pioneering work of historians like Rozina Visram, Antoinette Burton, and Kusoom Vadgama on how Indians “negotiated the colonial and racialized

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meanings” attached to their encounters with Europe.<sup>1</sup> To illustrate, in a fine chapter, “Five Shades of ‘Brown,’” Das explores the part-ethnographic, part-documentary photographs and sketches of sepoy soldiers on the Western Front for the “trace of contingency” they bear, the “tremor in the field of European perception” that they generate (120–23). The discussion includes an intriguing account of the new repertoire of gestures the Indian soldiers brought to Europe, including perching, stretching, squatting, and grooming. Das is particularly acute and particularly gentle in exploring these sepoy soldiers’ participation in their own orientalizing, as well as their resistance to such framing—their glances to the side, their unexpected or unscripted movements, such as we find in the photograph of an Indian soldier visiting the grave of two British airmen that Das also includes as the cover image (151).

*India, Empire, and First World War Culture* is especially compelled by the everyday, the actual, physical experiences of Indian soldiers and in some cases of those who observed them, their ordinary frustrations and distractions, their passing moments of relief or curiosity. Chapter 4, “Imperial Antibiotic,” includes a striking reading of Kipling’s *The Eyes of Asia* (1918), in which Das examines how this “greatest writer of the time” drew on actual Indian letters home to “give the ordinary sepoy a voice,” and shows how Kipling’s ventriloquism lurches in complex ways between “grotesque travesty” and acute understanding (186–92). In line with Das’s first book, *Touch and Intimacy in First World War Literature* (2006), an outstanding set of reflections on haptic experiences of the Great War as captured chiefly in poetry, *India, Empire, and First World War Culture* is delicately attuned to “zones of contact between warm life and historical violence” (9). But the 2018 book is threshold widening in ways for which the earlier study only began to lay the ground. As Das’s bibliography of his own contribution to other studies of the Great War and India across the past years of commemoration shows, his work now informs the entire field of modernist and postcolonial war writing. This field-shaping impact is seen not only in the breadth of material he explores, ranging from ephemera to oral sources, and including even records of rumor (23, 77). It is also captured in his methodology, the care with which he reads across this “vertically and horizontally expanded archive,” his engagement with the “poignancy of story” (including stories drawn from song, children’s letters, marginal lists), and his overall attention to form (13). The kind of reading that this engagement sparks is truly inspired: a dwelling on unorthodox, even unwritten poetics to produce “a more complex psychological and sensuous space,”

1. Elleke Boehmer, *Indian Arrivals, 1870–1915: Networks of British Empire* (Oxford University Press, 2015), 5–6.

and an excavation of palimpsests to hear the reverberations of the “sepoy heart” (26 and elsewhere).

The achievement of the book can perhaps only be fully appreciated if we consider the combined insight and care required first to synthesize this vast range of cultural material, and then to find ways of reading it. In the chapter “Life Writing from Below,” for instance, in which images of Indian hands on the page lead on fluently to an investigation of sepoy letters as literary repositories of feeling, and that includes critical reflections on the extremes of self-wounding and romance the letters trace, the writer’s moves are so deft as to appear almost imperceptible (212). Or we might look at the powerful chapter on the “cosmopolis in extremis” (266) that was the war in Mesopotamia, as witnessed, among others, by the doctor Kalyan Mukherji and the lawyer-orderly Sisir Prasad Sarbadhikari. Both memoirs are freshly unearthed, as Das writes, and it is clear that he has participated centrally in that unearthing. His facility with this material testifies to a remarkable discipline honed, I suspect, in the very act of making sense of (and excavating) an extremely diverse archive.

*India, Empire and First World War Culture* is a book that merits being read at once closely and slowly. No chapter focuses on one text alone, yet each emerges through the alchemy of Das’s analysis as a seamless flow of “moments, moods, emotions, situations, crises, contingencies,” each moment and situation summoning up “a real body, a palpable life” (238). It is through slow, attentive reading that we truly begin to see what a spectrum of experience we traverse in this book, as the author now looks at soldiers’ letters, now listens to a warbling audio recording, now reads Mulk Raj Anand’s celebrated *Across the Black Waters* (1939), now considers Tagore’s against Iqbal’s cosmopolitanism, each time taking us into the “very contact-zone where testimony is born” (238).

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