

## **Isaac Sequeira Memorial Award-Winning Paper**

### **South Asia's Second World War: Exploring the Legacies of World War II on Indian Memoirs**

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**Abstract:** World War II was a pivotal moment in world history. The Asian theatre of war saw unprecedented levels of destruction, displacement, and loss of life. I examine the memoirs of Ramesh Benegal and Bharati 'Asha' Sahay, volunteers of the Indian National Army (INA) and John Baptist Crasta, a soldier of the British Indian Army who was captured as a prisoner of war (POW) by the Japanese. Benegal's memoirs offer a unique perspective on the war as a member of the INA, which fought alongside the Japanese in their efforts to liberate India from British colonial rule. Benegal and Asha's accounts describe the brutal conditions under which the INA fought, facing not only the British forces but also the complexity of being mobilised to fight their own former units often. Crasta's memoirs, on the other hand, offer a perspective on the war from the other side of the conflict. As a member of the British Indian Army, he was captured by the Japanese and spent several years as a POW. His account offers a stark contrast to INA memoirs, highlighting the harsh realities of life as a captive of the Japanese. Their memoirs shed light on the complex political and social dynamics of the conflict and the toll it took on individuals caught up in the violence. By comparing their accounts, this paper will attempt to analyse the complex memories and traumas that indelibly shaped the emerging postcolonial states of South Asia but have hitherto not been given the necessary analytical attention.

**Keywords:** War Literature, Memoirs, World War II, Trauma, Conflict Studies

The capture of Singapore by the Imperial Japanese Army on 15<sup>th</sup> February 1942 came as a shock to the British Empire, leaving its claim to being the dominant power in Southeast Asia utterly exposed. It was the gravest catastrophe for Prime Minister Winston Churchill to have struck the 'prestige' of

the British Empire's entire history. It was just as much of a shock to the nearly 85,000 British, Indian and Commonwealth troops who were taken as prisoners of war (POWs) by the Japanese (Roy 46-49). The once seemingly unchallenged colonial army of the British Empire had been comprehensively outmatched by an enemy that the ideology of imperial racism had deemed as ineffectual opponents. This turn of events would lead to a cascade of events that would indelibly shape the history of Southeast Asia. In the dominant discourses of this form of narratives, especially for the Second World War, there has hitherto been a marked bias in centering Anglo-American voices. The specific context of an Indian soldier fighting for a colonial army against fascist forces places an added layer of complexity and nuance that needs to be engaged with on multiple discursive levels to begin an exploration of the qualitative effects that were wrought on the colonised world during World War II.

When analysing the impact of World War II on the Indian subcontinent, historian Yasmin Khan makes the compelling case that the fraught memories of the War played a vital role in the shaping of the postcolonial republic (5). However, until recently, the more significant impact of the Second World War on the Indian consciousness was not an area of historical research that garnered much attention. While there have been works on the military history of the Indian Army's role in WWII as the most significant volunteer force which served on the Allied side, a more nuanced discussion of the multifaceted impact of the War on the subcontinent and the narratives it spawned is yet to be had. WWII was an especially complex event in Indian history. On the one hand, it laid the groundwork for the eventual relinquishment of British rule in Delhi while also being the period in which the sectarian political climate that would lead to the violent conflagrations of Partition was most widely articulated. According to historian Srinath Raghavan, the experience of fighting WWII institutionally and effectively transformed the Indian Army. It gave the contours of the professional force it was to become for the independent republic (9). On the other hand, the narratives of the War in independent India are indelibly marked by the need to create a nationalist narrative to comprehend the role of Indian men in uniform within the framework of the Indian nationalist movement. In this

respect, it is the Azad Hind Fauj (Indian National Army) that has received the most attention in independent India.

This paper looks at the complex web of narrative construction that ties together the fraught memories of this often-overlooked chapter of Indian history. The paper will use three memoirs by Ramesh Benegal and Asha Bharati Sahay, who both served in the INA and John Crasta's account from the other side of the barbed wire as a captive POW of the Japanese. Life writings such as these provide a different path to exploring historiography away from what LaCapra calls the documentary and positivist methodology of traditional professional historians. He describes 'radical constructivism' as a key approach to problematising the milieu of historiography, to include the space for emotions, narrative and affective structures that can make claims to further our understanding of historical events by lending a different and equally important form of authenticity than that offered by the positivist research paradigm (LaCapra 41).

In this regard, memories and their recurrence are a crucial feature of the Second World War. The Asian theatre has hitherto faced a relative lack of attention from the popular memories of the War, along with details of the participation and tribulations of non-white troops at the front. One need only look at the body of research that incorporates these men having been 'forgotten' as a critical aspect of analysing their wartime experiences in the works of researchers ranging from G.J. Douds to Christopher Bayly and Timothy Harper. A poll conducted in the UK regarding the greatest battle fought by the British, in recent years, awarded the Battle of Kohima and Imphal as the greatest battle that Britain ever fought instead of more officially and historically memorialised British victories such as the D-Day Landings and Waterloo (Guyot-Réchar 328). While this can be read as symptomatic of a wave of imperial nostalgia in an increasingly right-wing post-Brexit UK, there are more profound implications to the resurrection of these memories from theatres of the war that saw the massive participation of non-white troops and, in turn, revisiting the legacies of wartime to understand how it shaped the fault lines of the postcolonial world which was taking shape in South Asia at the time.

To delve further into how the voices arising from these memoirs can complicate a collective confrontation of the legacy of World War II in Asia, one needs to address the positionality of the speakers in these texts. The experience of war is both a severely traumatic rupture in the psyche of the individuals caught up in the maelstrom of events that is mass armed conflict, and it also simultaneously plays a crucial role in reshaping the identities of the ones who went through these experiences. In trying to make sense of how these combatants made sense of their own experiences and tried to capture their own memories in their texts, it becomes essential to locate them within the milieu of colonial society and be conscious of the positions from which they spoke. Researchers such as Gajendra Singh have pointed out the lacunae in the popular historical memory of the role of the INA and the British Indian Army during India's World War (175). Why the participants chose to fight on one side or the other, or how they fashioned their own identities and made sense of their own roles in the conflict, becomes a crucial factor in deconstructing some of the more nuanced realities that underly the conflict as it played out.

The two INA volunteers whose memoirs are considered here came from privileged segments of Indian society. Ramesh Benegal was a well-educated young man living with his privileged and Anglicised family, part of the upper crust of the Indian diaspora in colonial Burma at the outbreak of war (10-12). This is revealed through his family's ability to make use of their resources to send multiple family members, such as Ramesh's mother, across the Indian border to safety at the start of the Japanese invasion of Burma. Benegal's account of his journey with his uncle through war-torn Burma gives yet more examples of the clout that some segments of the Indian community held there as his uncle can resist the depredations of Burmese extortionists by identifying their leader to have been his one-time servant (15). Benegal's joining the INA comes about in the context of his awakened national and ethnic identity amid the collapse of the British colonial state in Burma. His account of the rumours of Indian soldiers committing atrocities on Burmese women as they retreated in the face of the Japanese offensive indicates some of the more complex racial dynamics and power hierarchies that operated in colonial society. Those Indian soldiers could be perceived to be the hatchet men of

an increasingly gutted and ossified colonial state in stark contrast to the new vision of Indian agency offered by the recruiting officers of the INA (Benegal 22). It is crucial to foreground some of these issues in locating Benegal's induction into the INA as an officer cadet and his subsequent journey to Japan to be trained as an Air Force pilot.

In the case of Asha Sahay, her involvement with the Indian nationalist movement seemed to have been a foregone conclusion from the outset. The daughter of Anand Mohan Sahay, a former secretary to Dr Rajendra Prasad and later a key organiser for the Indian Independence League in Japan, and Sati Sen, the niece of the revolutionary freedom fighter Chittranjan Das and an active participant in the nationalist movement in her own right, Asha's family had unimpeachable nationalist credentials (Sahay 23). Even as a young girl, Asha was steeped in the lore of the freedom struggle, and the anti-imperialist ideology was a dedicated commitment in her household. Her upbringing in Tokyo amongst the Japanese and the dissident Indian diaspora who had settled in Japan to escape British persecution indelibly shaped her understanding of the Second World War and her own role in it. The influence of Showā era Japanese nationalism and her parents' views is apparent in Asha's worldview. For her, the motivations of all her fellow Indians could be flattened into the binary of being *deshpremi* (trans: patriots) and *deshdrohi* (trans: traitors/collaborators) (Sahay 23). The nationalist ideology, especially the one gaining currency with the arrival of Subhas Chandra Bose in Japan in 1943, at the height of the war, helped bolster Asha's identification with the freedom struggle and the role she carved out for herself to play in it. She joined the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the INA as an officer cadet while being accompanied by her father, a senior figure in the intelligence apparatus of the Azad Hind government.

In stark contrast to the young INA volunteers, one confronts a very different voice when encountering Crasta's text. John Crasta belonged to a religious minority (he was a Catholic) from an impoverished part of southwestern India (in the modern state of Karnataka). In a postscript to his memoir, John's son Richard explains the circumstances of his father's joining the British Indian Army as one of economic necessity. Working as a labourer in Karachi was the financial burden placed on

John at the time of the death of his father, which saw him join the Indian Army for the same reason as many recruits to the army: economic survival (Crasta 92). His working-class background lends a voice that describes the wartime shorn of the ideological rhetoric of the better-educated and privileged officer corps. Crasta was stationed in Malaya with a Supply Troop at the time of the peninsula's capture by the Imperial Japanese Army. His ordeal at the hands of the Japanese would see him suffer a gruelling battle to survive against the criminal treatment of POWs at the hands of both the Japanese and, notably, Indian soldiers who had defected to the Indian National Army (INA). Initially stationed with the British Indian Army in the Malayan Peninsula, his sojourn as a captive of the Japanese would see him being transported against his will from Malaya to the Dutch East-Indies (Indonesia) to finally witness the horrors of the Pacific theatre on the island of New Britain at Rabaul (Crasta 36-68).

When analysing his reasons for not joining the INA during his captivity, Diya Gupta argues that Crasta provides a more nuanced view of the Indian soldiers in combat and what motivated their actions and conceptions of themselves as colonised subjects fighting for a colonial army. She makes the case that Crasta's loyalty to the Indian Army cannot be conflated with a corresponding loyalty to the British colonial regime. His principled opposition to joining the INA had more to do with his perception (with more than a grain of truth to it) that the INA itself was co-opted by the Japanese and, in turn, would inevitably be an instrument of Japanese expansionism (Gupta 154). In military history, the motivations of the British Indian Army in intense combat situations were explained through the specific organisation of military institutions of the British Raj. Narratives of regimental honour and traditions formed the cohesive glue to keep the colonial war machine going (Barkawi 325). Crasta himself indicates his attachment to his regiment as a primary reason for refusing to defect to the INA (24).

Gajendra Singh's study of the reasons why most of the captured Punjabi Muslim soldiers of the Hong Kong garrison refused to defect to the INA supports Barkawi's argument. Far from being the simplistic 'martial races' that the colonial state envisioned them as, and many in postcolonial India seem to have assumed them to be, these soldiers refused to part with their Indian VCOs

(Viceroy's Commissioned Officers) and NCOs (Non-Commissioned Officers) (Singh 187). In addition to the growing anxiety amongst Muslim soldiers of the INA and the Congress program being heavily influenced by Sikh and Hindu political rhetoric, the incidents of resistance to the INA at the Gun Club Hill Barracks in Hong Kong suggests a far more nuanced perspective of Indian soldiers than they are usually given credit for. The Combined Defence Services Interrogation Centre (India) (CSDIC-I), in fact, directly concluded that the refusal of large bodies of Indian soldiers to defect to the INA was categorically not the result of any entrenched loyalty to the British state (Singh 174).

The experience of wartime itself wrought further challenges to the self-fashioning of combatants. In this regard, a war memoir is a unique form of narrative that can juxtapose the tensions of trauma and memory and simultaneously illuminate the realities of war for a reader while also alienating them from the battlefield as a visceral yet ultimately inaccessible lived experience. When discussing the specific characteristics of the war memoir, there is a unique expression of this juxtaposition of conscious articulation, inherent inaccessibility, and revealing silences. When describing one of the seminal tensions of war literature, especially of soldiers' narratives, Samuel Hynes described writing war memoirs as a unique form of travel writing, giving the (most likely civilian) reader a tour of the essentially alien landscape of war and its destruction, while simultaneously inscribing the essential inaccessibility of that space for anyone who has not undergone that experience. For Hynes, a complete war story involves the return of the only surviving soldier from an enemy ambush to his base, but who dies before he can tell his comrades what happened out there (25-30). That aspect of the unknown is a seminal part of constructing war experiences and dovetails into a similar tension of silence and articulation characterising trauma.

The effects of wartime mobilisation thus produce tensions in the narrative construction of memory that reveal and challenge the cohesiveness of revisiting lived experiences. In the case of Asha, her primary emotional struggle in fashioning her self-hood amid the armed camp of the INA in Thailand is one mostly marked by interiority. It is marked by her preconceived notions of the revolutionary's mental state and her striving towards a state of being where she is purged of most of

her personal emotional connections to be wholly dedicated to the cause of India's freedom. Yet, her own narrative reveals the underlying tensions in this essentially idealistic cauterising of her own psyche for the service of her cause. "But how do I crush these unyielding emotions? I have to scold myself and hold myself accountable. I am no longer a college girl," laments Asha (80). Asha firmly believes in the tenet of a revolutionary having to excise their inner worlds of the effect of any other connection except to their cause and fellow comrades.

As an organising principle, this serves as a potent tool of mobilisation. Yet, Asha's inner struggles delineate the emotional costs it imposes as she is making the self-reproach due to her anxiety over the fate of her mother and siblings back in Tokyo, which was being ravaged by American air raids. Yet, the war also provides hitherto unimagined outlets for self-fashioning. For Asha, her role in the struggle was already refracted through the INA's re-imagining of traditional gender roles, attested to by the very fact of the Rani of Jhansi Regiment's existence. In addition to her training with the rifle and in guerrilla warfare, the role-playing that the exigencies of combat allow an individual to refashion their selves is revealed in one of the most interesting episodes in her memoir. While in uniform, Asha visits the daughters of one of her hosts in Taiwan and takes the subversion of her own gendered existence to a new imaginative plane. As she presents herself to these young women in her army uniform, she imagines herself as a man, as well as a possible lover to these women. "If I was really a prince, I know these girls would become infatuated with me immediately" (Sahay 87). Her momentary destabilisation of gender, too, in the final instance, must be brought back to the nationalist cause, as she proclaims the role of a 'princely figure' as one essential to fighting for the nation.

The effects of wartime force reveal insights into the life worlds of the narrators of these life writings while equally highlighting some of their silences and elisions in constructing the narrative. One of the primary points of historical interest in revisiting these memoirs would be to understand the role of the INA and the Indian combatants in Asia in the context of Japanese imperialism. In the case of Benegal, his text captures some of the tensions that inevitably existed in the somewhat liminal status of Indian combatants, fighting either as colonised subjects for the Raj or as ostensibly



independent fighters allied to the Japanese, which made the reality of Japan's war aims a tense counterpoint to Indian aspirations. While Benegal initially marvels at the order and discipline imposed by the Japanese military in Burma, his memoir offers disturbing instances of a far grimmer reality that, at some points, also causes deep anxiety to the narrator himself. Benegal encounters the infamous 'comfort women,' who were forced into sexual slavery by the Japanese military during his stay in Mergui. Yet, he tries to explain it away as another ode to Japanese efficiency (20). He seems to see the women without truly seeing them at all. A more disturbing encounter for him occurs on the Burma-Siam Railroad. The journey through wartime Burma to reach Japan creates a dissonant and uncomfortable narrative thread as he depicts the racial hierarchy between Indians and the Burmese, as well as his shocking encounter with the conditions of British POWs working on the infamous Burma Railway (Benegal 28). The 'Death Railway' saw the forced labour and starvation of thousands of captured Allied POWs. Benegal's experiences and guilt over his and his comrades stealing the pig of a destitute woman in rural Philippines, while at the time comprehended through the hardships of wartime, leaves an indelible link to the large-scale policy of expropriations conducted by the Empire of Japan across Asia (44).

Unlike Benegal, Asha, perhaps because of having been a product of the rigidly nationalistic education system of Imperial Japan, seems to be unaware of the realities of Japanese occupation in the conquered territories. Asha had written her original diary entirely in Japanese. Alongside Bengali, Japanese was the language she was most fluent in then. A large part of her time at the INA RJR training camp was spent studying Hindustani, and she only gained fluency in English well after the war. Her linguistic heritage reveals the complex cultural crossroads for a diasporic subject. Tellingly, during her stay in Saigon, she observes, "But today there is peace with Japanese rule...they are disciplined, but not exploited" (Sahay 102). She ironically makes this comment at a time when the Viet Minh were, in fact, actively engaged in a guerilla war against the Japanese occupiers, and the Imperial Japanese Army's requisition of rice stocks was leading to mass starvation in rural Vietnam. Asha's encounter with the Kamikaze pilots in Taiwan is also portrayed in a similar vein of awe at the

prospect of self-sacrifice for the national cause. Her interactions with the Kamikaze officers leave a deep impression on her as they come to symbolise the highest ideal of service to the nation (Sahay 81). Yet this view misses some of the nuances of the Kamikaze and their mobilisation as a desperate gambit by the Japanese Empire as the heavy toll of the Pacific war left the air force without any experienced pilots who could last long against American airmen leading to these suicidal aerial attacks on US Navy ships to become standard policy. Indeed, the pilots' motivations for joining the Kamikaze were more nuanced than blind Emperor worship, as Emiko Ohnuki-Tierney captures in her remarkable study of the diaries of Japanese *tokkotai* pilots. She gives the instance of Machida Dokyō, who flew his final mission because he believed it might bring reprieve to his mother from the incessant American air raids on the Home Islands and to support her through his pension upon his death (Ohnuki-Tierney 173-176).

With Crasta, one encounters the most enduring lacuna that marks war literature and memories of this sort: the narrative of trauma. When analysing Freud's contemplation of the unique nature of trauma as a form of mental wound in his *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Cathy Caruth concludes that the best way to comprehend the nature of trauma is to view it as a unique form of narrative construction. Using the example of Tancred unknowingly wounding his beloved Clorinda while the latter is first disguised in armour during a duel and later when her soul is trapped in a tree during a magical Crusading quest, Caruth contends that there is a tense dynamic between the knowable and the unknown within the ambit of traumatic experience (9-10). Not only is trauma experienced once, when for the victim, the nature of the event may be the least comprehensible, but the memory of trauma returns as a repeated haunting spectre to the victim. Life writings that recount and confront traumatic experiences reveal this tension of a double narrative, where, as a reader, one needs to negotiate through the traumatic realities that are illuminated by the text while simultaneously being forced to ponder the silences and elisions that I would argue from an equally integral aspect of the narrative construction of the text. In a larger sense, this discourse can be understood in the context of history as the constant repetition of wounds in the form of traumatic memory, which cry out to be

acknowledged. The nature of the voice may be both raising the listener or reader to the consciousness of the inflicted wound while also obfuscating some of its deeper, existential impact.

Crasta recounts the deaths of many, indeed most, of his comrades during their captivity by the Japanese. In the case of two POWs from a Pioneer Battalion on Rabaul, not only are they killed in an Allied air raid, but their corpses are flung out from their shallow graves in a subsequent air raid to perform a metaphoric repetition of the traumatic loss for Crasta (51-52). How did Crasta process the pain and suffering of his years of captivity under the Japanese in the years after the War? There is a scant record of that. He ends his memoir with his repatriation to India at the end of the war in 1945. A detailed postscript by his son Richard documents the difficulties of publishing and disseminating the text in 1998 in the face of resistance from Indian government officials, but after 1945, his father's voice lapsed into silence. The fact that John Crasta kept his memoirs as merely personal notes for more than fifty years after the War, and they may not have seen the light of day had it not been for his son, is a telling fact. The text's silences are just as revealing as the graphic details it provides of the inhumane conditions under which these men had to attempt to survive. That silence poses both a challenge and defines a key concept for any subsequent reader of memoirs such as this, namely that the record of explicit suffering must co-exist with the implication of the repetition of silent traumatic memories. Arguably, the opacity of the silence that may be perceived in the interstices and the telling of Crasta's memoir offers critical possibilities to re-imagine how trauma and conflict narratives operate and what they offer to our understanding of an affective authenticity beyond the bounds of the factual accurate or real. The ineluctable gap between the articulating of the traumatised veteran and the reader may offer the possibility of renegotiating the revisiting of historical events with a renewed understanding of how to theorise inaccessible aspects of traumatic experience.

Lastly, in an ominous sign of the cascading effects of wartime mobilisation, brutalisation and the radical self-fashioning that ripped through the subcontinent in the 1940s, Crasta documents the spontaneous outbreak of communal violence between Muslim and Sikh soldiers in Romali during the repatriation process at war's end (72). Similarly, the reason Crasta's memoir sparked controversy

with the defence establishment of the Indian state in the 1990s stems from his testimony, posing a direct challenge to the constructed memory of the mythicised heroism of the INA. More than just being a facet of Crasta's possible ideological indoctrination by the colonial state, he gives concrete examples of INA brutality towards Indian soldiers who refused to defect by giving descriptions of Buller Camp, a 'separation camp' where INA men tortured uncooperative Indian officers, and in describing men such as Subedars Sher Singh and Fateh Singh, who figure as major tormentors of the Indian prisoners who had refused to serve in the INA (Crasta 23). Indeed, he is initially elated to have his custody handed over to the Japanese from his INA overseers (Crasta 30).

This testimony starkly contrasts the national memory of the INA's actions as sanctioned and sanitised by the Indian state. Just as silences and narrative rebuilding play a role in individual memories comprehending traumatic events, collective memories, in this case, fashioned by the emerging postcolonial state, take recourse to a similar process of narrative construction and silencing to make sense of and sanctify a nation's historical memory, especially of traumatic events. Richard Crasta, John Crasta's son, appended a long and fascinating postscript detailing the challenges of getting his father's memoir published and recognised in India in 1997-1998. The reactions of the then Chief of Army Staff, Gen. VP Malik, and Defence Minister George Fernandes reveal a conflicted attitude towards the legacy of the War in India in general and the army in particular. Crasta's memoir may be located within that lacuna of the mainstream Indian memory of World War II. As much as a valuable source to revisit the history of Indian experiences in World War II, Crasta offers a fascinating example of the elisions, tensions, and traumas of war narratives, especially in a context away from the dominant Anglo-American voices of the War. In this regard, one is reminded of Freud's parable of the dream of the burning child, which Caruth deploys to analyse the simultaneous subconscious and literal (including historical) reverberation of trauma, and war memoirs like Crasta's deploy their narrative construction much the same way to both reveal and repress traumatic memories. The voices captured in these memoirs sketch an elaborate psycho-geography of memories, often conflicting narratives, that when confronted at multiple discursive and theoretical levels, may help us to begin to

deconstruct the ignored and multifaceted histories and legacies of the global wars of the previous century on the subcontinent and to begin to grapple with the consequences of when India last became a state mobilised for total war as the 21<sup>st</sup> century progresses by revisiting (to borrow Ian Buruma's phrase) the unfinished business of the war.

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