

[Bhagavan on Khan, 'India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War'](#)

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Yasmin Khan. *India at War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015. 432 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-975349-9.

Reviewed by Manu Bhagavan (Hunter College and Graduate Center, CUNY) **Published on** H-Diplo (May, 2016) **Commissioned by** Seth Offenbach

The Second World War, with its larger-than-life personalities, cataclysmic campaigns, race-against-the-clock gamesmanship, and vivid characterizations of good and evil, has long captured the imagination of generations of both professional and armchair historians. Most work on the conflict, whether analytical or narrative, has explored the major actors involved, seeking for instance to explain Hitler's rise; to catalogue the horror of Nazi atrocity; to depict the outer limits of human endurance, bravery, and cruelty; to herald the heroism of soldiers; or to laud Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill as saviors.

Breaking from such conventions, Yasmin Khan's new book is resolutely focused on the war's impact, its lived reality, on the Indian subcontinent, an area marginal to the primary military confrontations, and seemingly peripheral to the entire war itself. Yet precisely by looking at things from such an angle, *India at War* allows us to see the war from fresh perspectives. This book is a sweeping history, ambitious in scope, which sees the arc of the global struggle predominantly through the eyes of South Asian peoples, from the famous to the everyday.

India was a colony of Great Britain in the early 1940s, and was increasingly chafing at the imperial yoke. What did it mean to go and fight for "the Raj"? Just whose side were the British on? If colonies were fighting on behalf of the imperium, how come only the metropole was credited? Could a victorious Japan lead to pan-Asian liberty and unity?

Khan distills these questions, unsurprisingly, into the story of Subhas Chandra Bose. Bose, a charismatic former president of the Indian National Congress, was an ardent Indian nationalist who prioritized ending British domination of India above all else. He reached out to the Axis and forged an alliance of convenience, taking over leadership in 1943 of a corps of Indian Army POWs who had switched sides and dubbed themselves the Indian National Army (INA). Bose declared a Provisional Government of Free India and the INA its fighting force, and he set out to liberate the subcontinent embedded in Japanese forces.

The Bose story loosely bookends *India at War*, and further makes brief appearances throughout the rest of the narrative, but does not receive any sustained treatment. This is for the most part a good thing, since quite a bit has already been written on this subject.[1] Instead, Bose is deployed tactically here, to highlight the ambiguity of World War II in the subcontinent and for its people. The complexity of the emotions—fears and hopes—and needs—hunger and poverty and family—driving people's decisions are all brought into relief, and the war is in the process humanized in meaningful

ways. Indians in Southeast Asia, for instance, soon “became vulnerable to forced labour, to the predations of hungry armies on the march and to aerial bombardment” and “soured” on Japanese victory as a result (p. 117). To survive, they would jump between service in the (British) Indian army, the INA, and civilian life, defying ideological or easy political explanations for their actions.

The sheer scale of the Second World War is overwhelming, with its multiple theaters, numerous battles, and terrible toll. Khan manages to capture this breadth, yet cleverly weaves small, individual stories throughout the grander narrative, in the process drawing sharp portraits of lives forever changed. She selects a handful of figures for special attention, ranging from well-known leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali to villagers like Richpal Ram. Through the latter’s tale, Khan vividly portrays the heroic actions of a battalion of Indian soldiers in Italian-occupied East Africa.

While a commendable effort, the treatments are uneven. Aruna Asaf Ali, for example, goes underground for much of the war, and leads a life of derring-do as an anticolonial activist. In this, she grows increasingly physically and emotionally distant from her husband, the nationalist Asaf Ali. He is conflicted, happy and proud of his wife, scared for her safety, and unhappy about his own marginality, caused by his imprisonment due to the Quit India movement (the third, and final of Gandhi’s major anticolonial campaigns). Aruna’s is an interesting, even exciting episode. But Khan never really gets the reader into Aruna Asaf Ali’s head, to understand what was driving her and to give us clear sense of her purpose, her ambition, and her own fears. Moreover, Aruna Asaf Ali was one of several politically active women during this time, including Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, and Hansa Mehta, yet we never hear about any of them.

The absence of such figures speaks to one of the book’s lacuna. Khan mentions “internationalism” once (p. 249) but does not discuss the ways in which the concept informed some important aspects of India’s response to the war, and many of Mahatma Gandhi’s and Jawaharlal Nehru’s ideas. The Quit India declaration that was adopted, for example, was written by Nehru and was distinctly antifascist. It promised India would side with the Allies upon independence, and then it talked about a need for a world federation. Chattopadhyay and Pandit both went on tours of the United States in the 1940s to speak for Indian independence, and Pandit played a big role in early 1945 in challenging Great Power plans for the postwar peace. India did not just fight in the Second World War, it actively imagined and helped construct the order that came after, led often by women.

This, however, is ultimately not Khan’s primary concern. She is, rather, interested in giving us the most detailed account to date of the small and large ways that India as a territory was affected by the war. And so she spends time talking about the relatively carefree attitude of Raj high society in India early on, far removed from the tragedies and hardships being endured in Europe. She gently and tenderly conveys the worry of family for each other when ripped apart by fighting. She captures the sense of doom in parts of eastern India as the Japanese continued to make advances. And she vividly depicts the anxiety, fear, and hope provoked by the American presence in India, most notably by troops of color, in challenging both Raj and caste assumptions.

Perhaps Khan’s most jarring depiction is that of the Bengal famine, which had been raging in northeastern India throughout 1943. Khan asserts that the famine was the product of hoarding by “black marketeers and more affluent traders,” poor administrative decisions, and willful neglect by the British (p. 210).[2] So it is provocative and “shocking,” as she correctly states, when she notes

much later, quoting “a British lady from Calcutta,” that “the German atrocities apparently do not compare with the Bengal famine” (p. 299). Britain’s heroic wartime image certainly suffers from such an assertion, a damning indictment. Khan moves on quickly from this point, but it nevertheless lingers.

Overall, *India at War* is a careful and nuanced work of history. Yasmin Khan has striven to produce a study of World War II that is attentive to racism, colonialism, and gender discrimination; to everyday and extraordinary acts of heroism matched by inexplicable barbarism; to selflessness and selfishness; to the local and the global, and that reflects through the prism of the Indian subcontinent the contradictions of the Second World War. It is a big task at which she largely succeeds and *India at War* consequently is a book well worth reading.

Notes

[1]. See for instance Sugata Bose, *His Majesty's Opponent* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011); Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Nehru & Bose: Parallel Lives* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2014); and Leonard Gordon, *Brothers Against the Raj* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2014), among many others. Khan is knowledgeable about this literature.

[2]. Following the work of Janam Mukherjee and Amartya Sen.

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