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# Tale of Two Narratives: Indian Medical Personnel in the First World War

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper interrogates two interconnected narratives – Sisir Sarbadhikari's *Abhi Le Baghdad* and the biography of Dr Kalyan Mukhopadhyaya which feature the travails of Bengali medical personnel serving with the British forces at the Mesopotamian front during the First World War. The central question that resonates throughout the article is one of representation, for both the narratives raise a host of issues, including the Bengali male's uneasy engagement with his masculinity, nationalism, pacifism, the futility of war and Pan-Asian cosmopolitanism. The relative lack of rancour towards the opposing Turkish forces, who were held as protagonists of both prisoners' narratives, leads us to the fundamental tenor of this article – are the assertions and absences, implicit and explicit, in these two narratives rooted in their specific contexts or could they be touted as widely representative of the Bengali 'bhadralok' mentality of the times?*

## Introduction

This paper interrogates and seeks to contextualise two interconnected First World War narratives featuring the travails of Bengali medical personnel serving with the British forces at the Mesopotamian front. The first narrative is Sisir Sarbadhikari's *Abhi Le Baghdad*, the autobiographical account of a Bengali detailing his experiences as a nurse with the Bengal Ambulance Corps in Mesopotamia. Sarbadhikari's account was written at the prompting of his daughter-in-law and almost forty years after his return from Mesopotamia.<sup>1</sup> The account gets its name from the utterances of a Muslim soldier on the retreat from Ctesiphon after the British defeat at the hands of the Turks where

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<sup>1</sup>Sisir Prasad Sarbadhikari, *Abhi Le Baghdad* (Kolkata: Naya Udyog, first published 1958, first reprinted Kolkata, Naya Udyog, 2014).

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he stated mockingly 'Abhi le Baghdad' (Baghdad is there for the taking). Sarbadhikari wrote and hid his diary in his boots. Miraculously it survived the war.<sup>2</sup>

The other narrative explored here is a biography of Dr Kalyan Mukhopadhyay, an Indian Medical Service doctor who served at the Mesopotamian front around the same time and, as we shall see, partly in the same area as Sarbadhikari. The biography was skilfully written by his grandmother Makhoda Devi, who based it partly on the letters written by Mukhopadhyay to his mother when he was at the front. Tragically, Mukhopadhyay would not survive the war and would die of an outbreak of enteric fever in a Turkish prisoner-of-war camp, though not before curing many other prisoners of war in the camp of the same deadly disease.<sup>3</sup>

The partial overlap of their professional paths in Mesopotamia was one of the compelling reasons to compare and contrast these two specific narratives. The main protagonists in these two narratives, Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay, experienced the vicissitudes of war in the same theatre. It is as if their professional lives during their service in Mesopotamia were intertwined. Both went to Basra though they boarded ship from different ports in India. They were eventually posted to the same station, Kut, from the third week of November 1915. Their fates were interwoven for the next few months, starting with the march towards Ctesiphon to fight the Turkish forces in the third week of November and then the same Turkish prisoner camp at Russell Lines in May 1916. Thereafter their lives would take different twists and turns. While Sarbadhikari returned from the front, notwithstanding his time as a Turkish prisoner of war, Mukhopadhyay perished in a Turkish prisoner-of-war camp.

One seeks to contextualise these narratives and, at the same time, locate them in a broader setting. Therefore, the central question that resonates throughout is one of representation, for both the narratives raise a host of issues, the Bengali male's uneasy engagement with his masculinity, nationalism, pacifism, the futility of war, and Pan-Asian cosmopolitanism, to name but a few. The narratives also demonstrate a relative lack of rancour towards the opposing Turkish forces who held the protagonists of both narratives prisoner, albeit in contrasting modes. This again leads us to the fundamental tenor of this article, are the assertions and absences, implicit and explicit, in these two narratives rooted in their specific contexts or could they be touted as widely representative of the Bengali '*bhadralok*' (literally meaning decent folk) mentality of the times?

The term *bhadralok* was an appellation used for the predominantly Hindu Bengali middle classes who had from the later decades of the eighteenth century risen to

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<sup>2</sup>Ibid, p. 29.

<sup>3</sup>Makhoda Devi, *Kalyan Pradeep*, (Kolkata: Self-Published, 1927), p. 334.

prominence in a particularly colonial context. Their economic interests were intrinsically tied to the colonial economy, mainly as dependent junior partners and agents of British business interests in Colonial India, or were beholden to the British for land grants. The *bhadralok* has thus been described by some historians as someone who pursued a vocation which involved the pursuit of the mind and was far removed from manual labour. Another criteria was that they lived at least in a *pucca* or concrete house and earned a respectable income. The *bhadralok* additionally and very crucially had to possess refined manners and tastes, and dressed, and conversed in a cultivated manner; in short they were men of culture and were a cultural elite, a status group to which all avowedly non-*bhadralok* classes aspired. They were also at the forefront of the Bengal Renaissance, a nineteenth century reformist phenomenon, which is ascribed to the Bengali *bhadralok*'s tryst with Western education and civilization.<sup>4</sup>

The *bhadralok* has been depicted by some historians of the Bengal Renaissance, such as Ashok Sen, as a dependant bourgeoisie because their rise was attributed to their servile links with the colonial regime. Consequently Sen argues that the *bhadralok* as a class displayed a stubborn conservatism despite the presence of certain very progressive minds among their ranks.<sup>5</sup> The second half of the nineteenth century saw a marked increase in this conservative strand amongst them. Coupled with it was a growing disquiet and disgruntlement especially among the lower middle class sections of the *bhadralok* class with the policies and attitudes of the colonial regime.<sup>6</sup> The colonial establishment responded to this newfound hostility in multiple ways. One way was to dub the *bhadralok* as an effeminate *babu* as he was sometimes referred to or addressed as. Mrinalini Sinha argues that the *bhadralok* showed considerable anxiety at this affront to his avowed masculinity, a tension which is markedly evinced in the two narratives in question.<sup>7</sup>

This article will explore this manifest tension with regard to the masculinity displayed in the two narratives. The other apparently contrary theme is pacifism. Kalyan Mukhopadhyay becomes a pacifist who was appalled by the mayhem around him.<sup>8</sup> We seek to contextualise and complicate these emotions, tension, and anxieties and enquire whether this disquiet in Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay regarding their

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<sup>4</sup>J.R Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal*, University of California Press, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Ashok Sen, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones*, (Calcutta: Riddhi-India: 1977).

<sup>6</sup>Sumit Sarkar, *Modern Times: India, 1880-1950's, Environment, Economy and Culture* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2014), pp. 318-321.

<sup>7</sup>Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman And the Effeminate Bengali, In the Late Nineteenth Century*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995), p.14.

<sup>8</sup>See Makhoda Devi, "Kalyan Pradeep", (Kolkata: Self-Published, 1927), pp. 317-318.

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masculinity and the pacifism exhibited by Mukhopadhyay were specific to their context or broadly representative of the *bhadralok* mentality of the times.

### Literary Narrative as History

The source base for this article being two narratives, it is imperative that, at the very outset, to discuss what historians seek when they deal with narratives, either literary or, as in this case, a war memoir and a biography based partly on the protagonist's letters written to his family from a theatre of war. The two narratives in question could be classified as war literature, though not as war fiction, for they are built around events which have purportedly occurred. What opposes history and fiction does not have to do with the structuring activity invested in their narrative structures as such, rather it has to do with the 'truth-claim.' Paul Fussell makes the argument that war memoirs, though based essentially on the protagonist's personal experiences, often veer towards the fictional as the protagonists sometimes have a tendency to exaggerate their own role in the scheme of things and tend to invest their actions with a heroic halo.<sup>9</sup> Notwithstanding these traits, as Ricoeur suggests, ultimately the historical narrative is built around events which have actually occurred as opposed to the fiction within a literary narrative.<sup>10</sup> In Sarbadhikari's case, a war veteran, who attempts years later to recount in an autobiographical mode his experiences as a volunteer nurse, and in the process shedding his perspective on war, masculinity and a host of other issues. Dwelling on Mukhopadhyay, his grandmother writes a biography of her grandson drawing on her first-hand knowledge of, and experiences with him. The part dealing with Mukhopadhyay's experience of the war as a doctor is based on his letters to his mother. Again, Mukhopadhyay is seemingly narrating events that actually occurred in his letters. The letters are printed verbatim in his biography. They reveal a sensitive mind trying to grapple with the enormity of the destruction and mayhem around him, an issue we will take up in detail in this article.

If we look at these two narratives from a broader perspective, how would they compare with an all-time classic such as Eric Maria Remarque's *All Quiet on the Western Front*, a classic that is seemingly based on the writer's own experiences? The protagonist, Paul Baumer, and his comrades in the regiment are supposedly modelled on the writer and his core group of friends and fellow soldiers. Yet the novel is only partly autobiographical, for here the autobiographical and the fictional are interwoven together. A large part of the action depicted in the book could not have been experienced by Remarque since he served in an engineering regiment in the German Army. Remarque was actually writing a largely fictional account where his own, albeit

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<sup>9</sup>Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 355.

<sup>10</sup>Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, Vol. III, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988), p. 5.

limited experiences came in handy. The novel was an instant bestseller and is now considered an epic war novel.<sup>11</sup>

Despite the popularity of the novel, Remarque was roundly criticised by right, and far right critics for his depiction of a one-sided version of the war. He was pilloried for depicting a dark, negative picture and for discounting patriotism and idealism as incentives for fighting. Right-wing critics particularly were emphatic in their opinion that Baumer and his group of fellow soldiers could not speak for the experiences of all German soldiers at the front during First World War. Their experiences were very specific. Nevertheless, the book sold more than a million copies in Germany. So, there was something in the book to which millions who had either experienced the war first-hand or had been affected by the war could relate. The reality was that the life of every single German of that generation was irretrievably altered by the war.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless we cannot wish away the criticism that the trials and travails of Baumer and his fellow soldiers were not representative of the wider section of German fighting men. There were German combatant accounts that glorified the war. One could cite for instance Ernst Junger's account of the First World War, a notable contribution on the German side, which is in stark contrast to Remarque's account of the war. Junger glorified combat and war, practically depicting it as a sport with its own set of rules, which the protagonists were expected to observe. Junger rationalises the inconvenience of the trenches by typifying them as an unavoidable aspect of a glorious struggle that presented men with an opportunity to display their heroic sides. For Junger, war is an embodiment of all that was noble in mankind. War was consequently to be celebrated, something positive which was not to be depicted in bleak terms. Junger was thus taking a position which was at odds to that of Remarque.<sup>13</sup>

Such diversity of strands was to be expected given the fact that there was a gamut of European literature on World War I, both from the British and German standpoints. The war saw a considerable number of men of letters enlist, especially from the British side, notable among them being Rupert Brooke, Wilfred Owen, and Siegfried Sassoon.<sup>14</sup> There are also stark, raw accounts from combatants without a literary background in the form of letters, field-notes and personal items, and they have been aptly analysed

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<sup>11</sup>Erich Maria Remarque, *All Quiet on the Western Front*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1984).

<sup>12</sup>Harold Bloom, *Interpretations: Erich Maria Remarque's All Quiet on the Western Front*, (New York: Infobase Publishing House, 2009).

<sup>13</sup>Ernst Junger, *The Storm of Steel From the Diary of a German Storm-Troop Officer on the Western Front* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1996).

<sup>14</sup>Spencer Jones, *World War I Poetry: A Collection of Haunting Verses From The Great War*, London,( Arcturus Publishing Limited,2017), pp.13-14.

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by scholars such as Paul Fussell. The sheer intensity and directness exhibited by these accounts have a distinct flavour of their own which conversely could not be found in the more sophisticated accounts by combatants who were also men of letters.<sup>15</sup>

In general, British combatants writing on the war were more circumspect in their views, apart from possibly the early soldier-poets such as Rupert Brooke who were yet to be confronted with the full extent of the mayhem of the war would bring in its wake.<sup>16</sup> Both prose and verse accounts of the war reflected an anxiety and difficulty in grasping a war which was unprecedented in its scope, magnitude, nature and brutality, and which conflicted with the British public-school notions of war as a manly and honourable vocation. Trenches, for example, were usually described in all their nastiness. This was, though, interspersed with accounts which, for example, celebrated the beauty of a sunrise viewed from the trenches.<sup>17</sup>

Contrarily, the wartime accounts of Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay, rooted as they are in their colonial context, offer a study in contrast. To state the obvious, this was a different war, in a different theatre, where the vicissitudes of war were of a different tenor, although the Western Front had seen numerous Indian men in combatant roles braving the odds as has been memorably etched by Mulk Raj Anand.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, both Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay were non-combatants hailing from avowedly colonial non-martial communities. War for these men was a novel and unique experience though they would both experience it as non-combatants. This, though, by no means inured them to the dangers and horrors of war, and they sought to turn the situation to their advantage by executing their duties bravely in the face of mortal danger. This lends a different tone to their writings. They reveal a different kind of anxiety, as for these men it was about the honour of their community, not necessarily of their motherland. For instance, the unease of both Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay over slurs on Bengali male's purported effeminacy. Both seek to combat such allegations by executing their roles, albeit non-combatant in nature, bravely and admirably in the face of mortal danger. Notwithstanding these differences, ultimately both narratives, for all their contextual dissimilarities, celebrate comradeship, humaneness, fortitude, and indomitability in the face of adversity and unimaginable odds. They represent at the end of the day a triumph of the human spirit and the resilience of human values in the most trying of circumstances.

This brings us back to the central question. What do we as historians seek in literary works or, in this case, these narratives? Do we read such narratives because we believe

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, *World War I Poetry*, p. 13

<sup>17</sup> Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory*, pp. 55–58.

<sup>18</sup> Mulakraj Anand, *Across the Black Waters*, (London: Shalimar Books, 2014).

they provide a more nuanced understanding of a society's aspirations, fears, hopes, and grievances? Do literary works, and also narratives in the autobiographical or semi-autobiographical mould, perform a better job of grasping the multitudes of emotions and travails people undergo during extraordinary times? For instance, one may well claim that literature on the sub-continent's partition in 1947 does a better job of capturing the agony and trauma borne out of the unprecedented violence, the killings, the agony and trauma of displacement, abduction, of witnessing family members killed and violated.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the issue of representation remains. Can the genre of the narrative, in its multiple facets, capture the entirety of emotions experienced by a people during the course of extraordinary events? How do we categorize the experiences of Mukhopadhyay or Sarbadhikari at the front? Are the emotions they express, their reactions to the events around them, and the world view that they provide, representative of a wider Bengali mentality of those times? Should we conceptualise the reactions, opinions, mentality, ethos, and values they espouse as specific to their context?

### **The Question of Bengali Masculinity**

To begin with, we seek to find answers to these questions by dwelling on one of the major underlying themes of both narratives, namely the issue of Bengali masculinity. The urge to negate the charge of cowardice, the ostensible absence of manliness in the Bengali bhadralok, in particular, was intense. A brief account of the two narratives and the circumstances in which they were composed provides us with a glimpse of the centrality of the question of masculinity or the avowed lack of it for the Bengali bhadralok, a tension which was more marked in the case of Sarbadhikari. The protagonist of *Abhi Le Baghdad*, Sarbadhikari, served as a volunteer with the Bengal Ambulance Corps, a part of 16 Brigade of 6 Poona Division of the British Expeditionary Forces to Mesopotamia. He hailed from an illustrious family that had produced eminent doctors and educationists, and on the eve of the war, Sarbadhikari had recently passed his Bachelor of Arts examinations and was wondering about his future course of action. His attention was drawn to the concerted efforts of the colonial government to recruit Bengali men into combat roles and auxiliary services for the various theatres of the First World War. The unprecedented demand for manpower had forced the British to temporarily cast aside their reliance on their 'martial race theory' for recruitment, a policy where only men from certain select communities dubbed as martial were recruited.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Aloke Bhalla, ed., *Stories About the Partition of India*, Vol. I-IV, (Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 2012).

<sup>20</sup>Sarbadhikari, *Abhi Le Baghdad*.

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The entreaties of the British were reciprocated by the Bengali elite and *bhadralok* politicians who saw in the war an opportunity for men from their community to be drafted into the army, a recruitment avenue that had been denied to them before on the grounds that Bengali men lacked physical prowess and were effeminate. Consequently, their efforts were also underlined by the thought process that this was a chance for Bengalis to prove that they could perform as well as anyone on the battlefield:

দেশী লোককে শিক্ষা ও সুযোগ দিয়া দেশীয় শিল্প বলিষ্ঠ ও উন্নত করিয়া তোলা গভর্নমেন্টের কর্তব্য। সঙ্গে সঙ্গে দেশীয় সকল প্রদেশের লোককে সৈন্যবিভাগে গ্রহণ করিয়া ও সেনাপতি পর্যন্ত হইবার অধিকার দিয়া দেশের আন্তরিক বল বৃদ্ধি করিয়া তোলা উচিত।<sup>21</sup>

*It is the duty of the government to establish industries with firm footings and develop them by providing education and opportunities to natives. Simultaneously, by recruiting soldiers from every province of the state and giving them the opportunity to be a commander, the country should enhance its internal strength.*

A series of meetings and camps for the war effort were organized, with people such as the Maharaja of Burdwan and the nationalist politician Bipan Chandra Pal both actively involved in the process. Sarbadhikari heard of the proposal to set up a Bengal Ambulance Corps. Ultimately, the untiring efforts of the Maharaja of Burdwan and Dr S. P. Sarbadhikari ensured the establishment of the Bengal Ambulance Corps and its volunteers hailing predominantly from the Bengali *bhadralok* class. Sarbadhikari was one such volunteer, he a stretcher bearer.<sup>22</sup>

The volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps, after some initial training at the Alipur infantry lines in Calcutta and subsequently at the naval barracks in Bombay, were told that they were to sail for Mesopotamia and would be attached to 16 Brigade of the 6 Poona Division of the British Expeditionary Force serving at the Mesopotamian front. Sarbadhikari's account informs us that the Bengal Ambulance Corps set sail from the Bombay docks on 1 July 1915 and, after a trying journey involving the changing of two ships, landed at Basra Port in Mesopotamia on 12 July 1915.<sup>23</sup> From Basra, they travelled by steamer to Amarah and reached their destination on 15 July 1915. After arriving at Amarah, they immediately went about setting up a field hospital, which was up and running by 17 July 1915. They then experienced two uneventful months, leading

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<sup>21</sup>From the Bengali literary magazine *Prabasi*, 1322 Bongabdo *Kartika* 15 (Oct/Nov 1916), Part 2 (1): 6.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid, p. 34.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid, p. 41.

them to occasionally complain that this was not why they had enrolled. They pined for some battlefield action.<sup>24</sup>

This desire for action could not be categorised as simply the normal reactions of men who had volunteered for the war in the hope of encountering action, only for the realisation to dawn that there was a tedious side to war involving painstaking planning and the setting up of infrastructure for future engagements with the enemy. Sarbadhikari's craving for the chance to distinguish himself on the battlefield was fuelled by the latent insecurity regarding his masculinity, an anxiety that was ubiquitous in nature and pervaded the psyche of every Bengali male. The Bengali *babu* had long been labelled as effeminate and cowardly and purportedly incapable of exhibiting physical skills and daring. The alleged lack of masculinity in the Bengali male was, therefore, a sensitive issue for the *bhadralok*. While it is unclear when and how this notion gained ground, the stereotyping of the Bengali male as cowardly, effeminate, and so on was already prevalent in early eighteenth and nineteenth century British accounts, a feature which Mrinalini Sinha, who is primarily concerned with the British depiction of the Bengali *babu* post the second half of the nineteenth century, neglects to dwell upon except for a cursory mention of Robert Orme's portrayal of the Bengali as a cowardly being.<sup>25</sup> Bishop Heber, in his account of his tour of Bengal, writes in the 1830s that the Bengalis were a cowardly and non-martial race, incapable of physical prowess. There are, nevertheless, discourses pre-dating Bishop Heber's account where the Bengali male is essentialised as feminine and, by implication, cowardly. These early generalisations, though, did not discriminate on indices of caste or religion. The word Bengali was used as a broad ethnic term transcending barriers of caste, class, and religion. The view that Bengalis were inimical to situations that demanded physical prowess and valour was, thus, entrenched by the middle of the eighteenth century. It led to the pre-1857 Bengal Army specifically debarring Bengalis from the ranks of native recruits from that army's inception in 1757. The Bengal Army, therefore, concentrated on recruiting upper-caste Hindu men from present-day Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar (*Purbaiyas*). Most of them hailed from a rural middle-peasantry background. Men of this ilk were supposed to be brave, loyal, and virile and reportedly made the best soldiers, and thus constituted the bulk of the infantry units of the Bengal Army, with the notable exception of the presence of a limited number of Ahirs or Yadavs.<sup>26</sup>

This trend registered a partial break from the 1830s onward when certain fresh communities, such as the Gorkhas and the Sikhs, were dubbed martial and were

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<sup>24</sup>Ibid, p. 43–45.

<sup>25</sup>Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, p.15.

<sup>26</sup>Report of the Enquiry Committee of the Barrackpore Mutiny, 1824, Military (Misc), Vol. I I, National Archives of India, Delhi.p.479.

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recruited into the Bengal Army in considerable numbers, although the overall dominance of the Purbaiyas remained intact.<sup>27</sup> Thus, the Bengali male had no place in this early pre-1857 version of the martial race theory, for he was decidedly and incontrovertibly effeminate. This seemingly hard truth was an entrenched part of colonial discourse vis-à-vis the Bengali male, though the trope about them being meek and timid would acquire certain shades of class and religion going into the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup>

This powerful discourse directed at the Bengali male, emphasising their physical weakness and lack of courage, possibly affected their self-perception and their perception by men of other communities. Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, a clerk who joined the pre-1857 Bengal Army in the 1850s, wrote his memoirs at the behest of the editor of a Bengali journal named *Bangabasi*. Bandyopadhyay probably started writing his memoirs around 1889, and an early version of it appeared in the Bengali journal *Janambhoomi* in 1891. The memoir informs us that Bandyopadhyay joined the Bengal Army as a clerk entrusted with keeping the accounts of a regiment posted to Hansi, which lies in the Haryana province of modern-day India. Joining the army as a clerk was the only option for a Bengali such as Bandyopadhyay to serve in the colonial armies when Bengalis were not inducted as combatants.<sup>29</sup>

One could cite this passage in Bandyopadhyay's autobiography where certain Purbaiya soldiers express wonderment at the stout physique of Bandyopadhyay, who was tall and powerfully built, "Tum Bangali hoke itna balwan kaise?" (*How are you so strong despite being a Bengali?*) Durgadas replied to the effect that there were many Bengalis who were endowed with fine physiques and he knew certain Bengalis who could take on ten of them, that is, Purbaiya soldiers, single-handedly. Thus, two not completely interrelated factors are at play. On the one hand, there is this strong assertion by the Bengali regarding the supposed illegitimacy of the view that the Bengali male was a weakling. The other interesting side we see here is that it seemed that the native communities categorised as martial by the British also shared their perception of the alleged effeminacy of the Bengali male.<sup>30</sup>

Heather Streets, in her study of the notion of martial races across the British Empire, argues that communities who were conferred with the martial tag were also burdened

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<sup>27</sup>G.W Forrest, *Selections from the Letters, Dispatches and Other State Papers Preserved In the Military Department of the Government of India, 1857-58, Vol 1*, Calcutta, 1893, p.45.

<sup>28</sup>Sinha, *Colonial masculinity: The Manly Englishman And the Effeminate Bengali In The Late Nineteenth Century*, pp.1-3.

<sup>29</sup>Durgadas Bandyopadhyay, *Vidrohe Bangali Or Amar livana-Charit*, (Calcutta: Ananya Publishers, 1924), p. 52.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid, p.50.

with the onus of acting in certain ways, for the martial races were bestowed with certain characteristics and mannerisms that they might not actually have possessed. Part of this baggage, the avowedly martial communities imbibed, was the tendency to share with their colonial masters a commonality as far as the mapping of native communities into martial and non-martial was concerned. This trait was no different for the subcontinent, and evidently influenced the categorising of communities into martial and non-martial.<sup>31</sup>

Post-1857, things did not change much for the Bengali male. He was still regarded as an enfeebled male. While the old Bengal Army and, as a consequence, its recruitment policy, was completely done away with and a balanced recruitment policy, which cast its net over a wider range of communities, was adopted, Bengalis still had no place in this new scheme of things. They were, after all, the original antithesis of all that was manly as far as the colonial discourse on manliness was concerned. And things would only get worse for the Bengali as far as the masculinity index was concerned. The rise of the martial race theory in the 1880s would further seal the fate of the Bengali male, and he would be entrapped in his image as a cowardly and effeminate person.

The theory initially captured by Fredrick Roberts stated that only a few select communities, such as the Sikhs, Gorkhas, Dogras, Punjabis, Mussalmans, Pathans, and a few others on the subcontinent, were dubbed martial and were capable of fighting bravely and effectively. The reasons behind a community possessing martial qualities, according to the ideologues of the martial race theory, were manifold, and the only point of agreement among the proponents of the martial race theory was that wheat-eating and less literate peasants from the rural areas made the best fighters. Some of the proponents of the martial race theory ascribed martial qualities to the presence of advantageous genes, while there were others who stressed their environment, or historical and political factors. For instance, Roberts believed that long years of peace in the Madras Presidency had enervated the Madras sepoy and had made him unmartial.<sup>32</sup> George MacMunn, another important proponent of the martial race theory, believed that the Aryans had enslaved the original inhabitants and deprived them of the right to bear arms. Therefore, only the communities of Aryan origin were capable of being martial. MacMunn also believed that the tenets of certain religions, such as Sikhism, made them martial. MacMunn, though, did not stress much on climatic

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<sup>31</sup>Heather Streets, *The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857–1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), Chapter 1.

<sup>32</sup>Frederick Roberts, *Forty-one Years in India: From Subaltern to Commander-in-Chief*, (London: Richard Bentley and Son, 1898) p. 499, p. 530, pp. 532-534.

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factors, unlike Roberts, who believed that people from colder areas proved to be better fighters.<sup>33</sup>

Again, the point is that the Bengali did not figure anywhere in the scheme of things and was probably, as mentioned before, further marginalised. Moreover, class and religion were now added as categories to qualify the notion of the unmanly Bengali. The reason was that the Bengali Hindu, largely upper caste *bhadralok*, had emerged as a vocal opponent of the Raj. The middle classes hoped that the colonial Raj would, in the course of time, introduce democratic reforms in the colonies. Their hopes were gradually belied, and disillusionment with the British set in. This disenchantment became marked over the European reactions to the Ilbert Bill in 1883, which sought to empower Indian judges to try Europeans. Further provocation was offered by the provisions of the Arms Act, which effectively barred Indians from bearing arms.

There were a host of other trying issues, too, which Mrinalini Sinha ably highlighted. Sinha argues that colonial discourses were not fixed or homogenous categories. They were heterogeneous and evolved in specific contexts. She argues that the labelling of the Bengali *babu* as effeminate was the product of a specific material and social context, and so was the Bengali *babu's* desperate attempt to change this perception of himself as timid and cowardly. Sinha succinctly depicts the Bengali's obsession with attaining physical fitness and the opening of *akharas*, *byam samitis*, and so on.<sup>34</sup> There were also the efforts of Bengali elite women, such as Sarala Devi, who established the Volunteer Movement in the 1880s. An intelligence officer, J.C. Ker, wrote about the objectives of Sarala Devi, which were:

...apparently political, as she was known to be a supporter of the nationalist movement; her declared intention was to remove the historical reproach, perpetuated by Macaulay, that the Bengalis were a race of cowards, and she was avowedly influenced by the success of the Japanese in the war with Russia.<sup>35</sup>

All these frenzied efforts, as Sinha points out, underscored the tension and unease within the Bengali *babu* over the categorization of his physical identity. She argues that the Bengali *bhadralok* had been feeling insecure since the 1860s when certain pro-tenancy measures introduced by the British in the wake of peasant revolts threatened

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<sup>33</sup>G.F. MacMunn, *The Armies of India 1911*, (New Delhi: Heritage Publishers, 1991), pp. 129-131.

<sup>34</sup> Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, pp. 14-16. An akhara could be described as an arena where budding and established wrestlers practiced under the watchful eyes of a guru. Byam-Samitis roughly correspond to gymnasiums.

<sup>35</sup> James Campbell Ker, *Political Trouble in India, 1907-1917*, (Delhi: Oriental Publishers, 1973), p. 7.

the dominance of the Bengali *babu* over the peasant whom he was a landlord, for most Bengali *babus* had some investment in land to a greater or lesser degree. To add to their woes, the Bengali *babu* gradually grew disillusioned with the British. Therefore, his desperation to shed the tag of unmanly was accorded a double-layered assertion, both to assert his dominance as the unchallenged spokesman of his community and as an act of defiance against the Raj.<sup>36</sup>

This tension in the Bengali *bhadralok* male was manifest in Sarbadhikari's and Mukhopadhyay's writing. Both emphasised that the war gave Bengali men a chance to prove they were second to none in courage and manliness. Sarbadhikari says that he and his fellow volunteers were eager to prove themselves in hazardous field conditions as that would lay low the charge that Bengali men were incapable of displaying courage and physical prowess. He wrote in Bengali:

আমাদের মতো শিক্ষিত বাঙালি যুবক যদি এই সময়ে সামরিক বিভাগে গিয়ে (সে হোক না কেনো এম্বুলেন্স-এ, কেনো রকমে পা রাখবার জায়গা পেলেই হলো।) ভালোভাবে কাজ করে বাংলাদেশের হয়ে সুনাম অর্জন করতে পারি, তবেই ভবিষ্যতে বাঙালীর মিলিটারিতে পাকাপাকি ভাবে স্থান হবার সম্ভবনা। ভালোভাবে আমরা কাজ করেছিলাম কিনা, তা আপনারা আমার এই কাহিনী থেকে কতটা বুঝতে পারবেন। আর, যদি ভালোভাবে কাজ না করে থাকি, তা হলে কি ব্রিটিশ গভর্নমেন্ট বেঙ্গল ডবল কম্পানি ও ফটিনাইনথ বেঙ্গলি রেজিমেন্ট গঠন করতে রাজি হতেন? বাঙ্গালী কে যাতে মিলিটারি তে জায়গা দিতে না হয়, তার জন্যে কোনো একটা ছুতো পেলে, তাঁরা কি সেটা ছেড়ে দিতেন? এই সমস্ত কারণে আমাদের মনে যদি এমন একটা ধারণা হয়ে থাকে, যে বেঙ্গল এম্বুলেন্স-এর কাজ মোটের উপর ভালই হয়েছিল, সে গর্বটুকু নেহাত ভিত্তিহীন নয় ও সজনে মার্জনীয়।<sup>37</sup>

*If educated young Bengalis like us in this time of distress attained appreciation for Bengal through working in military forces [though the work is in an ambulance, what matters is to gain an opportunity], then only in the future will Bengalis accrue a permanent place in the military. Since we had served well, to what extent will you understand that from my story. If not done well, would the British government have agreed to form the Bengal Dabul Company and 49th Bengali Regiment? Will they leave any opportunity to exclude Bengalis from military services? Because of these reasons, if we consider that the work of Bengal ambulance in the field was good enough, that would not be a baseless claim and would be forgivable.*

In a similar vein, Mukhopadhyay concurs in his letters that the fear of being labelled as a cowardly Bengali served to motivate him whenever he was on the verge of wavering in his professional duties:

<sup>36</sup> Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*.

<sup>37</sup> Sarbadhikari, *Abhi Le Baghdad*, pp. 32–33.

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এখন আর সে কাপুরুষের রাস্তা লওয়া চলে না—তাহা হইলে জন-সমাজে আমি আর মুখ দেখাইতে পারিব না। আমি এখন কুণো হইয়া ঘরে লুকাইয়া বসিয়া থাকিলে সমস্ত বাঙ্গালী জাতিকে অপমান সহ্য করিতে হইবে। আমার দ্বারা ওরূপ নেমক-হারামী কাজ হইতে পারে না। যখন বাঙ্গালী হইয়াও স্পর্ধা করিয়া ইংরাজদের হাত হইতে সম্মানের বা লড়াই করিবার অস্ত্র শস্ত্র, তরোয়াল, বন্দুক পাইয়াছি—যখন আমি লড়ায়ে রাজ-আজ্ঞা পালন করিব বলিয়া শপথ করিয়াছি তখন—আমি পেছ-পা হইয়া, কুণো হইয়া কাজ ছাড়িয়া লুকাইয়া বসিয়া থাকিতে পারিব না। আর আমার একট প্রাণের জন্য সমস্ত বাঙ্গালী জাতিকে, ভীরা কাপুরুষ নেমক-হারামের বদনাম খাওয়াইতে পারিব না। আমাদের জাতের সে বদনাম ত আছেই - তবু সেটা কাটিয়ে আমরাও যাতে বীরজাতির ভিতর গণ্য হইতে পারি, আমার সেদিকেও ত দৃষ্টি রাখা দরকার। তোমরা কি বলছ? একট প্রাণের জন্য আমার ইজ্জত খোয়াইব? তাহলে ত আমার গলায় দড়ি দিয়ে এখনি কড়িকাঠে ঝুলে পড়া উচিত।  
ছি! ছি!<sup>38</sup>

*It is not the time to take a cowardly path, then I will never be able to show my face to society. If I become fearful and take refuge in the safety of my home, then Bengali society will be shamed. I can't do this kind of betrayal. Even though being a Bengali, from the English government, I have gained honour and weapons, sword and rifle, when I have taken the oath to follow the orders of high command during wartime, will not be able to step back and give up my duty. And only for one life, I will not intend for the whole Bengali community to be marked as cowardly betrayers. Since we have these things attributed to us, we should prove them wrong and be upheld as a valiant community. What are you saying? Only for one life should we lose our prestige? Better than that is to hang myself to death.*

Thus, both men display palpable tension and anxiety over their masculinity. Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari may also have been representative of a wider cross-section of the Bengali bhadralok. The tension of the Bengali *babu* over the slight to his alleged lack of masculinity was acute. They had internalised the slurs on their manhood emanating from colonial discourses, which had also affected the gaze of other native communities vis-à-vis the question of the physical inefficacy of the Bengali male. It had affected their self-esteem. It was important for them to repudiate this stereotype of the Bengali *babu* being a cowardly, effeminate person lacking physical prowess.

Trailokyanath Chakraborty, a famous Bengali revolutionary of the early twentieth century, says:

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<sup>38</sup>Devi, Kalyan Pradeep, 206.

Banglar biplobi ra “viru Bangali” ei opobad bividu karma anushtan dara dur koriachilo, artachari setango karmachari o police hotta korita abong shastra sangram korita proman korilo, bangali viru noi, banagali lorai korite jane, pran dite jane, tahara prithibir j kono swadhin jatir bir sainikder samokkoho.<sup>39</sup>

*Through their various activities, Bengali revolutionaries alleviated the idea of the “coward Bengali”. By assassinating police and white skin economic exploiters, they proved that Bengalis are not cowards. Bengalis know to fight, they are prepared to sacrifice their lives, they are equal to the brave soldiers of any other free community.*

The dubbing of the Bengali male as non-martial sat heavily on the shoulders of Bengali men, and Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari were no exception. For them, the First World War provided the opportunity where they would prove their manhood and the falsity of the assumptions about the lack of masculinity in the Bengali male. There was though a catch to the situation, the First World War had, on the face of it, brought a ray of hope for supposedly non-martial communities such as the Bengalis as far as recruitment was concerned. The unprecedented scale of demand for manpower forced the army to look beyond the avowedly martial communities. So, they launched recruiting drives among the so-called non-martial communities. Yet the prejudice against the ostensible non-martial races ran so deep that recruits from such backgrounds were mostly assigned to auxiliary units posted far away from the frontlines. The combat roles were still assigned to units composed of men from the martial races.<sup>40</sup>

In the case of the Bengalis, there was actually a regiment formed of Bengali recruits, that is, the 49 Bengali Regiment which served in Mesopotamia in 1915. There, large sections of the regiment mutinied, in all probability because of mismanagement by the British officers, something that was emblematic of the larger British campaign in Mesopotamia in the initial years of the war. However, the stigma of mutiny was hard to wish away, especially when it involved recruits from a community specifically dubbed as non-martial and thus unmanly by the Raj. It was as if their mutiny vindicated all the stereotypes regarding the masculinity of the Bengali male or, rather, the lack of it. The 49 Regiment was hastily disbanded.<sup>41</sup>

For Bengali men, such as Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari, the option, therefore, was to join the war effort in auxiliary roles. Nevertheless, these men rationalised the

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<sup>39</sup> Trailokyonath Chakraborty, *30 Years Imprisonment and Freedom Movement of Pakistan and India* (Calcutta: Radical Impression, 2015), p. 46.

<sup>40</sup> Steven L. Wilkinson, *Army and Nation: The Military and Indian Democracy Since Independence*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2015), p. 50.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid*, p. 50.

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situation by affirming that the successful execution of their auxiliary roles on the battlefield, and in this case that of a nurse and doctor, who faced mortal danger, was proof that the Bengali male could be as brave and heroic as anybody. Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay indeed displayed a cool bravery when faced with indomitable odds and risks on the battlefield.

Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers were presented with an opportunity in late September to showcase their bravery when orders came that they were to move to a station further up the river called Kut, where fierce action was taking place between the British and the Turks. They also learnt that they were to be attached as an Ambulance unit to the 6 Brigade of the 6 Poona Division. On 27 September, the steamer arrived from Basra to take them to Kut, and on the way, they learnt that Kut had fallen to the British. They finally arrived in Kut on 3 October 1915.<sup>42</sup> The British had captured it from the Turks barely a few days before and now intended to use it as a springboard for a decisive push towards Baghdad, which they believed to be within their grasp. They did advance resolutely towards Baghdad, and the troops were often made to march at a punishing pace. Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers had barely two days to rest before they were asked to march to their first destination, Aziziyah, seventy miles away. For Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers, it was a baptism by fire into the rigours of military life. Their officers set for them a punishing pace and the distance of seventy miles was covered in three days flat. It must be said, though, in their favour, that the men of the Ambulance Corps largely handled themselves well on the march, barring a few exceptions, and their conduct was considered worthy enough for them to be mentioned in official dispatches.<sup>43</sup>

Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers now had a much-needed respite for nearly two weeks before orders to advance again came on 24 October.<sup>44</sup> A period of desultory fighting marked by light resistance from the Turks followed until the British troops reached the vicinity of Ctesiphon. The Turkish troops, despite their retreat from Kut and their subsequent light resistance, had not been sitting idle and had decided to make a stand at Ctesiphon, ninety miles from Baghdad. Ctesiphon was very well fortified and was ideal for a defensive rearguard action, as the British troops soon found out to their discomfort. The lack of Turkish resistance prior to Ctesiphon had lulled the British commanders into believing that Baghdad was theirs for the taking and that the Turks would, at best, offer light resistance. Those hopes were soon belied when they received disconcerting news that the Turks had brought in crack reinforcements and had entrenched themselves in very strong positions at Ctesiphon.

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<sup>42</sup>Sarbadhikari, *Abhi Le Baghdad*, pp. 45–47.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid, p. 49.

<sup>44</sup>Ibid, p. 50

The British realised that a tough battle was at hand, and they tried their utmost to steel themselves for the imminent trial.<sup>45</sup>

Fighting began in earnest on 22 November 1916 and soon developed into a slugfest where neither side was willing to give quarter. For the volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps, their long-cherished desire to experience battlefield action had been answered, and it was now up to them to make the best of the situation. To give them their due they rose to the challenge and plunged into the thick of the action to extricate the wounded to safety. Sarbadhikari tended the wounded, loading them on to stretchers and moving them to the relative safety of the British camp, away from the centres action, all the while under artillery and gunfire from the Turkish forces. While sceptics may argue that we only have Sarbadhikari's words as proof of his avowed heroism, it must be said in his defence that his account is confirmed in dispatches by British commanders at Ctesiphon, where the bravery of the volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps is cited prominently.<sup>46</sup>

After three days of intense fighting, the casualties were high on both sides, and in effect they had fought each other to a standstill. Sarbadhikari's account is replete with descriptions of the agony of the wounded and the terribly trying circumstances in which he and his colleagues had to perform their duties. The situation was grave for the British who had failed to dislodge the Turks from their positions.<sup>47</sup> Presently, the British decided to withdraw and fall back to a secure base. Sarbadhikari and his colleagues now had the onerous task of retreating in good order along with the rest of the British forces and against the backdrop of an imminent attack by the pursuing Turkish forces. The British forces, against all odds, reached their first intended destination, Aziziyah.<sup>48</sup>

Sarbadhikari and his colleagues were specifically praised in the dispatches for having successfully completed the arduous march despite the privations they had to endure. Interestingly, during the march, Sarbadhikari met Mukhopadhyay, and Mukhopadhyay's close friend and colleague, Dr. Puri. Sarbadhikari reminisces that Dr. Puri was very appreciative of the efforts of the Bengal Ambulance Corps, though Mukhopadhyay seemingly thought otherwise. In his letters to his mother, Mukhopadhyay mentioned meeting the volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps during the retreat to Aziziyah, and he observed that the volunteers seemed to be out of their depth. They had now realised what they had let themselves in for and that war was no laughing matter. This

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<sup>45</sup>Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>46</sup>Ibid, p. 67.

<sup>47</sup>Ibid, pp. 51–57.

<sup>48</sup>Ibid, p. 69.

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was, in reality, the disdain of the professional for amateurs who had volunteered for the job.<sup>49</sup>

The British forces were in a precarious position and difficult choices had to be made. Ironically, as Sarbadhikari informs us, the British decided to fall back on Kut and dig in there. It was now the turn of the British to be besieged by the pursuing Turkish troops who soon arrived and surrounded the British fortifications at Kut. Thus began a protracted siege which ultimately ended in the surrender of the British garrison. Unable to receive any supplies their food supply ran down forcing the troops to depend on horse meat before the commander, Major General Townshend, was told that the prospects of a relief force reaching Kut were bleak or non-existent. Without food supplies and any hope of relief, Townshend surrendered on 29 April 1916. The entire force passed into captivity.<sup>50</sup>

While disaster befell the British, Sarbadhikari and his associates had made their point that they, or Bengalis, were capable of executing their duties in the face of mortal danger to their lives and were more than capable of standing up to the rigours of military life. The anxiety about being dubbed cowardly hung heavy in a similar vein on Mukhopadhyay's shoulders. Mukhopadhyay's biography was written by his maternal grandmother, Makhoda Devi and with only a part of it describing Mukhopadhyay's wartime experiences in the period before his death from enteric fever in 1916. A large part of the biography deals with Mukhopadhyay's childhood, family background and issues, which seemingly are completely unrelated and meaningless to his short tenure as a doctor with the Allied Forces in Mesopotamia. Devi reveals an obsession with Hindu-Muslim relations and the alleged atrocities to which Hindus had been subjected during Muslim rule. Mukhopadhyay's maternal and paternal families were heavily involved with the Brahmo Samaj, a reformist sect which arose in early nineteenth century Bengal.<sup>51</sup>

Devi, after devoting two-thirds of the biography to issues that have supposedly no connection with Mukhopadhyay and his war experiences, finally arrives at the core issue and follows a two-pronged strategy here. On the one hand, she uses Mukhopadhyay's wartime letters to his mother to narrate a moving account of Mukhopadhyay's tryst with the war, an experience that was doomed to end in tragedy. Simultaneously, she also tries to render a history of the war in Mesopotamia based on official dispatches, newspaper reports and first-hand accounts. Her objective is to contextualise the wartime experiences of Mukhopadhyay and his unit within the

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<sup>49</sup>Ibid.

<sup>50</sup>Ibid, 98.

<sup>51</sup>Devi, *Kalyan Pradeep*.

broader patterns of the war in Mesopotamia. Devi was a skilful writer and produced an absorbing account of the war.<sup>52</sup>

Devi's account tells us that Mukhopadhyay, after passing his MBBS, briefly served as a doctor with a raja who sent him abroad for further studies, though it is not clear what the exact nature of the qualifications is that he acquired in England. Mukhopadhyay joined the Indian Medical Service on the eve of First World War and, after serving elsewhere in India, was posted to Mesopotamian in 1915. Mukhopadhyay set forth from Karachi around the same time as Sarbadhikari did to Basra. After landing at Basra, he was eventually posted to Kut in November 1915 and was present also at the battle at Ctesiphon. Mukhopadhyay, along with the rest of the British forces at Kut passed into Turkish captivity, although his status as a doctor meant he was accorded extra privileges. Mukhopadhyay, though, had no choice but undertake a long and tough march into captivity alongside the rest of the prisoners. The fates of Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari were thus bound together, though Mukhopadhyay was accorded superior treatment on account of his rank as an officer and more so due to his being a doctor. It was, therefore, ironic that Mukhopadhyay did not survive the war while Sarbadhikari, despite his tribulations, returned to India hale and hearty.<sup>53</sup>

Mukhopadhyay's letters survive and provide a fascinating first-hand account of the war. The letters, among the finest specimens of war writing by an Indian in the twentieth century, reveal, among other things, a tension regarding his masculinity. Mukhopadhyay writes to his mother that the fear of being branded a cowardly Bengali motivated him to work extra hard whenever he felt himself wavering in his resolve. It was as if the reputation of the Bengali bhadralok community rested on the shoulders of men like Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari performing their duties diligently in the face of mortal danger. He was also waging a battle on the personal front as he lost his infant daughter and mother in quick succession. He, too, tragically lost his life in Mesopotamia, though not on the battlefield. His fight was as a doctor against an outbreak of enteric fever in a Turkish prisoner-of-war camp where he successfully saved others before falling victim himself. In doing so Mukhopadhyay did live up to his lofty ideals.<sup>54</sup>

### **Pacifism and the Bengali Male**

While Mukhopadhyay's letters evidently reveal a latent tension at the prospect of being labelled a cowardly Bengali if found wanting in the execution of his duties, the letters stand out for their searing anti-war rhetoric. They show him becoming a pacifist after seeing the carnage around him. He also makes a strong case against the kind of nationalism that makes people and nations hate and kill each other without mercy. For

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid, p. 334.

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him, the carnage was meaningless, and people blinded by hatred and a virulent form of nationalism were behaving insanely. The pacifism that the war bred in him also led him to strongly condemn the modus operandi of the revolutionary terrorists in Bengal. They were, according to him, motivated by the same blind hatred towards the British, and the kind of deep antipathy which was leading to men killing each other without mercy during the war. To quote him,

... স্বদেশ প্রেম স্বজাতি প্রেম — এই সব কথা ওজর করে — লোকে লোকের গলা কাটার উদ্যোগ করবে। স্বদেশ প্রেমের মত সংকীর্ণ অধমরিপু জগতে আর নেই। ধর্মের নাম করে যত রক্তপাত নিষ্ঠুরতা হয়েছে, স্বদেশ প্রেমের নাম করে তার চেয়ে লক্ষগুণ বেশি হয়েছে। আর এদানি সব যুদ্ধেই পয়সা-ওয়ালা লর্ড ইত্যাদির পয়সা-রোজকারের জন্যে বোকা প্রজাদের দেশের নামে, স্বদেশ প্রেমের নামে ভুলিয়ে জীবন দিতে প্রস্তুত করেছে। “প্যাট্রিয়টিসম” (বা “স্বদেশ-প্রেম”) কথাটা ইউরোপীয় অভিধানে না থাকলে অনেক রক্তপাত কম হত। আমাদের দেশেও “প্যাট্রিয়টিসম” এর নাম করে অনেক নেতারা ছোট ছোট স্কুলের ছেলেদের খুন করতে শিখিয়েছে। যে হত্যা মহাপাতক, প্যাট্রিয়টিস্মের দোহাই দিলেই তা মহাপুণ্য। একজন মানুষ আর একজনের বিষয় ছলে বলে কেড়ে নিলে, তা ডাকাতি বা চুরী— ও মহা পাপ। আর একটা জাতি, আর একটা জাতির জমী জবাই করে কেড়ে নিলে— তাহা মহা বাহাদুরের সাম্রাজ্য স্বপ্ন।<sup>55</sup>

...By propagating the ideas of love for the homeland, love for their own community, people will try to cut the heads of other people. There is no more narrow vile sense in the world than patriotism. The amount of bloodshed in the name of patriotism has been a lakh of tons higher than that has happened in the name of religion. In recent times in every war wealthy lords have influenced the idiot subjects to give his life in the name of patriotism. If the word patriotism had been absent from European dictionaries, the amount of bloodshed would have been lesser.

In our country too, in the name of patriotism several leaders (political leaders) have motivated innocent school children to kill (people).

Murder which is a great sin, in the name of patriotism has transformed into an act of great virtue. If a person through inappropriate means takes away others' subject that is a sin — great sin. On the other hand, slaughtering a community and taking away their homeland is considered to be — a brave act— the establishment of an empire.

In another letter to his mother, Mukhopadhyay further wrote,

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid, pp. 317-18.

... সব প্যাট্রিয়টিসম — পরের দেশ কেড়ে নিচ্ছে। তাহলে প্যাট্রিয়টিসম — এমপায়ার, সাম্রাজ্য, তৈয়ার করচে। হাজার হাজার লোককে মেরে এক টুকরা জমী কেড়ে নিয়ে স্বদেশ প্রেম, স্বজাতি, দেখানও ত ইংরাজই শিখিয়েছে। আমাদের দেশের ছোকরারা আবার তাই দেখে এই জঘন্য রূপ স্বদেশ প্রেমের চর্চা করতে আরম্ভ করেছে। ফলে গোটা কতক লোক খুন, নির্দোসী বড়লাটকে বোমা মারা এই সব ভয়াবহ কীর্তি আরম্ভ করেছে। স্বদেশ প্রেমের মুখে ঝাটা। যতদিন পৃথিবীতে ঐ সংকীর্ণতা না ঘুচবে ততদিন প্যাট্রিয়টিসমের নামে রক্তপাত থামবেনা। তা একজন লোকে ছাত থেকে বোমা ছরুক আর ৫০ জন লোকে কামানের গোলা ছরুক — এই রক্তপাতের, এই পাগলামীর মূল কারণ একই।

... “Selfish nationalism: a most inhuman sentiment” অর্থাৎ সংকীর্ণ স্বার্থপর স্বজাতি প্রেমের ভাবটা — সমগ্র মানব-সমাজের পক্ষে অন্তরায়, অহিতকর, শক্রসদৃশ; ইহাই এই যুদ্ধে প্রমাণ হয়েছে।<sup>56</sup>

... *Patriotism is snatching away other countries. That means, patriotism is creating empires—sāmrāya. Even, to show patriotism by killing thousands of people to create empires is the learning that England has taught.*

*Youngsters of our country by observing all these have started to practice this vulgar patriotism. Because of which, dangerous acts like killing by targeting people, and bombing innocent borolāta (viceroy) have started. Sneer to the face of patriotism. Up until in the world this narrow mindless would not be demolished till then bloodshed in the name of patriotism wouldn't stop. Whether, 50 people threw cannon balls or only one threw a bomb from the terrace, there is only one reason for this madness, this bloodshed.*

... *Selfish nationalism: a most inhuman sentiment is hindrance, harmful, and enemy to humankind has been proven by this war.*<sup>57</sup>

Sarbadhikari in his account, too, takes a distinct anti-war stance, although in a distinctive mode of his own. There are these passages in Sarbadhikari's narrative where he recounts his conversations with Turkish soldiers wounded during the war. The Turkish soldiers believed the Indians and the Turks had no enmity towards each other, they were embroiled in a fight that was essentially European in origin. The Turks and the Indians were merely being used as pawns in this conflict by the warring European powers, namely the British and the Germans. Sarbadhikari seems to concur with the sentiments of the wounded Turkish soldiers and espouses what Santanu Das

<sup>56</sup> Ibid, pp. 334-335.

<sup>57</sup> Devi, Kalyan Pradeep, pp. 292–293, pp. 317–318, pp. 330–336.

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describes as Pan-Asian cosmopolitanism.<sup>58</sup> While he is not explicit about his anti-war stance, the tenor of his conversation with the wounded Turkish soldiers implies that Sarbadhikari, too, was appalled by the mayhem, though one cannot go as far as to call him an outright pacifist in the mould of Mukhopadhyay.

Now, the point is, how do we dub the anti-war views of Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari? Could it represent a wider worldview among the Bengali youth of those times? Is there any guarantee that other Bengali men in their place would have undergone a similar metamorphosis and become anti-war pacifists? Many Bengali men had enrolled for the Allied cause as volunteer nurses, doctors, and for example as combatants in the 49 Bengal Regiment, which ironically saw action in Mesopotamia and was disbanded for its alleged poor performance.<sup>59</sup> The problem is that they and their families did not write autobiographical or similar accounts. Consequently, we do not have documentation of the effect the war had on the minds of these impressionable young men. Notwithstanding such issues, it would not appear presumptuous to argue that the reactions of Mukhopadhyay and Sarbadhikari to the mayhem unleashed by the war may have been representative of at least a section of the Bengali middle class.

The notion of pacifism though may not have been as pervasive among the Bengali middle class of those times when compared to the tension in the Bengali *bhadralok* regarding his masculinity. This brings us to the problem of narratives and our expectations of it. Literary narratives possibly serve partly as a window to the multitude of emotions that are woven around extraordinary events. Or we could say that literary texts, in general, serve as an indicator of the value system of a society, its ethos and so on. That is possibly why mythology is often taken as indicative of the cultural essence of the times it is written. While myths are not meant for factual corroboration, their nature possibly serves to illuminate the historical context in which they are written. We could possibly hazard a guess about the ethos pervading a society from the structure of their myths.

Nevertheless, the problem of representation remains. How do we gauge that the sentiments and mentality evinced in a literary text have wider ramifications? One possible tracker could be the connection of the text with the populace. If a text has a wide appeal, it is obvious that it strikes a chord somewhere with the reader. To take the case of *All Quiet on the Western Front*, while Paul Baumer and his fellow group of soldiers may not have been representative of the First World War's wider German soldiery, the underlying theme of the work that the war had irrevocably destroyed

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<sup>58</sup>Santanu Das, *India, Empire and First World War Culture: Writings, Images and Songs*, (London: Cambridge University Press, 2018), Chapter 6.

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their lives might have endeared the novel to millions, for this was an inconvertible fact of German society. Yet the problem of representation remains, notwithstanding this line of argument.

## **Conclusion**

Sarbadhikari's and Mukhopadhyay's accounts supply several fascinating insights. They describe the experiences of two Bengali men from broadly similar backgrounds negotiating the war's unique challenges. The strategies for coping with these novel experiences were myriad and complex. Both men were exceedingly sensitive and their reactions to the mayhem of war provides a striking perspective. The literary quality and eloquence of their observations aside, the important question is whether their experiences were contextual to their own unique situation or their opinions, when their mentality and attitudes might have been representative of the wider cross-section of Bengali middle-class men. As is evident, there is no single affirmative or non-affirmative response to this question, the contentious notion of Bengali masculinity apart.

The issue of representation aside, these accounts can be read for their literary and human fibre. The accounts are also tales of young Bengali middle-class men in unfamiliar and trying circumstances, and trying their best to face the multi-fold challenges before them. Amidst death, destruction, deprivation and sheer savagery and mayhem, men form bonds and friendships and find ways to survive and cope with the carnage. Indeed, the small pleasures of life, such as close friends chatting, drinking and eating, do go on in the midst of the killing fields. Some of the more sensitive minds among these men, such as Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay, penned accounts of the war in Mesopotamia, which would rank favourably with the finest specimens of war writing in the world. To put it in a nutshell, the accounts of Sarbadhikari and Mukhopadhyay are alive to multiple possibilities and interpretations.