IMPERIALISM, NATIONALISM AND THE FIRST WORLD WAR IN INDIA

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South of the village of Neuve Chapelle in France, the curious traveler comes across what may initially seem an Orientalist fantasy: a green sanctuary is enclosed by a white circular wall engraved with Indian designs; inside, there are two dome-like chattries and a 15 meter high column inscribed with Lotus Capital, the Star of India and the Imperial Crown and the column is flanked by two tigers. On the lower part of the column is inscribed in English “God is One, His is the Victory” with similar texts in Arabic, Hindi and Gurmukhi and on the solid wall at the back are carved the names of 4,700 soldiers of the Indian army. Engraved on the memorial is the following inscription: “To the honour of the army of India which fought in France and Belgium, 1914-1918, and in perpetual remembrance of those whose names are here recorded and who have no known grave.”1 In an old house in the town of Chandernagore in India, one comes across the photograph of a young man in military uniform, his bloodstained glasses and some papers. The accompanying label identifies him as “Dr. J. N. Sen, M.D., M.R.C.S., Private, West Yorkshire Regiment… he was the first Bengali, a citizen of Chandernagore killed in 1914-1918 War.”2 Imperial war service and regional identity are here fused and confused, just as imperial commemoration and national sentiment overlap in the Neuve Chapelle Memorial. However, instead of being assimilated into the contemporary celebration of “hybridity,” what unites both public memorial and private memory in this case is a certain complex “struc-

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1 This article is a reworked and more developed version of my article “‘Heart and Soul with Britain’?: India, Empire and the Great War” forthcoming in Jörn Leonhard and Ulrike von Hirschhausen eds. Empire and Conflict (Leiden, 2010). For more details on the memorial, see Stanley Rice, Neuve Chapelle–India’s Memorial in France, 1914-1918. An Account of the Unveiling (London, 1928). Also see Michele Barrett, “Subalterns at War: First World War Colonial Forces and the Politics of the Imperial War Graves Commission,” interventions 9, no. 3 (2007): 452-475.

2 Papers of Dr J. N. Sen, The Indo-French Cultural Institute and Museum, Chandernagore, India.
ture of feeling” created by what Edward Said calls “intertwined and overlapping histories” that here bind India, empire and the First World War.³

India contributed around 1.3 million men to the imperial war effort during the First World War. These included both soldiers and non-combatants (including a large contingent of laborers and porters), who served in France, Mesopotamia, Persia, East Africa and Gallipoli, demonstrating not only the “world” nature of the First World War but its global reach for the children of the empire. According to the records of the time, the total number of Indian ranks recruited during the war, up to 31 December 1919, was 877,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants, making a total of 1,440,437.⁴ Between August 1914 and December 1919, India had sent overseas for purposes of war 622,224 soldiers and 474,789 non-combatants.⁵ Fighting for the empire during the first stirrings of nationalist uprisings, the Indian soldiers have been doubly marginalized: by Indian nationalist history which has largely focused on the heroes of the Independence movement and by the grand narrative of the war which still remains largely Eurocentric.⁶

As we approach the centenary of the First World War, its multiracial nature is fast becoming the focus of intense enquiry and debate.⁷

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⁴ India’s *Contribution to the Great War* (Calcutta, 1923), 79.