

Book Review

A Social History of Second World War

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Yasmin Khan (2015) The Raj At War: A People's History of India's Second World War, Random House, Gurgaon, pp 416, Rs 699

Breaking free from the 'global panorama' and the romanticism associated with the Second World War, Yasmin Khan begins with the promises of 'history from below'. The book explores the diverse experiences of people sandwiched between limited choices offered by the war. Khan makes us travel across time; she brings to us the experiences of the peasants being transformed into soldiers. The war began with an endless appetite for recruits. The Indian army expanded and the traditional fighting races like: Jats, Rajputs, Pathans, Gurkhas and Sikhs were complemented by Madrassis, untouchable leather workers and Bengali urbanites. The recruitment parties travelled to the hilly terrains and 'stripped' the hills of the 'young people and able bodied men' (p. 29). Recruitment was not without resistance and the author has beautifully portrayed the picture of mothers resorting to pleading, emotional blackmail and guarding their son from joining the army. Apart from men, war needed money. The Indian public had to forcefully part away with their income. The war fund brought hardship to people. This led to intensification of people's grievance, which was utilised politically by the Indian political leaders in writing off the hegemony of the Raj. The War fund certainly intensified decolonisation.

Deconstructing the masculine celebration of war, the author offers us a history of anxiety, wait and loneliness of women, whose husbands were serving in the battlefields. 'Soldiering' as the author observes 'was a mental and a physical challenge'.

The battles that sepoys fought with ill-health, depression and debilitating diseases particularly malaria and dysentery were often as extreme as any fought with combatants...In Assam and Burma, among sepoys, loss of weight was so great in a large number of cases that they were reduced to a bag of bones(p. 249)

While soldiers lived dangerously fighting in the battlefields, women kept waiting for their husbands to return, and soldiers missed their families. Women were left wanting

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both in money, love and longing and many appealed for divorce. Dependent women starved. Starvation gave way to prostitution. The soldiers on the other hand flocked towards prostitutes. The market for prostitution cropped up and sexually transmitted diseases were on the rise. There was nothing noble about the war, the author rightly argues that people were forced to make 'difficult moral and personal choices' during the war.

Geographies of War

After journeying across time, the author makes us travel through the varied geography of war. She has vividly portrayed the experiences of the 4th Indian Division fighting in Africa. The march of the Indian Division in defeating the Italian occupied East Africa is a gripping account of life lost and battle won. It was one of the 'hardest battle' fought. The sacrifice and the victory of the Indian troops found widespread propaganda. After all propaganda was one of the mechanisms through which the morale of the people could be boosted. Injured and dead were given medals and newspapers and newsreels recounted the experiences of heroism and exploits of the soldiers. From Africa the author takes us to the plantations and paddy fields of India. The tea planters in Assam began supplying men to be used as manual labourers towards the war effort. Labourers were deployed in building roads which connected India and Burma. Manipuri and Naga hills men were deployed as porters. The labourers and porters worked day and night. 'Marathas, Madrasis, Bengalis, Punjabis, Oriyas, Biharis, Nepalis, low castes, dalits and adivasis all worked side by side on the road' (p. 260). The building of road was a story of strain, shortage of food, sickness and malnourishment. Jungles were cleared to protect the health of the air force men from deadly mosquitoes and flies. For building of aerodromes, villages were acquired and paddy fields burnt without compensating the villagers. Workers worked on back to back shifts, and the people were made to bow forcefully before the rising military demands. The sign of unrest among the labourers has been very well portrayed, the workers feared working in the war zone, the undue strain and mental trauma of the villagers and workers surely goes in deconstructing the victory marches of war.

The road towards decolonisation

The British Empire travelled many roads towards decolonisation; the Second World War intensified the process. It served as a grave digger and stole the hegemony of the 'British Raj'. Price rise and food shortages brought starvation to people. While hoarders and merchants gained, people suffered. The draconian Defence of India Act generated thousands of political prisoners. The mood of the colonial population was turning against the Raj. From famines to the loss of life, war certainly 'heightened social tensions and exacerbated the differences of class, caste and religion' (p XIV). The mood of the colonial population can be understood from the following excerpts-

People paid bribes... to get cases through the courts or to shake off criminal charges, to secure driving licenses, to collect good from the post

offices and to acquire ration cards, taxi and *tongawallahs* complained about police harassment for petty fines; passengers complained about ticket inspectors on trains taking their share...young people who lived through the war were also becoming drawn into alternative forms of politics and finding other outlets, dreaming of radical political transformation...Similarly there was a rash of small private armies, routine drilling and armed militias that were attracting enthusiasts around the country, both on the left and the right, from the *Khaksars* and RSS to the Communist Party. They offered a refreshing and liberating vision and the promise of radical social transformation, transcending the bitter disappointments and stifled political life (pp 285-286).

While War brought victory to the State, war certainly brought the rule of the Raj under scanner. The victory celebrations to the people were mere eyewash, war had brought everyday life to a standstill and people began looking for alternatives. War brought politics home, the debates and discussions at home deprived the moral hegemony of the Raj abroad. Now the masses looked for newer alternatives, and a better government. The damages done by war could not be erased. The book traces the loss of the hegemony of the British Raj and opens newer avenues of research. Some of the themes highlighted Loneliness, War weary, Medicine, Women, Youth, Communists, are stories in themselves. As the author rightly puts there is 'still much more to be understood about the demands of war on many different kinds of people' (p. 321). This work is a beginning towards a people's history and opens roads for further critical social history of Second World War.