PART ONE

WAR EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS
The participation of Indian soldiers in vast numbers in the two World Wars has attracted a measure of interest mostly from military historians, to a lesser extent from political historians, preoccupied with its impact upon the development of Indian nationalism, but less so from social and cultural historians, with the exception of some Punjab scholars.¹ Yet, with a view to exploring the transnational connections developed by different groups of Indians during the colonial era, the world wars deserve close attention. They produced the two greatest migrations of Indians in the colonial period, apart from the export of indentured labour to Africa, the Caribbean and the Pacific. This was of course ‘forced migration’ as well as ‘temporary migration’ in the clearest sense of the terms, and it did not result in settlement abroad on any significant scale (except that of thousands of dead soldiers who came to rest in various military cemeteries or whose scattered bones remained anonymous on numerous battlefields). However, apart from a biological descendence, the product of war-time liaisons between Indian soldiers and local women on the different theatres of war, about which little is unfortunately known, it left significant archival traces in the form of censored letters, particularly in the case of the First World War, which give us an extraordinary insight into the thoughts and feelings of thousands of ‘ordinary’ Indians, the kind who normally do not leave behind written traces. An excellent selection of this correspondence has been published as a volume under the title Indian Voices of the Great War, by the British military historian David Omissi, who has written an interesting introduction to the collection,