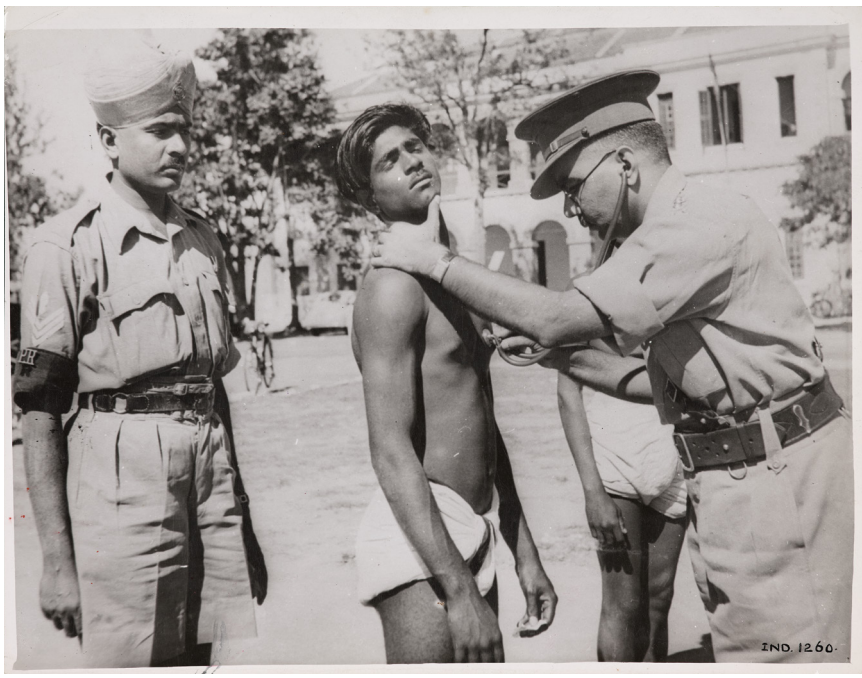
19

Docile Bodies? Reflections on a Recruitment Photograph from India during the Second World War

Diya Gupta

Diya Gupta presents a photograph from British military recruitment in India during the Second World War. Her commentary demonstrates that colonial archival material can be mobilized for postcolonial analysis by careful reading of its absences and silences, in this case the corporeal and colonial hierarchies in evidence in the photograph.

Source 19: Photograph captioned 'Recruiting for the army in South India. The Recruiting Medical Officer in Bangalore examining a candidate's chest'. © Imperial War Museums IND 1260.[1]



Diya Gupta, 'Docile Bodies? Reflections on a Recruitment Photograph from India during the Second World War' in: *Miniatures*. University of Exeter Press (2025). © Kate Ferris and Huw Halstead. DOI: 10.47788/ZPDY9911

Commentary

Three male bodies dominate this colonial photograph from 1942.[2] Our attention is drawn to a young Indian man in the centre of the frame, clad only in a loincloth, who arches his neck as a firm medical hand positions his chin at the required angle. The young man's eyes are closed. Is it in pleasure, pain or resignation to imperial control? A fully uniformed Indian medical officer scrutinizes this young man, listening to the internal sounds of his body. The medical officer bends over in concentration, in a position of authority; in contrast, the young man's arms hang loosely by his sides. The officer's uniformed aide looks on at this spectacle. Is he standing a little too close to the young man being examined, creating a claustrophobic effect? And what of the fourth body on display here, stripped of all recognizable identity? Only its lower half remains visible, with a pair of thin legs protruding and part of a skinny arm. Who does this fragmented body belong to? And how did these semi-clad Indian men, being measured and inspected, experience global conflict in the 1940s?

The young man under medical scrutiny in the photograph is, we are told in the accompanying military caption, from South India. According to the prevalent colonial theory about Indian military 'types'—a racialized and pseudoscientific one—men from South India, often ubiquitously linked to the province of Madras, were a 'non-martial' race, perceived as effeminate and unwarlike.[3] But such hierarchies had started collapsing under the pressure of wartime recruitment. Compared to the pre-Second World War years of providing merely 3% of Indian army recruits, South India now came second only to the province of Punjab, a traditional military enlistment ground for the British, in providing men. This comprised about 18% of 2.5 million troops from undivided India—approximately 450,000 in number.[4] And these 2.5 million Indian soldiers were posted in nearly every single theatre of this war—Persia, Iraq, Palestine, Egypt, East Africa and Abyssinia, Syria, Aden, Greece, Italy, Burma and Malaya.[5] Most of the men from South India served as non-combatants, working in the roles of drivers, carpenters, cooks, clerks and electricians.[6] This photograph, then, places the visual in dialogue with local, regional and imperial history in fruitful ways: the young man we see before us might have been one of these recruits. But the frame of the camera's lens conceals as much as it reveals: the colonial archives do not provide us with the name of this young man, or even tell us whether he was successful in signing up to military service.

The year this photograph was taken—1942—is significant in political terms for India, providing us with an insight into why it was commissioned as well as the everyday lives of the men on whose bodies it focuses. Indivar Kamtekar has rightly called this year 'the shiver of 1942', when India stood poised at the brink of historical change.[7] Would the country be invaded by the Japanese imperial forces that had so successfully taken over British-occupied Singapore, Hong Kong, Malaya and Burma, and reached the eastern border of India? Would the Quit India movement, launched by Mohandas Gandhi and other Indian political leaders, manage to wrest independence from British rule? And were the Allies losing the war, and with it, their colonies? Despite the danger posed by

unfamiliar 'non-martial' troops such as those from South India, whose 'loyalty' to colonial authorities had not yet been tested, British authorities were keen to keep recruitment levels high across the subcontinent: they simply needed more men. The photograph takes on fresh significance in this context, where a visual record of the desire of 'non-martial' Indian men to be measured, inspected and enlisted—and of submitting to an imperial and ethnographic gaze—becomes crucial for propaganda purposes. The war therefore must be popular; the Indian people must believe in its cause. In this sense, the photograph performs a similar function to a booklet published in 1943, entitled *Mutu Joins Up*, which describes how a young recruit in the 3rd Madras Regiment becomes an exemplary soldier. Again, earlier, in 1941 and 1942, an exhibition train highlighting tools and equipment used by soldiers travelled 1,500 miles through central and southern India to generate publicity for the armed services.[8] Undercutting these propaganda publications and activities, the experiential reality of the Second World War in India remained highly divided: a time when anti-fascism, communism, anti-colonialism and nationalism jostled against one another.[9] Military recruitment took place against this contested background.

There is another, more physically revealing, dimension to this photograph. Unlike Britain, conscription was never introduced in India during the Second World War; the 2.5 million men who signed up for military service were volunteers. But what did volunteering mean in a colony where the bulk of the population was desperate for jobs, for the means to eat and live?[10] Letters written by Indian soldiers to their loved ones back at home repeatedly highlight the economic imperatives leading them to sign up. A havildar clerk or junior officer in the Indian army, who belonged to a Sappers and Miners unit, confesses frankly in July 1943: 'I joined the Army in order that I may get rid of this accursed devil of unemployment so very prevalent in India.'[11] And British authorities had relaxed military requirements for entry, including the acceptance of underweight, underage and anaemic applicants.[12] We can see visual evidence of this in the photograph—the young man being medically scrutinized is young and thin, as is his companion next in line, only parts of whose body can be glimpsed at.

Why does the camera deliberately juxtapose the near-naked bodies of these would-be recruits and the uniformed men carrying out the inspection? Homoeroticism permeates this photograph; co-opted into the camera's voyeuristic gaze, we recognize how fetishized the unclothed colonized male body is here. As Philippa Levine has argued, there is a long history in photography of nakedness being 'emblematic of colonial primitiveness, savagery and inferiority', where the camera becomes 'a badge of modern legitimacy and anthropological truth telling'.[13] A transformation is being suggested to us through visual codes: from primitiveness and inferiority to imperial military uniform, modernity and the docile body, justifying the colonial project. And yet this transformation can only take place through young, impoverished men from a British colony participating in the terrible violence of a global war.

Although the cameraman responsible for this image was likely to have been a white British officer trained in photography,[14] the men in uniform shown to be in charge here are themselves Indian. This may well be because colonial authorities

creating propaganda material in India in the 1940s were conscious that 'Indians needed to be portrayed in positions of authority […] working for the war effort spontaneously and on a self-organising basis'.[15] The photograph continues to reveal to us the structures of colonial power acting upon the colonized, even if the agents who enact that power are Indian.

In an attempt to recover the lived experiences of those marginalized in dominant narratives of global conflict, I have situated this colonial photograph alongside broader historical contexts related to wartime India in the Second World War. Achille Mbembe notes that 'for an incomplete archive to speak with the fullness of a voice, it has to be created, not out of nothing but out of the debris of information, on the very site of the ruins, the remains and traces left behind'.[16] How, then, can we make postcolonial interpretations of colonial material related to India in the 1940s? The Imperial War Museum, where the photograph under discussion is housed, holds rich quantities of visual records both on wartime India, and Indians at home and abroad during the war. But these archives are frustratingly partial and incomplete: we are hardly ever told the names of the people being photographed and are given very little information about their backgrounds.

It is difficult, then, to trace the arc of a single life—of one Indian recruit, for example—through this visual material. But, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot writes: 'History is the fruit of power, but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge, the exposition of its roots.'[17] In trying to excavate the marginalized lives of ordinary colonized people, who often remain nameless in official records, we need to understand why the colonial archive was constructed and how it has endured. As Mbembe suggests, we must work with debris and ruins; we must piece together the experiential realities of colonized people caught up in the machinations of global war on international battlefronts and the home-front by interpreting visual records, such as photographs, alongside textual accounts like letters, and wider socio-political and military history. This includes recognizing where there are omissions and gaps, but also seeking ways of activating the archive with historical imagination and empathy. We may never know precisely what happened to the young man being medically examined in this photograph. But his vulnerable body has left its trace in the colonial archives—and that is a start.

Notes

1 This photograph is unlikely to have been taken by the No. 9 Army and Film Photographic Unit, as mentioned on the Imperial War Museum's website, as this particular unit was not officially established until 1945. See Fred McGlade, *The History of the British Army Film & Photographic Unit in the Second World War* (Helion, 2010), p. 162.

2 I have written a shorter version of my reflections on this photograph in my book: Diya Gupta, *India in the Second World War: An Emotional History* (Hurst, 2023), pp. 142–44.

3 See Gajendra Singh, *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy* (Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 11–34, for an analysis of the 'martial races' theory. Also

see Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914* (Manchester University Press, 2004).

4 Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: The Making of Modern South Asia, 1939–1945* (Penguin: 2016), p. 74.

5 Florian Stadtler, 'Britain's Forgotten Volunteers: South Asian Contributions to the Two World Wars' in *South Asians and the Shaping of Britain, 1870–1950: A Sourcebook*, ed. by Ruvani Ranasinha, Rehana Ahmed, Sumita Mukherjee and Florian Stadtler (Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 80–135.

6 Raghavan, *India's War*, p. 74.

7 Indivar Kamtekar, 'The Shiver of 1942', *Studies in History*, 18.1 (2002), pp. 81–102.

8 Raghavan, *India's War*, p. 78.

9 See the introduction to Gupta, *India in the Second World War*.

10 Indivar Kamtekar, 'A Different War Dance: State and Class in India 1939–1945', *Past and Present*, 176.1 (2002), pp. 187–221 (p. 190).

11 British Library's India Office Records, Middle East Military Censorship Reports: Fortnightly Summaries Covering Indian Troops, April 1943–October 1943, L/PJ/12/655, 14 July to 27 July 1943.

12 Raghavan, *India's War*, p. 79.

13 Philippa Levine, 'Naked Truths: Bodies, Knowledge, and the Erotics of Colonial Power', *Journal of British Studies*, 52.1 (2013), pp. 5–25 (pp. 8–9).

14 Fred McGlade observes that training for Indian cameramen was established in India in 1943–44. See Chapter 7: 'The South-East Asia Campaign' in McGlade, *The History of the British Army Film & Photographic Unit in the Second World War*, pp. 155–83 (p. 157).

15 Philip Woods, 'From Shaw to Shantaram: The Film Advisory Board and the Making of British Propaganda Films in India, 1940–1943', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 21.3 (2001), 293–308 (p. 300).

16 Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics: Theory in Forms* (Duke University Press, 2019), pp. 160–61.

17 Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Beacon Press, 1995), p. xxiii.