The Great War or the First World War was the world’s first ‘Total War’. The roles of the non-European armies in the extra-European theatres are generally neglected in the standard works on First World War. The focus of the historians is mainly on France and on the British and German armies and the battles they fought such as Verdun, Somme, and Cambrai. Since the fate of the war was mostly decided on the Western Front, historians probably have reason to focus on the carnage in France. However, a large number of extra-European soldiers fought outside Europe and the experience of war affected their military organizations, and finally their host societies. Cultural and political changes in those societies in the long run were inevitable. Hence, for a holistic understanding of the dynamics and impact of the First World War, it is important for us to look beyond West Europe.

The main focus of academic military history since the last decade has been on war and society approach which highlights the impact of social changes on military organizations. And in recent times, the fashion is to go for cultural studies of the military. All these approaches have undoubtedly enriched military history but the combat capacities of the militaries have been relegated to the background. Nevertheless, Carl von Clausewitz rightly says that armies in the final count exist for combat. Hence, in this paper, the limelight is turned on analyzing the Army in India’s combat capacity during the First World War in a particular theatre of war, i.e. Mesopotamia (now Iraq).

In 1914, the Army in India, which was preparing mostly for a possible war in Afghanistan and an extensive counter-insurgency operation...
in South Asia, was sent to fight the Great War. Its presence in France during 1914–15 was marginal. Though the Indian Army was deployed at various places such as Egypt, East Africa, Persia and Aden, Mesopotamia, as evident from table 1, was its primary theatre. Three interrelated aspects which generate military power: hardware, tactics and supply, are considered in this essay. Instead of a chronological narrative of the Mesopotamian expedition, a thematic analysis is undertaken. The army is studied as an institution. The objective of the article is to assess what the shortcomings of the Army in India were, its reaction from the institutional point of view and how far it was able to overcome the limitations.

The Military Establishment in British-India

The Army in India comprised the British units stationed in the subcontinent and the Indian Army. The latter included the Indian units which were composed of Indian soldiers but commanded by the British officers. On 1 August 1914, the combat strength of the Indian Army was 155,423 men. The strength of an Indian infantry battalion varied between 600 and 912 men. Theoretically, the officer cadre comprised of 14 British officers and 16 Indian officers. The latter were known as Viceroy’s Commissioned Officers (hereafter VCOs). In practice, every infantry battalion had only 12 British officers.3 The highest ranking British officer in each battalion was either a colonel or a lieutenant-colonel.

In the Indian Army there were two types of cavalry regiment: irregular (also known as siladari unit) and regular. The sanctioned strength of each cavalry regiment (both regular and irregular) was 14 British officers and 620 sowars (cavalrymen). There were 3 regular cavalry regiments and 36 siladari regiments. The siladari system was a legacy of the pre-colonial Indian military system. In the siladari regiment, the sowars provided for their own horses, clothing, and other accoutrements.