



**Robinson, C. (2015) 'Indian soldiers on the Western Front: the role of religion in the Indian army in the Great War.'**  
*Religions of South Asia, 9 (1): 43-63.*

Link to official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/558/rosa.v9i1.23964>

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**Indian Soldiers on the Western Front:  
The Role of Religion in the Indian Army in the Great War<sup>i</sup>**

2014 saw the commemoration of the centenary of the start of the Great War, and also of the participation of Indian soldiers in the conflict as they arrived to serve on the Western Front. Although the historian K.M. Panikkar famously described the First World War as ‘the European Civil War’, on the grounds that its global dimension was secondary to the primary European nature of the conflict, he also acknowledged that neither its combatants nor its theatres of operation were solely European (Panikkar 1993: 197).

This article examines the part played by Indian soldiers on the Western Front. It foregrounds the religious dimensions of British policies and practices in recruiting to the Indian Army, and thereafter in the command of the troops. It focuses upon the ways in which the authorities were able to accommodate the Indian soldiers’ religions while they were on active service, by featuring a case study of the conversion of the Royal Pavilion Estate in Brighton, Sussex, into a military hospital where Indian casualties were treated. This case study was chosen because it was particularly well documented, and probably the best-publicized example of a First World War British hospital for Indian soldiers. Building upon earlier work that raised some of the same issues but concentrated more on religious ideals and teachings (Robinson 1999), this article’s discussion of how the military coped with the challenges of Indian religions is located in the context of critical reflection on martial race ideology and the complex and controversial role of religion in this ideology. It concludes with some comments on contemporary echoes of martial race ideology in public responses to Gurkha protests against discrimination by the British Army, Sikh claims to a martial history in relation to a variety of issues, and even an attempt to reconnect British Muslims with the armed forces.

### **Martial Race Ideology**

Martial race ideology dominated discourse about the correct composition of the Indian Army during the second half of the nineteenth, and the first half of the twentieth, century. At one level, the concept of martial race simply denoted those communities whose members were regarded by the British as suitable for military service, on the basis of their ostensibly martial character. However, as Heather Streets explains, this concept has to be seen in relation to ‘shifting racial ideologies ... as part of an increasingly “scientific” understanding of race as a set of objective, biological characteristics’ and in terms of ‘a consciously manipulated linguistic and performative tool ... as an artificial strategy of rule during a period of imperial anxiety’ (Streets 2004: 6-7). Yet, as she allows, the view of race was both broader in scope and more fluid in nature, certainly in the earlier era, while the belief in martial races was neither unprecedented in British, nor, crucially, unparalleled in Indian, thinking (pp. 7-8).

Describing the pre-scientific idea of race, Susan Bayly observes:

The term ... was widely used in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, but its meaning was linguistic and cultural, rather than 'ethnological' in the late Victorian sense, when notions of progressive evolution had emerged as a generalized theory of human racial 'type'.

(Bayly 1995: 172)

Nevertheless, even in the later period, race as it featured in martial race ideology was not in fact a purely physical phenomenon but an admixture of the biological with various other influences, for example geographical-cum-environmental or social-cum-occupational, on the grounds that martiality as an inherited racial quality was positively or negatively impacted by contextual factors (Roy 2013: 1311-12, 1318-19).

On the subject of indigenous norms, Philip Mason stresses the older origins of martial race in pre-British India as well as the concept's utility to the British Raj:

The division of the people into 'martial' and 'non-martial' was not an invention of the British; it was the recognition of something already implicit in the Indian social system. But it was extremely convenient to a conqueror.

(Mason 1974: 24)

Although the British went further in their formulation of martial race ideology, the warrior ideal was embodied in the *kshatriya varna* (Kirk-Greene 1980: 396), while epic literature offered lists of foreign and domestic fighting peoples (Brockington 1995: 101).<sup>ii</sup> The Mughals made similar determinations of military prowess, and, when forming their armies in India, they preferred the Rajputs and Marathas who were perceived to be warlike (Roy 2013: 1326-7). Likewise, the distinction between groups eligible and those ineligible for enlistment was drawn in Nepal before the British chose to recruit their erstwhile enemies (Caplan 1995: 262-3). Indeed, the East India Company tended to exploit extant lines of recruitment in raising an army to defend its interest and extend its holdings (Rand and Wagner 2012: 237-9).

The Mutiny of 1857-1858 that began with the Bengal Army and brought about the demise of the East India Company has been seen as a pivotal point in changing British military policy (e.g. *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 1897). Accordingly, the conventional interpretation of the impact and implications of the Mutiny regards the experience of the Mutiny as establishing future military planning and organization that marked a significant shift in recruitment patterns. The familiar history of the Mutiny turns on loyalty to the British as the criterion of recruitment, with communities to which mutineers belonged deemed unsuitable, and those to which loyal soldiers belonged suitable, to supply soldiers to Britain (Rand and Wagner 2012: 251). Indeed, in the immediate aftermath of the Mutiny, loyalty was the primary consideration in determining the composition of the Bengal Army though, in the longer term, it becomes clear that the Mutiny did not provide the justification for the

changes made to the Indian Army (Omissi 1994: 8-10). Subjected to closer scrutiny, by the final decades of the nineteenth century continuities and discontinuities in recruitment cannot be attributed to soldiers' conduct during the Mutiny (Rand and Wagner 2012: 251-2). This is evident from examining the fortunes of the *sepoys* of the largely loyal Madras and Bombay Armies that, if loyalty were still the operative factor, would suggest increased recruitment in the south and decreased recruitment in the north when subsequently it was southern recruitment that decreased and northern recruitment that increased (David 2003: 19; Mason 1974: 305, 325; Omissi 1994: 5, 15). This is borne out by figures for the areas from which infantry battalions were recruited between 1862 and 1914, showing that the numbers of battalions from Bombay and Madras fell from 30 to 18 and from 40 to 11 respectively, while the numbers of battalions from Nepal rose from 5 to 20 and those from Punjab and the North West Frontier from 28 to 57 (Omissi 1994: 11). The explanation for this was martial race ideology that, riven with contradiction and incoherence as it may have been, functioned to rationalize imperial practice as a recognition of, and response to, what was represented as the differential distribution of martial ability.

Two of the leading ideologues of martial race were Lieutenant-General George MacMunn and his predecessor Field-Marshal Lord Frederick Roberts. The initial premise of martial race ideology was predicated upon a distinction drawn between the West, where the whole population was potentially martial, and the East, where martiality was seen as particular to specific sections of the Indian population who possessed the required military aptitude (MacMunn 1984: 129); thus the supposedly martial Northerners were favoured over the supposedly non-martial Southerners (Roberts 1898: 532). The underlying logic, if that is the appropriate word, of this selection had a climatic element in that it was believed that a bracing climate was conducive to martiality, in contrast to warmer areas, since heat was understood to be debilitating both physically and psychologically (Roy 2013: 1312). Another element was caste-based, in that peasants of the middle rank were considered martial because they were untainted by the corrupt and debased mores of the urban educated classes (p. 1313).

### **The Martial Races and Religion**

Religion too had a prominent place in martial race ideology. In part, this was due to perceptions of the causes of the Mutiny. These have often centred on the introduction of the single-shot muzzle-loaded Enfield rifle and a rumour, traced to a worker at the Dum-Dum magazine, that its cartridge was greased with a mixture of beef and pork fat, a mixture that contravened the religious principles of both Hindu, to whom the cow was sacred, and Muslim, to whom the pig was unclean (David 2003: 19, 27, 53-4; Mason 1974: 264-6; Omissi 1994: 5). However, the rumour about the greased cartridge that ran rife through the ranks invites further investigation: because, whatever mistakes may have been made initially, the British authorities acted to allay anxieties by allowing soldiers to grease their own cartridges with their choice of fat; and because, in an atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust, fears of defilement were then transferred to the paper from which the cartridges were made (David 2003: 52-5; Mason 1974: 265-6).

The *sepoys* mutiny grew into a great rebellion that challenged British rule, giving rise to various theories that attempted to explain the violence that had erupted across the subcontinent – though such

a disparate and diverse series of events defied simple or straightforward analysis (Rand and Wagner 2012: 240). Among the reasons cited for resentment was the policy of annexation and lapse that affected the kingdom of Oudh from which many soldiers hailed, but the soldiers had numerous other grievances related to their terms and conditions of service such as pay, promotion and pensions (David 2003: 26-33; Omissi 1994: 5). Whether and to what extent religion had a role in the Mutiny divides historians but religion did feature in contemporary accounts, if only in arguing that agitators were arousing soldiers' apprehensions about an attack on their religions or that religious issues were merely pretext for rebellion inspired by non-religious motives (David 2003: 58, 396). In the end, one lesson learnt by the British was that the Mutiny was a reaction against reformist efforts to revise the old order, so that henceforward a policy of non-interference in religious belief and practice recommended itself (Rand and Wagner 2012: 242).

In narrowly military terms, the role of religion was regarded as similarly significant because the soldiers of the Bengal Army were high-caste with the British taking great pains, such as the provision of vegetarian food and the employment of Brahman priests, to ensure that their soldiers could maintain their status (Bayly 1999: 202). Indeed, British assurances of the superior social standing of their soldiers sometimes served to enhance their status and, in the case of the Bhumihar Brahmins, their very caste identity was in great measure a product of a British military career (pp. 202-3). Even before the Mutiny, moves had been made to modify recruitment that were later reinforced when it was judged that concern with the religious requirements of the most meticulous had been counterproductive as the mutinying Rajputs and Brahmins proved, and that Gurkhas, Sikhs and Pathans, for instance, were much to be preferred as either not Hindu or at any rate not orthodox Hindu (p. 203). Consequently, the process of weakening high-caste dominance that marked the years preceding the Mutiny and involved recruiting from a greater variety of communities was continued and developed with much the same object which was to minimize the risk to military order believed to be associated with those most deeply invested in strict religious observance (David 2003: 22-3; Omissi 1994: 4-5).

Implicated in this was an association of martiality with masculinity (Chowdhury-Sengupta 1995: 288). This was not only consistent with ideal of the soldier who from time immemorial has epitomized masculinity (Dawson 1994: 1) but also had political resonance in the context of rising nationalist sympathies linked to the urban educated classes who were stereotyped as effeminate (Streets 2004: 158, 165). In turn, this led to various Indian attempts to promote martial qualities in order to reassert Indian masculinity and thereby undermine British assertions of the necessity of imperial rule (Mohan 1999: 163, 179).

Accordingly, the martial races were understood to be less religious where religiosity was associated with preoccupation with social position and ritual niceties, but there was nevertheless a commitment on the part of the British to maintain the ways of life of their Indian soldiers. This commitment was expressed by Field-Marshal Lord Roberts who insisted that 'everything should be done to secure the contentment and loyalty of the Native Army by a scrupulous regard for their customs and their religion' (cited in Omissi 1994: 99). This meant that for every unit of Indian soldiers there was a British officer who was able to converse in his men's language and was knowledgeable about their

faith so that it was possible to facilitate (or even enforce) observance of their religions (Jack 2006: 335).

Religion was also important to the construction and constitution of the martial races at a more fundamental level, reflecting the ambiguity of the idea of race in martial race ideology. Gurkhas, for example, in fact came from a conglomeration of diverse communities unified in British opinion, so their character as Gurkhas was framed by necessary conformity to British understandings of Gurkha tradition (Streets 2004: 9). Hence Gurkha soldiers were obliged to adopt prescribed religious as well as cultural forms, irrespective of the authenticity and familiarity of these usages in their lived experience (p. 202). Or again, Sikhs were defined by membership of a religious group that acquired a militant nature with the inauguration of the Khalsa as an order of saint-soldiers, initiation into which was recognized as having the power to transform through conversion (p. 9). Thus Sikh soldiers were obliged to join the Khalsa, vowing to observe the discipline of the order and bearing the Five Ks during their military service (p. 202). Despite regional and ethnic differences, Muslim soldiers too were treated as a unity in certain respects; this was politically sensitive in imperial India, given the rise of pan-Indian Islamic sentiment (Majeed 1995: 319). One outcome of this was the notion of a Muslim nation, its boundaries drawn in distinction from and in opposition to its Hindu counterpart (Robb 1995: 28). More generally, the financial benefits of joining the army were such that, through the construction of mosques, provision of suitable education, performance of pilgrimage and maintenance of seclusion, they promoted the enhanced Islamic observance that underlay a sense of Muslim distinctiveness (Omissi 1994: 98).

Clearly, therefore, religion was inextricably involved in the formulation and reproduction of the identities of martial races, with what the British considered to be their religious requirements integrated into regimental life. Religion could be crucial to the very existence of the martial races; and, even where religion was only a contributory factor, it still had a major role and benefited from official approval and support. Such were the views on recruitment, and on the necessity of maintaining the religious lives of the martial races who were recruited, that typified British thinking on the eve of the First World War. Moreover, despite the exigencies of wartime that required increased enlistment, entailing a broadening of the definition of martial race and an extension of recruitment beyond martial races, the Indian Army remained dominated by the martial races, a pattern that was reinforced by post-war retrenchment (Jack 2006: 1338, 1340, 1346-7).

### **The Indian Army on the Western Front**

The decision to deploy the Indian Army on the Western Front was a contentious one, however. Before the outbreak of hostilities, Douglas Haig, chief of staff, and Lord Hardinge, the viceroy, had clashed over whether the Indian Army should fight in Europe, with Haig insisting on the need for Indian forces to contribute to the defence of the Empire against the German threat, whereas Hardinge prioritized the security of India and preferred subcontinental over metropolitan command of the Indian Army (Jack 2006: 333-4). When war was declared, Haig advocated the mobilization of the Indian Army, and, having gained Kitchener's agreement, together they prevailed upon the war council to deploy Indian divisions to Europe (p. 337). Consequently, the plans Haig had prepared previously

for the Indian Army's deployment in Europe, that earlier had incurred Hardinge's wrath, were put into practice (pp. 334, 337-8). Admittedly, a rather different version of events emerges from Hardinge's memoirs than from Haig's papers concerning Hardinge's attitude towards the Indian Army fighting in Europe. After the outbreak of hostilities, according to Hardinge, it was he who championed sending Indian divisions to the Western Front on the grounds that to do otherwise would be to cast aspersions on India when Britain's French allies included Algerian and Senegalese soldiers among their domestic forces and would also serve to undermine support for the war on the subcontinent (Hardinge 1948: 99; Visram 2002: 170-1). Notwithstanding, this decision was innovative in certain respects, notably the deployment of the Indian Army both in Europe and against European soldiers, thereby lifting the colour bar (Omissi 2007: 373-4). Yet in other respects the decision did not mark a distinct break from the past in that it involved the Indian Army discharging its time-honoured duty of supplying Indian soldiers when British soldiers were not available in sufficient numbers (Jack 2006: 340, 348).

Hence the Indian Army arrived in France to relieve the British Expeditionary Force in the autumn of 1914 (Macpherson 1923: II. 116). The Indian Army Corps, comprising two divisions of both infantry and cavalry with British as well as Indian personnel, provided a significant proportion of the British troops serving on the Western Front, fighting in some of the most famous battles, incurring concomitant losses and receiving many honours. It fought at First and Second Ypres, Festubert, Neuve Chapelle and Loos, was reduced to half its initial numbers by early 1915 and, by later that year, had been awarded 2,300 decorations of which 11 were Victoria Crosses (Hyson and Lester 2012: 20; Jack 2006: 329, 346, 349-50; Omissi 2007: 374; Visram 2002: 171). Most of the Indian soldiers were redeployed to Egypt or Mesopotamia in late 1915, by which time about 140,000 of them had served in Europe, whether on the front line or in auxiliary roles (Hyson and Lester 2012: 20, 33; Visram 2002: 171). In contrast, the Indian cavalry divisions which fought as infantry were not redeployed until spring 1918 (Macpherson 1923: II. 134; Visram 2002: 171).

Religion featured in the lives and consequently the letters of Indian soldiers<sup>iii</sup> in various ways: among them, by offering imagery with which to describe their experiences. Comparisons were made with the titanic struggle of the Pandavas and Kauravas in the great *Mahabharata* war in terms of its terrible scale and cataclysmic effects, even reflecting that the conflict in which they were engaged was greater than that narrated in the epic (Omissi 1999: 32, 38, 48). Another comparison, this one from Muslim history, that was intended to indicate the ferocity of the conflict and the prospect of imminent martyrdom, was with the battle of Karbala where Husayn ibn Ali met his death in a tragedy foundational to Shi'ite Islam.

Indian soldiers were advised by their correspondents that fighting for Britain was a religious undertaking, a belief bound up with notions of honour and loyalty, on the one hand, and with the legitimacy of British rule vested in the person of the British monarch and the rightness of the cause against Germany and her allies, on the other hand (Maher 2011: 25; Omissi 1999: 26, 140-1). Their own letters gave martial interpretations of their destinies where they wrote that to die in battle, true to their salt, was to be freed from the cycle of *samsara* and to reach heaven (Omissi 1999: 39, 88, 126). Such sentiments were very much along the same lines as those expressed by George V in his message to his Indian soldiers in France (cited in Mason 1974: 414) in which he assured the troops that they were serving their King-Emperor and their religions, stressing that the war afforded them the

opportunity to demonstrate their martial qualities and that their religions extolled laying down their lives in the course of discharging their duty.

Nevertheless, service on the Western Front understandably aroused Indian soldiers' anxieties about their ability to satisfy religious and associated requirements (Omissi 2007: 386). Under these circumstances, how could a soldier continue to practise his faith, abiding by its precepts and maintaining its standards? For example, a Punjabi Muslim wrote home to enquire about how to observe the *Ramadan* fast when the summer days in France were so long, while a Hindustani Muslim commented on the introduction of steel helmets that Sikhs refused to wear, reporting that Hindus and Muslims were considering whether or not to do so, with soldiers' opinions divided on the religious permissibility of availing themselves of this protective headgear (pp. 198-9, 206-7).

Notwithstanding some obvious difficulties, the soldiers' testimony makes clear that they were able to practise their faiths, as the following further instances illustrate. One letter referred to Indian soldiers in France hearing readings about the prophet Muhammad and another included an account of the joyful celebration of *Eid* (Omissi 1999: 167, 307). There was also grateful acknowledgment of the dispatch of a copy of the *Sri Guru Granth Sahib*, and discussion of processing the *Granth* through a French village (pp. 156, 210). Diet and caste with their religious resonance were other themes addressed in Indian soldiers' correspondence: for example, commenting favourably on the provision of appropriate and ample rations, or, again, worrying about the sharing of water supplies with Untouchables (Jack 2006: 356; Omissi 2007: 386). These issues, together with general religious imperatives, were made all the more pressing and complex when it came to the care of casualties and disposal of the dead, encompassing specialized hospital services and alternative funeral arrangements (Hyson and Lester 2012: 20-1; Jack 2006: 355, 358). Exactly what was required and how it was to be achieved depended upon possessing the necessary information about the Indian soldiers' backgrounds. What the British regarded as constituting such information could be found by consulting the *Indian Army Handbooks*.

### ***Indian Army Handbooks on Religion***

The *Indian Army Handbooks* embodied military thinking on the martial races. Irrespective of their ethnographic merits, these guides to recruitment were officially sanctioned and published accounts of the martial races that were inextricably linked to the corresponding ideology (Rand and Wagner 2012: 245-246). Moreover, they exerted a powerful influence over military policy and practice in informing British officers about the ways of life of the soldiers they were engaged in recruiting and subsequently commanding.

The *Indian Army Handbook* on the Gurkhas commented upon the historical importance of Buddhism, with the Newars and Gurungs both described as Buddhist, even if in the former case the influence of Hinduism was increasingly dominant and in the latter case the allegiance to Buddhism was not acknowledged beyond Nepal's borders (Vansittart 1906: 49). Other groups were identified as Hindu,



albeit with apparent approval of less than rigorous observance (p. 49). Overall, it was concluded that '[t]he fashionable religion is Hinduism, and it may therefore be said that Gurkhas are Hindus' (p. 49). Consistent with this, the account of deities worshipped and festivals celebrated by Gurkha soldiers in the Indian Army strongly favoured Hinduism with *Dussehra*, dedicated to the goddess Durga's victory over the buffalo demon and involving the veneration of regimental arms and insignia, accorded pride of place (pp. 54-6).

In contrast, the *Indian Army Handbook* on the Sikhs made clear that the label Sikh was not ethnic but religious in character (Bingley 1999: 16). However, it differentiated between the Sikhism of the first and that of the tenth *Guru*, explaining that contemporary followers of Guru Nanak lacked the orthodox affiliation and distinctive appearance that demarcated members of the *Khalsa* founded by Gobind Singh (pp. 79-80). This meant that the *Nanak-panthi* was described as basically a Hindu whose religiosity was shaped by the *Gurus'* message and demonstrated by veneration for the *Granth*, whereas the *Khalsa* Sikh who had taken the name *Singh* was deemed to be the exemplary Sikh (p. 80). The significance of the Jats as the largest constituent group of the Sikh panth was admitted in the discussion of the origin and development of the Sikhs, alongside the recognition of the religion's accessibility to diverse ethnicities and hence the plural nature of Khalsa membership (pp. 1, 38). The definition of a Sikh was thus unambiguously religious, reflecting the British preference for the Khalsa whose discipline was enforced upon Sikh recruits to the Indian Army, with Sikhs being depicted as 'members of a military order of Hindu dissenters and puritans' (pp. 1, 71).

The *Indian Army Handbooks* covered diverse communities that shared an allegiance to Islam even if that adherence was sometimes seen as simplistic or superstitious in character (Ridgway 1906: 32; Wikeley undated: 61). While some information on the martial aspects of Islam was imparted such as the prospect of paradise for those who make war on unbelievers and the designation of martyr for those who die in defence of the religion, this was nuanced to take account of the ability of a given group in multiple locations as well as the ability of different groups (Wikeley undated: 7-8, 38). In the case of the Pathans, for example, it was commented that 'his proverbial hospitality, courtesy, courage, cheerfulness and loyalty make him ... a valuable soldier' before paying detailed attention to the qualities of constituent groups like the Afridis whose skills as skirmishers merited special mention (Ridgway 1906: 14, 50).

Of course, religious adherence had implications beyond a narrowly defined religiosity, and the *Indian Army Handbooks* addressed a wide range of such issues. Diet, for instance, was restricted by religious rules, and not just for Muslims to whom pork was repugnant and for whom any meat had to be *halal* which involved ritual slaughter as set out by Islamic law (Wikeley undated: 40-1). The *Indian Army Handbooks* on various Muslim communities considered a number of diet-related concerns, ranging from the permissibility of inter-dining with Christians to the scarcity of meat barring the celebration of special occasions and among higher classes (Ridgway 1906: 24; Wikeley undated: 40, 57).

The Gurkhas were described in their *Indian Army Handbook* as meat-eating, with the proviso that none but those lowest in status would eat beef (Vansittart 1906: 557). The equivalent handbook for Sikhs stressed that they too regarded the cow as holy and hence shunned beef but not mutton or goat

and, while allowing that meat was not often eaten, specified *jhatka* – decapitation – as the prescribed means of dispatching animals (Bingley 1999: 121-2).

Inextricably associated with diet was caste, including caste-based restrictions on commensality or inter-dining, while caste was itself associated with other aspects of religious and social identity. The *Indian Army Handbook* on the Gurkhas emphasized that, with the exception of *dal* and rice, they would eat together (Vansittart, 1906: 56). Reportedly, higher castes were not willing to eat *dal* and rice with lower castes, though food prepared in ghee, including rice but excluding dhal, could be eaten together (p. 57). Crucially, water could be drunk from the same goat-skin container by all Gurkhas (p. 57). Consistent with the flexibility of outlook towards food and drink, the general attitude to caste adopted by Gurkhas was said to be comparatively lax (p. 65). Even those supposedly more subject to Brahmanical values were presented as having minimal concern for caste norms (p. 71). In general, the Gurkhas were portrayed as little troubled by the niceties of caste (p. 77).

Officially, Sikhism rejected the caste hierarchy, as the *Indian Army Handbook* on the Sikhs made clear (Bingley 1999: 122). Yet it indicated that caste retained some influence, as was evident in the exchange of food, since a Sikh, though willing to accept food from an orthodox Hindu, would not accept food from another Sikh who came from an Untouchable caste (p. 122). Nevertheless, when circumstances demanded, Sikhs would receive food even from Muslims (p. 122). Guru Nanak was represented as denouncing caste conventions even if he did not call for the abolition of caste, while Guru Gobind Singh was represented as more radical in his insistence on the social expression of spiritual egalitarianism through his institution of the Khalsa (pp. 15-16, 20-1). Yet the sharing of *karah prashad*, intended to symbolize the teaching of equality, was still affected by caste, as again other Sikhs would not accept the blessed food from an Untouchable co-religionist (pp. 20, 122). Overall, the Sikh was shown to be less bound by caste than the Hindu, but nevertheless to discriminate against Untouchables. This caste prejudice in modern Sikhs was attributed to a failure to uphold Sikh principles in favour of complying with dominant Hindu practices (p. 73).

The power of Hinduism that was believed to have had a detrimental effect on Sikhs was also believed to have detracted from the faithful observance of Islam. The *Indian Army Handbook* on Hindustani Muslims asserted that most Muslims practised a version of Islam shaped by Hinduism, in line with the absorptive properties attributed to indigenous norms and values that were believed to exert a powerful influence over peoples who settled in India (Bourne 1914: 33). As a result, despite Islam's emphasis on equality, caste was explained as a significant factor among Muslims (p. 33). Moreover, even setting aside caste, the *Indian Army Handbooks* documented different forms of status differentiation among Muslims, including the notional distinction between those whose ancestors were the Islamic conquerors of India and those whose ancestors were Indian converts to Islam, and the existence of a hierarchy of tribe and clan within a particular community coupled with a sense of superiority over other communities (Bourne 1914: 33; Ridgway 1906: 14-15; Wikeley undated: 47-8).

Another aspect of religion of particular relevance to the Indian Army was the treatment of the dead. The funeral practices of Gurkhas were detailed in their *Indian Army Handbook*, featuring both burial and cremation (and sometimes simply casting the corpse into a river) (Vansittart 1906: 54). However, burial was regarded as the most popular method of disposal; hence the handbook mentioned the desirability of a regimental ceremony (p. 54). The decision to cremate bodies may then have reflected the contemporary ascendancy of Hinduism in Nepal, the Gurkhas' affiliation to Hinduism as soldiers

in the Indian Army, as well as the adaptability of Gurkhas that was stressed throughout (pp. 49, 55, 106, 129; cf. Author 1996: 44). Speculatively, it may also have reflected the lack of appropriate burial grounds for the soldiers, coupled with the presence of other Hindu soldiers for whom cremation was the stipulated method of disposal where the British imposed a degree of standardization in religious as in other terms.

The *Indian Army Handbook* on the Sikhs pointed to continuities between Sikhs and Hindus, whereby Hindu lifecycle rites, including funeral practices, were performed for Jat Sikhs albeit that the performance of these rites was interpreted as opposed to Sikhism (Bingley, 1999: 87). The favoured method of disposal was cremation as would be the case for Jat Hindus, and likewise any remains were collected, ideally to be immersed in the river Ganges (p. 97). Generally, there was very little to differentiate the Jat Sikh from his Hindu counterpart when it came to funeral rites, as can be seen when comparing the account of funeral rites in the *Indian Army Handbook* on the Sikhs with that in the handbook on Jats, Gujars and Ahirs written by the same author (Bingley 1904: 62-4).

The *Indian Army Handbook* on Hindustani Muslims noted some variation in lifecycle rites such as funeral practices along regional and social lines (Bourne 1914: 22). This variation was limited, though, in the sense that the principal features of classical Islamic funerals were present (p. 22). Among those features was the burial of the dead and this together with the conduct of the Muslim burial service were similarly specified in the handbook on Punjabi Muslims and also in the handbook on Pathans, though problematically this indicated a strong preference to be interred in the village burial ground even if that entailed transporting remains over a long distance (Ridgway 1906: 38-9; Wikeley undated: 53).

Such information as this provides a real insight into the kind of considerations that informed decisions made in the conversion of the Royal Pavilion Estate into a hospital that received Dogras, Gurkhas, Jats, Sikhs, Pathans and Punjabi Muslims as patients.

### **Conversion of Royal Pavilion Estate into the Pavilion Hospital**

Colonel Sir Walter Lawrence was appointed as Commissioner for Sick and Wounded Indian Soldiers in France and England (Hyson and Lester 2012: 20). According to Lawrence's own account, his task as commissioner was to advise Lord Kitchener on the treatment of Indian soldiers in the knowledge that 'very special arrangements were needed for water, food, and other requirements, which Religion and Caste Rules demanded' (Lawrence 1928: 269). It was he who decided upon Brighton (for reasons not made explicit in his memoirs), initially proposing to requisition a couple of hotels (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Lawrence 1928: 270). The council, unwilling to lose such valuable facilities, suggested the use of a pier and the racecourse (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Lawrence 1928: 270). This offer was rejected by Lawrence who was insistent upon a roofed structure (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Lawrence 1928: 270). Subsequently, he

gained the agreement of the local authority for the use of the Royal Pavilion with the Dome and Corn Exchange, henceforth the Pavilion Hospital; the York Place and Pelham Street schools, henceforth the York Place Hospital; and the Brighton Poor Law Institution, henceforth the Kitchener Indian Hospital (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Lawrence 1928: 270; Roberts 1939: 199). The choice of the Royal

Pavilion has been explained in terms of its striking Hindustani style of architecture that was supposed to remind the soldiers of home and its much-vaunted, if over-stated, associations with the monarchy where the King-Emperor was the focus of a carefully cultivated loyalty and devotion on the part of the soldiers (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21, 31; Jack 2006: 336-7; Omissi 2007: 381). In this connection, reportedly Alderman Sir John Otter, Brighton's mayor, was given to understand that it was King George V's wish that the Royal Pavilion be used as a hospital for Indian soldiers (Roberts 1939: 199). The Brighton hospitals provided 3,324 beds for Indian soldiers, of which the Pavilion Hospital provided 724 beds (Lawrence 1928: 270; Roberts 1939: 200). The first casualties arrived on 1 December 1914 and, by the time the last casualties left on 15 February 1916, 4,306 patients had been treated, with only 32 fatalities (Roberts 1939: 201).

The staffing of the hospitals was a major undertaking. Retired officers of the Indian Medical Service were appointed to management positions, with current members of the service supplying surgeons, supplemented by Indian doctors and medical students and supported by other Indian employees such as cooks, sweepers, washermen, orderlies and clerks (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Visram 2002: 181). This meant that the majority of the members of staff were either British with personal knowledge of India, or themselves Indian (Omissi 2007: 379). In turn, this conduced towards the creation of a familiar ethos and environment, including the fostering and facilitation of religious observance.

Lawrence was acutely aware of the potential dangers of failing to put in place the necessary arrangements for the Indian soldiers to fulfill the obligations laid upon them by their respective religions (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21). In due course, he was to insist that every practicable measure had been taken to secure this objective (Jack 2006: 355), asserting that the Indian soldiers were even more appreciative of 'the scrupulous attention which was paid to the requirements of their religions and castes' than of the hospitality shown them by Brightonians (Lawrence 1928: 270). Certainly, in addition to more general expressions of approval for the medical care, meals and accommodation provided, along with the visitors and gifts received, this positive assessment of how religious issues were addressed was borne out by the comments of Indian soldiers themselves – such as Havildar Ghufran Khan who heaped praise on the arrangements made at the Pavilion Hospital for him and his co-religionists to practise their faith (Omissi 1999: 86). This was vital given the political situation on the subcontinent which made it imperative to demonstrate that Indian soldiers' welfare was accorded the highest priority (Visram 2002: 182).

Obviously, turning the Royal Pavilion estate into a military hospital was something of a challenge, to say the least. Henry Roberts, erstwhile director of the Royal Pavilion Estate, related:

It was ... necessary to arrange that men from every one of the fighting classes ... could be taken in, possibly large numbers of different castes at the same time; yet each must find within the hospital the possibility of living according to his own custom and religion.

(Roberts 1939: 200)

This entailed paying attention to the soldiers' needs for places of worship, suitable foodstuffs and food preparation, segregated facilities to serve distinct constituencies, and appropriate funeral rites.

Each of the Brighton hospitals was expected to ensure worship could be conducted, designating areas for a mosque and a *gurdwara* (Lawrence 1928: 270). In the Pavilion Hospital, Muslims prayed on the grass in front of the Dome, and Sikhs prayed in a marquee (Roberts 1915: 13; 1916: 2-3). Moreover, the soldiers' freedom of religion was protected by a ban on their proselytization (Hyson and Lester 2012: 23). Undoubtedly, the British realized that religion was important to Indian soldiers. In the opinion of one military censor, the outlook of Indian soldiers was typical of Eastern peoples in prioritizing religious observance, adding that 'a few rupees expended on Qurans, extracts from the Granth, kirpans, Brahminical threads, and the like would give more pleasure than ... sweetmeats and tobacco' (cited in Omissi 1994: 101). The efforts of the military authorities were supported by the hospital-based Indian Soldiers' Fund, a charity headed up by old India hands and financed by public donations, that supplied sacred texts and items but also enormous quantities of sweets and cigarettes as well as warm clothing, stationery and recreational equipment (Maher 2011: 21-2).

It was also vital to cater for different diets, and in order to satisfy diverse dietary requirements, the Pavilion Hospital had nine kitchens of three types: one for vegetarians; one for non-vegetarian Hindus (apparently including Sikhs); and one for Muslims (Roberts, 1939: 200). Neither beef nor pork was allowed on the premises so as to avoid affronting Hindu (also Sikh) and Muslim sensibilities (p. 200). Separate slaughterhouses were set up to ensure that animals were handled and processed properly for the soldiers to eat (Hyson and Lester 2012: 24; Roberts 1939: 200).

In the Pavilion Hospital, cooking was carried out by caste cooks assisted by convalescent and invalided patients, and food was delivered to the wards by members of one caste to be given to patients who also belonged to that caste (Roberts 1915: 8). Any patient unable to wash up his own utensils would have this chore performed for him by a ward attendant of the same caste (Roberts 1939: 200). Indeed, the hospital was arranged around caste, with patients being grouped according to caste, and caste committees being created to advise on its running (Hyson and Lester 2012: 23-4; Roberts 1915: 8; Roberts 1939: 200). The outcastes who undertook a range of tasks that, though vital, were deemed polluting, were located, as in India, in a separate settlement, here billeted in huts on the eastern lawns (Roberts 1939: 201). There were two taps in each ward for potable water, one for the use of Hindus and the other for the use of Muslims, and there were bathing houses and latrines designated for different groups (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Roberts 1939: 200). When fatalities occurred, there were separate mortuaries so that the required rituals could be performed (Roberts 1939: 200). Treatment of the dead, a very sensitive area both in terms of recognizing the heroism of Indian soldiers and countering probable German propaganda about improper means of disposal, was handled with great care and in cognizance of the value of publicity; it received favourable comment from the soldiers who witnessed the treatment of those patients who succumbed to disease or injury (Hyson and Lester 2012: 21; Omissi 1999: 137; Visram 2002: 182).

Hindus and Sikhs who died in Brighton needed to be cremated, and their Muslim comrades-in-arms buried; the former involved a flexible interpretation of the 1902 Cremation Act and the latter the creation of a cemetery on Horsell Common (Visram 2002: 182). A cremation site was designated on the Downs, outside Patcham, where 53 Hindu and Sikh soldiers' bodies were cremated by caste-fellows on burning *ghats* built for this purpose and their ashes consigned to the sea (Hyson and Lester 2012: 23; Roberts 1939: 201). Arrangements were also made for the burial of the 21 Muslim soldiers who died. This involved the transportation of their bodies by hearse to Woking, in the care of another soldier and a Muslim doctor, where they were received by the *moulvi* of the Shah Jehan mosque, buried as prescribed by Muslim rites, and honoured with a salute by a military firing party (Roberts 1939: 200-1).

These extraordinary events in a provincial town on the south coast of England were commemorated by two memorials: the Chattri, a monument in the form of a dome supported on pillars (described in a history of the Royal Pavilion as a traditional Indian memorial (Hindi *chatri* 'umbrella, parasol', a symbol of kingship) ) commemorating the Indian soldiers who died in the Great War, erected on the site of the burning *ghats* and funded by the India Office and the Brighton Corporation<sup>iv</sup>; and the India Gate, at an entrance to the Royal Pavilion, commemorating those soldiers who were treated at the Pavilion Hospital, funded by Indian monies and unveiled by the Maharajah of Patiala (Lawrence 1928: 273; Roberts 1939: 204-5).

### **Legacy of Martial Race Ideology**

The legacy of martial race ideology that remained so influential in the recruitment of Indian soldiers during the Great War is an enduring one. It is evident in various ways, perhaps most obviously in recent campaigns for Gurkha rights. The then Prime Minister Tony Blair spoke of the Gurkhas' heroism in battle and record of service when contextualizing the need to acknowledge the part they had played (Ford 2004). Yet the 2004 decision to grant Gurkhas retiring after 1 July 1997 a British passport was not deemed adequate by Gurkhas and their supporters, who then took up the causes of the equalization of Gurkhas' pension rights with their British comrades-in-arms and the extension of settlement rights in Britain for Gurkhas (BBC News 2010). Memorably, the popular actor Joanna Lumley championed Gurkhas' rights in a high-profile campaign, and while her celebrity status and personal popularity did much to mobilize support, the British public proved receptive to her arguments. Such receptivity must in some measure reflect the portrayal of Gurkhas in martial race ideology and, inextricably linked with this, their military heritage and honours. Religious issues do not seem to have come to the fore in the Gurkhas' case, beyond Joanna Lumley being hailed as a goddess when she visited Nepal (BBC News 2009), but they have been more prominent in the case of Sikhs whose martial identity is so bound up with religious adherence.

In 2007, a proposal made by Sikh leaders to create a British Sikh regiment, harking back to the organizational principles of the Indian Army and enjoying the endorsement of some politicians and senior officers, was rejected by the Ministry of Defence on advice from the Commission for Racial Equality (Rayment 2007). Supporters of the proposal stressed the Sikhs' proud history of fighting under British colours, among them Kuljit Singh Gulati, general secretary of the Shepherd's Bush *gurdwara*, who was reported as insisting that the creation of a specific Sikh regiment was the key to increasing recruitment from the British Sikh community (Rayment 2007). Notwithstanding the

absence of such a regiment, Sikhs have served and continue to serve in the British Army, similarly inspired by the martial history of the Sikhs.

Sergeant-Major Makand Singh, awarded the Meritorious Service Medal in 2005, attributed his decision to enlist to the example of his father, who had been the first *keshdhari* Sikh to join the British Army in 1963 but had needed to take legal action to do so (Rana and Patel 2005). Sergeant-Major Singh, working in the West Midlands as the Ethnic Minority Liaison Officer trying to attract new recruits, explained in a BBC interview that the British Army was open to members of diverse religious faiths, and in this spirit denied that his wearing a turban had ever posed a problem (Rana and Patel 2005). However, this was not the experience of Guardsman Jatinderpal Singh Bhullar, whose being permitted to wear a turban instead of a bearskin while on duty outside Buckingham Palace stirred up considerable controversy. In defending his nephew, Gurburtap Singh Bhullar appealed to the family's tradition of military service in both World Wars, alongside the martial heritage of the wider Sikh community and the suffering and casualties incurred (*Birmingham Mail*, 2012). Guardsman Bhullar did receive public support, with one correspondent to the *Telegraph* referring to the service of Indian soldiers on the Western Front and citing the sacrifice of Guardsman Bhullar's ancestors, together with other imperial soldiers, as entitling him to guard the Queen (Lynott 2012).

A very different appropriation of martial race ideology has been advocated in respect of Muslims, whose position in British society is fraught with contradiction and contention. In a publication by the centre-right think tank Policy Exchange, Shiraz Maher identifies the past military record of Muslim soldiers as vital to challenging the supposed incompatibility of Muslim faith and British nationality that alienates Muslims from the armed forces (Maher 2012: 8). Maher's analysis finds in Muslim soldiers fighting a way to repudiate far-right and Islamist notions and a model for contemporary practice in terms of British policy towards soldiers' religions and soldiers' ability to disaggregate religion from politics (pp. 7, 10, 21, 36). He examines a number of factors impeding the recruitment of British Muslims today, including a political definition of the *ummah*, the levelling of charges of apostasy against Muslims who reject the Islamist agenda, and the glossing of the 'War on Terror' as a 'War on Islam', before making recommendations to increase the representation of Muslims in the armed forces (pp. 61, 64, 66). His recommendations feature eschewing reliance on religious organizations as gatekeepers in favour of more direct approaches, suggesting that the school curriculum draw attention to the Indian soldiers' contribution on the Western Front, as well as seeking to capitalize on Muslims' family connections with the British military (pp. 89, 92). Irrespective of the success or otherwise of this strategy, it is clearly heavily indebted to martial race ideology.

## Conclusion

A notable feature of the Indian Army of the Great War was how it facilitated diverse religious belief and practice. The accommodation of religion was related to the martial race ideology that embodied British views on eligibility for enlistment, in which religion was a major factor. The military authorities' official opinion of soldiers' religions, and hence of their requirements when under British command were articulated in the *Indian Army Handbooks* that guided policy and practice. Certainly, religion was raised in the soldiers' letters from the Western Front, and was a central organizing principle of the Pavilion Hospital. Both in France and in Britain, the British undertook to cater for different kinds of worship, special diets, caste rules and distinctive funeral rites. Moreover, martial

race ideology is still relevant today, albeit in attenuated form, where again religion is often an integral element of argument and debate, engaging members of the general public and specific communities.

There can be little doubt that the conventional image of British forces in the Great War is of the British Tommy, sheltering from German bombardment in a muddy trench or silhouetted against a landscape scarred with barbed wire and bodies. Yet, as the ex-Cabinet Minister Baroness Sayeeda Warsi observed, ‘our boys weren’t just Tommies – they were Tariqs and Tajinders too’ (cited in Joshi 2014), and recently there have been concerted attempts to correct the popular picture and redress the imbalance in coverage. The National Army Museum’s community outreach project ‘War and Sikhs: Road to the Trenches’ has involved touring a re-creation of the 15<sup>th</sup> Ludhiana Sikhs, with the goal of raising awareness of the part played by the Indian Army in the conflict (Richardson, 2014).<sup>v</sup> The Commonwealth War Graves Commission’s website hosts *Forever India* which has a similar, if broader-based, mission, to increase knowledge and understanding of the role of the Indian Army over both World Wars (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2014). A better-known attempt is a BBC series, presented by David Olusoga, entitled *The World’s War: The Forgotten Soldiers of World War I* and screened in August 2014, that has confronted the Eurocentric view of the war by concentrating on Indian and other imperial troops (Olusoga 2014). Most prominent of all, a service was held at Glasgow cathedral on 4<sup>th</sup> August 2014 attended by the Prince of Wales, to honour Commonwealth servicemen, in which Sir Trevor Macdonald highlighted the military role of undivided India, and the Indian High Commissioner, His Excellency Mr Ranjan Mathai, read excerpts from the soldiers’ letters.

Despite these attempts, the contribution of Indian soldiers will still in all probability be overlooked in general accounts. Given Britain’s status as a former imperial power, a degree of ambivalence on the part of Indians or those of Indian descent is easily explicable, since the soldiers fighting for Britain were, from a nationalist perspective, fighting for the freedom of the country that held theirs in subjection. There may also be some concern about the instrumentalizing of Indian religions in the service of the *Raj*, and even perhaps resentment of an orientalist version of respect for religious belief and practice. However, this does not mean that the Indian soldiers’ sacrifices should be ignored; nor, indeed, the serious, if sometimes flawed, attention paid to religion in the Indian Army, especially since the emergence of diasporic communities whose claims to common citizenship are strengthened by appeal to a shared history, and when the British armed forces today are grappling with the equality and diversity agenda in which the accommodation of different religions is a key feature.

### **Word count**

**Main text = 8400**

**Main text including notes = 8689**

**Total text with bibliography = 9743**



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<sup>i</sup> I am indebted to the comments and suggestions of participants at the thirty-ninth Spalding Symposium on Indian Religions, and especially to the advice of Dr Dermot Killingley and Professor Fiona Montgomery. Particular thanks are also due to the anonymous reviewer whose constructive criticism and ideas for additional sources have proven extremely useful.

<sup>ii</sup> I am grateful to Dr Simon Brodbeck for suggesting that the *Harivamsha* (81.96-100) may contain a reference to the martial superiority of northern over southern kings.

<sup>iii</sup> Here and below, extensive use has been made of David Omissi’s selection of Indian soldiers’ letters. As Omissi indicates, though these primary sources need to be treated with caution, they nevertheless offer valuable insights into the soldiers’ hopes and fears (Omissi 1999: 9). In respect of religious matters, it is necessary to distinguish between personal conviction and conventional piety, but religion was obviously important to Indian soldiers (p. 13).

<sup>iv</sup> A new memorial erected by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission next to the Chattri was unveiled in 2010. It took the form of a screen wall bearing the names of the Hindus and Sikhs who were cremated at the site (Commonwealth War Graves Commission 2010).

<sup>v</sup> It is noticeable that a number of initiatives centre on the Sikhs, presumably reflecting both the size of the Sikh contingent in the Indian Army (forming over 20 per cent of the army in 1912) and the status of the British Sikh community (whose members usually endorse this combined identity) (Roy 2013: 1330; Takhar 2014: 11). Another example is the Brunei Gallery’s exhibition on ‘Empire, Faith and War: The Sikhs and World War One’, held by the UK Punjab Heritage Association as the launch of a three year project about Sikhs in the Great War (SOAS 2014).