

Book Review

Radhika Singha, *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921*, Published in India by Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2020

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Radhika Singha's monograph opens an important "conversation between military history and labour history" (3), hitherto left unaccounted for by historians of South Asia. At the heart of this conversation is the category of the 'coolie'. This category, 'coolie', was a class of labour drawn largely from the British Raj in India, which filled the gap in the colonial labour market in the aftermath of the abolition of slavery throughout the British Empire in the nineteenth century. However, by the early decades of the twentieth century, the indenture system was under fire from both Indian nationalists and conscience-stricken Christian missionaries. Singha very adeptly examines how the British authorities in India threw "a military cloak over the 'coolie'" (3) to make labour recruitment for the First World War more palatable. Singha's background as a legal historian (Singha's earliest work being *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India*, 1998) allows her to dissect the labyrinth of judicial and legal regimes created by the Raj to conscript labour under the veneer of 'voluntary' recruitment from a plethora of arenas including its border-making complex in the frontiers of Assam and Burma (chapter 4) and the penal regimes of the Raj (chapter 3).

In chapter one, Singha traces the broader ecologies of labour recruitment and military infrastructure in colonial India. The chapter not only connects the colonial border-making project with labour recruitment but also the longer history of deployment of Indian troops overseas (27-29). However, the most interesting aspect of the chapter which emerges as a subtext is the contradictory nature of imperialism. While on one hand 'white' dominions increasingly barred non-white immigration (31-33), the exigencies of the Great

War meant that the Indian Labour Corps (ILC) had to be deployed in France (37-40). Moreover, while within India the colonial state sought to promote the differences between the 'martial races' of the sepoys and 'coolie' labour corps recruited from 'untouchable' and 'tribal' communities (17), these distinctions became somewhat blurred in the face of race prejudice when deployed overseas, often conflating the categories of 'sepoy' and 'coolie' (31, 34).

The second chapter tries to unpack the construction of the follower ranks of the Indian Army. This social construction of the follower rank sought to bolster "both the race standing of the British soldier and the status superiority of the 'martial castes'" (7). In this chapter, Singha shows the distinction between 'higher' followers like the stretcher-bearers, and mule, bullock and camel drivers who were regulated through Rule 8 of the Indian Army Act VIII of 1911; and the attached followers like cooks, sweepers, grass-cutters, water-carriers and leather workers (50-51). Below these two categories was the 'menial servant.' The figure of the menial servant was expected to combine professional duties with the domestic chores of his officers. The First World War "consolidated officers' expectations of domestic work at public expense within the Indian Army" (81). While "corporal punishment was abolished for the Indian soldier as well as the enrolled follower in 1920" (92), it remained permitted for the menial servant.

In the third chapter, Singha delves into the Indian Labour and Porter Corps in Iraq during the Great War. The great demand for labour meant that newer sources of manpower had to be explored. This meant recruiting convict labour from India's jails (103-112). Recruitment also had to be done from India's internal borderlands – the Santhal districts (126). Given that Mesopotamia had to be occupied, the demand for Indian labour did not cease with armistice; and the fiction of 'Military Labour Corps' was raised to throw a military cloak on all Indian labour in Mesopotamia, even those employed by the civil administration (156).

Chapter four deals with labour recruitment for the Great War from the empire's long-standing border-making complex. Singha contends that although recruitment covered "a broad swathe of upper India" (165), colonial propaganda tried to show that the ILC sent to France was a force drawn largely from primitive people from the remotest parts of India. This served the dual purpose of portraying the success of the frontier missionary work in civilizing the tribes of India's eastern frontiers (176-180) as well as preserving an image of calmness and control when in fact heavy recruitment had led to the Kuki-Chin uprising between 1917-1919 (188-192).

The short career of the Indian Labour Corps in France during World War I is the subject of study in the penultimate chapter. The most salient discussion here is on the imposition of comparative ethnic labels on the Indian Labour Corps as well as on other coloured labour drawn from the rest of empire. This allowed “lower standard of institutional care” (211). For instance, respiratory disease related deaths of Indian labour could be discounted when they were comparatively labeled as more fragile than South African or Egyptian labourers. Moreover, dividing the labour corps along ethnic lines meant “assertiveness and discontent” could be easily isolated (211). In this chapter Singha also traces the war experience of the Indian labourers in France.

The final chapter of the monograph deals with the long-drawn process of demobilization and repatriation of combatants and non-combatants to India. The official end of war did not automatically mean the end of engagements for many who had been recruited from India’s vast manpower. In fact, both the UK government and the Indian government had passed laws which allowed them to define the termination dates of World War I despite the signing of the armistice (249). The demobilization process was also a source of great anxiety for the colonial authorities as ‘veteran’ emerged as a political category (252). This was leveraged by some Punjabi notables like Malik Hayat Khan and the Jat leader Chhotu Ram. Moreover, it was important to convince educated Indians that the returnees represented the turning back of the clock, of sorts, for the drain of Indian resources for war (253).

The Coolie’s Great War is a superbly researched monograph written using rich archival data from both India and the UK, painstakingly collected over a decade. The monograph makes a significant contribution not only to labour and military history but also to World War I studies which unfortunately hitherto has remained predominantly Euro-centric. The lucid prose of the book makes it suitable for both the professional historian as well as the ordinary reader.