

Propaganda wars: India as a contested site between rival imperialist powers

Undivided India in the 1940s witnessed war within, and war without. The British Raj was riven into two, threatened at home and abroad. A gigantic Indian Army, swollen to 2.5 million men by 1944, was sent to fight in theatres of war across the world – Italy, North Africa, Greece, Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Burma, Singapore, Malaya – to combat the threat of the expansionist Axis forces. The external war brought in its wake internal foment: India had been declared a belligerent in September 1939 by the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, who had failed to consult Indian political leadership on this decision. The Quit India movement, beginning as protests against this undemocratic inclusion in the Second World War, evolved into mass agitations against 200 years of British colonial rule, suppressed in turn by an occupation-style use of force. Indeed, 57 infantry battalions of the Indian Army were diverted from international theatres of war and moved inward, within India, to restrain the August *kranti* or revolution.

The battle lines were clearly drawn: the Empire needed men and resources for the war; it would not be quitting India just yet. India's home front, in its turbulent and violent ways, reflected the battle front. War inexorably seeped into the language and politics, occupations and diet, lives and deaths of Indians; in front lines formed at home and in those thousands of miles away.

Yet India could not be divided into a neat binary of those who supported and those who opposed the war, neither did such political positions remain fixed for the duration of the war. Discourses on nationalism jostled against colonialism, communism intersected with anti-fascism, military intervention opposed non-violent forms of protest in independence movements. These intersections between political positions and 'causes' generated a shifting landscape of motivation during the Second World War years that made it difficult to affix a singular identity on the Indian people. As journalist Raghu Karnad highlights in his 2015 book *Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War*, where he

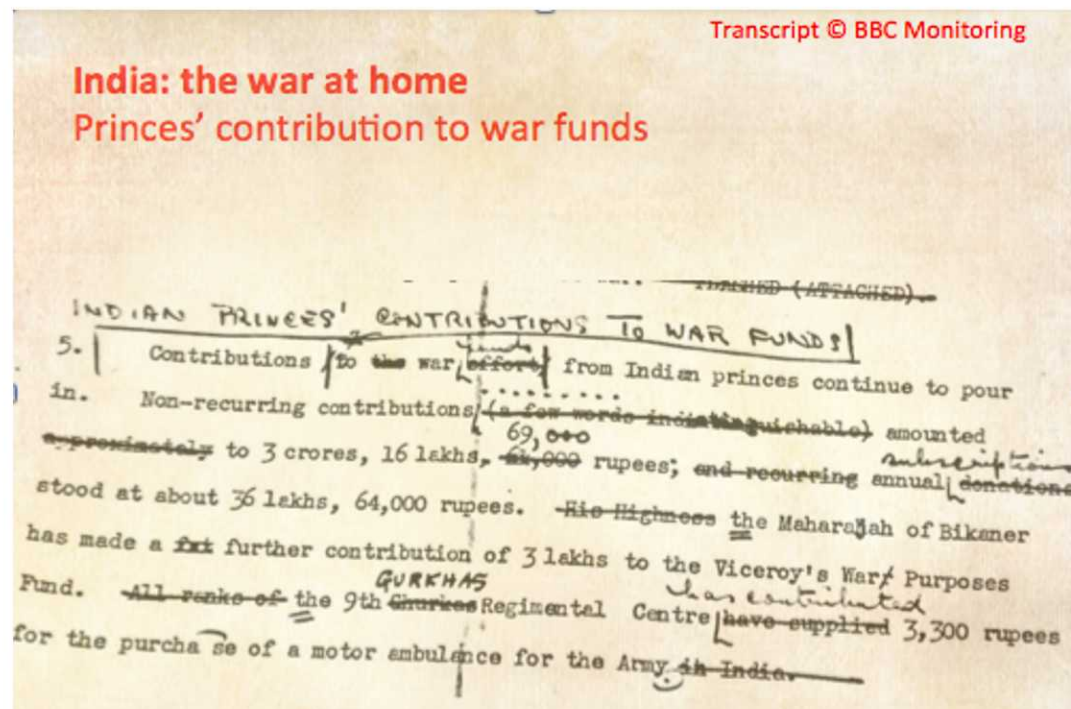
traces the wartime experiences of three of his family members, the word 'freedom' itself kept altering in ideological meaning – "Indians, who had spent two decades entering the river of nationalist sentiment, now found its flow violently reversed or eddying in confusion. The freedom struggle was a diversion from the fight against fascism, or vice versa. The word 'freedom' pulled one way and then the other. It meant freedom for the men of Europe. It meant freedom *from* the men of Europe. Likewise 'victory': frowning black Vs appeared amidst the newsprint and on walls, everywhere, demanding that the populace believe the war their own."¹

It is in a nuanced understanding of this complex political landscape that I believe the value of the BBC Monitoring archives lies for researchers of South Asia. Mining the rich seams of the BBC Monitoring archives, researchers will discover broadcasts that highlight the subcontinent's critical, and largely unrecognised, role in the war for both the British Empire and the Axis powers, particularly Germany and Japan. The collection thus has the potential to enrich and develop the emergent historical narrative of the Second World War outside the dominant Eurocentric frame, as well as offer insights into the conflicting political positions of 1940s India little recognised by South Asian nationalist historiography.

The variety and richness of the broadcasts are reflected in the languages used – English, Hindustani and "Persian" (modern-day Urdu) – as well as the range of stations from where broadcasts are made. For the purposes of this paper, I have selected three examples of British broadcasts made in English for an Indian audience, which are grouped under the heading **India: the war at home**; followed by three German broadcasts made in Hindustani, which are grouped under the heading **India: the war abroad**. I will then reflect briefly on the intersections between the BBC Monitoring Archives collection and the rich visual war propaganda material on India.

¹ Raghu Karnad, *Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War* (London: William Collins, 2015), p. 23.

India: the war at home



File reference: G122 – India in English

This extract discusses the significant contribution made by Indian princes to war funds – “3 crores 16 lakhs and 69,000 rupees”, for example, would mean a modern-day contribution of over £12 million. Threatened by the political movements of the time – mainly rising nationalism – and dependent on the British Raj for survival, the European war becomes a moment of opportunity for the princes to demonstrate loyalty and, literally, to measure their value to the Empire. Indian princes were generous donors to the British for both world wars, thereby providing excellent propaganda material to demonstrate Indian allegiance to the British ‘cause’.

India: the war at home

The Duke of Gloucester's troop inspection

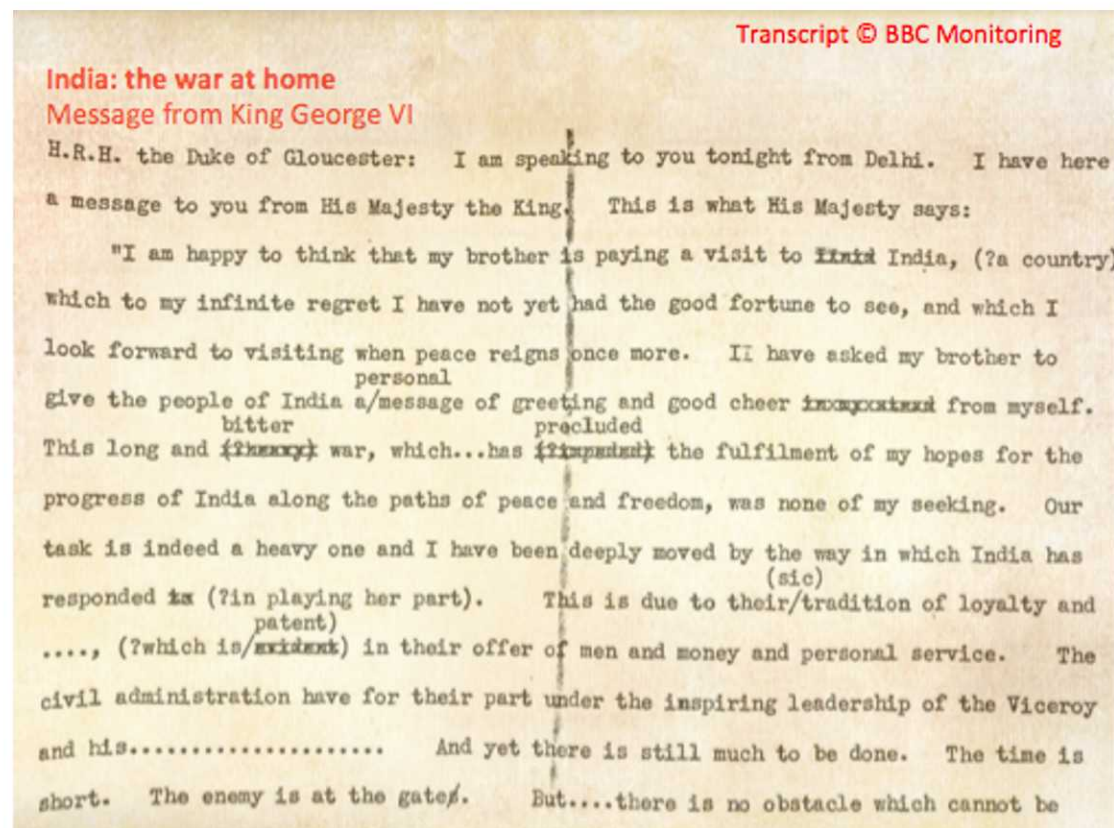
On his departure from India the Duke of Gloucester has sent a message to the C-in-C, General Wavell, declaring he was much impressed by the bearing, turn-out and (one word) spirit of the units he had inspected. He expressed his confidence that when these forces enter into battle, wherever it may be, they will prove themselves worthy of the great fighting traditions of the races to which they belong. The Duke continued: "We are all suffering for a common cause; that justice and peace and kindness, in which we all believe, may prevail, and that thereby we may be able to return to our homes and to peaceful lives." "I am sure," he said, "that by their courage, discipline and endurance we shall achieve an early and complete victory." General Sir Archibald Wavell, C.-in-C., in his reply says: "The visit of your Royal Highness has been an inspiration to the (one word) of the forces in India. They deeply appreciate the interest you have shown in them by undertaking such an arduous tour in the hot weather. Please assure His Majesty that we will fight on with endurance till the final victory of justice and truth is assured."

File reference: G122 – India in English

The second and third extracts highlight the martial aspects of Indian support for the war. The largest volunteer army in the world – 2.5 million men – served for the British in the Second World War, and the broadcast of the Duke of Gloucester's visit to India in June 1942 and his inspection of Indian troops cements the long-established role of the Indian Army as the perfectly crafted imperial tool. Broadcasting the exchange of messages in 1942 between the Duke and Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell, to the Indian people sustains these colonial hierarchies.

A line from the extract (see photograph above) reads: "He (the Duke of Gloucester) expressed his confidence that when these forces enter into battle, wherever it may be, they will prove themselves worthy of the great fighting traditions of the races to which they belong." This is an allusion to the colonial 'martial races' theory, according to which Indian people of certain ethnicities and religions were considered to be inherently more militaristic than others. With

the Empire's need for men during the Second World War, the theory entirely collapses, as men from all parts of India – including those who were underage or not physically fit enough – were now recruited into the army. The broadcast is therefore able to shed light on the ideological nature of the language being used here, and its role in promoting an established trajectory of Indian 'loyalty' towards the Raj.



File reference: G122 – India in English

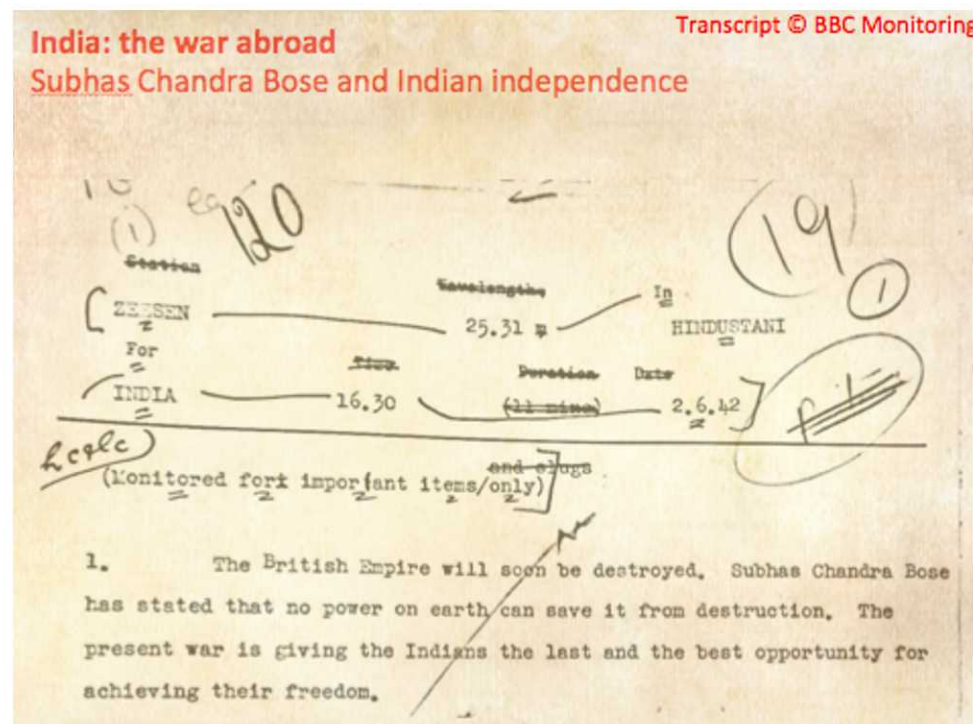
Such expressions of loyalty are further established in the third extract from the highest authority of Empire himself – King George VI. I quote a section (see above photograph): "Our task is indeed a heavy one and I have been deeply moved by the way in which India has responded (in playing her part). This is due to their tradition of loyalty and (missing word) which is patent in their offer of men and money and personal service."

Reading these transcripts, one may never think that a mere two months later, Mohandas Gandhi would be launching the Quit India movement – the largest concerted movement for Indian independence. The BBC Monitoring archives are

therefore important in addressing the following questions: How are hierarchies of power perpetuated through national broadcasts? At the same time, how are these broadcasts testament to political instability and turbulence? And how does language function as a tool for propaganda?

To examine these questions from an anti-colonial perspective, I will now move to the second section of my paper – India: the war abroad.

India: the war abroad



File Reference: E212 and E214, Azad Hind broadcasts

The extract from this first transcript reveals the date to be the same as the Duke of Gloucester's visit to India – June 1942. While the ceremonial trappings of statehood and Empire were being visually exhibited in India, revolutionary and nationalist ideas were contiguously dominating the airwaves. Subhas Chandra Bose, former President of the Indian National Congress – India's leading political party up until the war years – advocated armed resistance against the British Empire, in contrast to Gandhian beliefs in non-violent resistance. Escaping house arrest in India, Bose, in a rather James-Bond-like series of adventures, journeyed

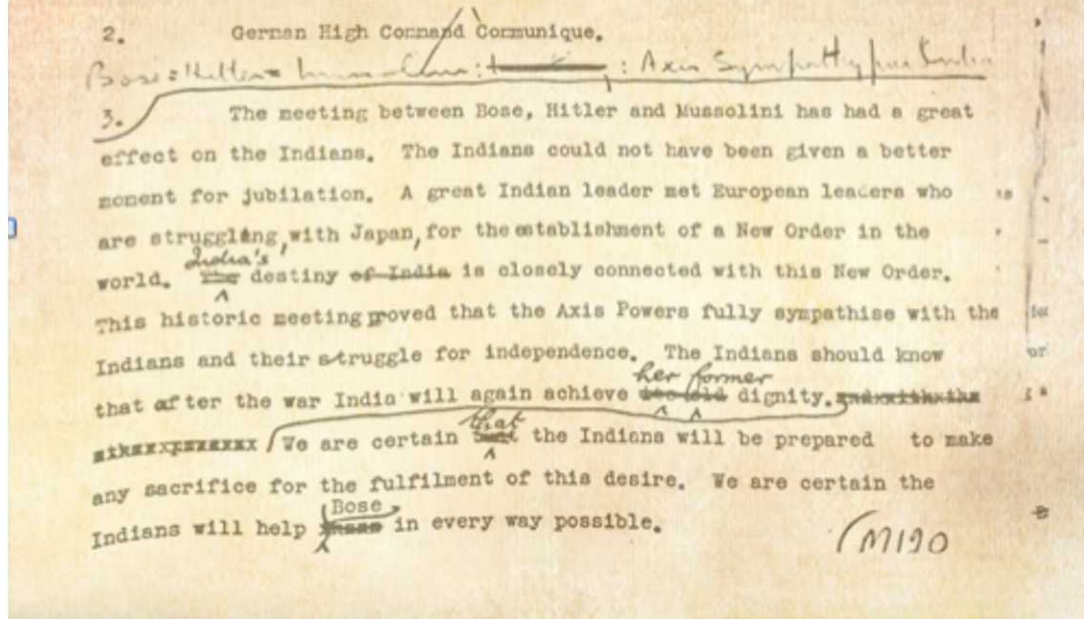
to Germany. There, he headed the Indian Independence League, comprising Indian prisoners-of-war and expatriates who had defected to the Axis side.

This broadcast is from Zeesen in Germany, the language is Hindustani, and the contents highly subversive to the colonial power entrenched in India by the British Raj (see above photograph): “The British Empire will soon be destroyed. Subhas Chandra Bose has stated that no power on earth can save it from destruction. The present war is giving Indians the last and best opportunity for achieving their freedom.” This final sentence challenges the dominant Eurocentric narrative of the Second World War; this is the war viewed through the eyes of a colonised people – it is seen as an “opportunity” for independence, for achieving lasting and transformative change in undivided India. As Sugata Bose says in his recent biography of Subhas Chandra Bose, entitled *His Majesty’s Opponent*, “Subject peoples in Europe’s colonies knew that their destinies would unravel in conjunction with the global conflicts. Their dreams of liberty became mired in the battles between totalitarianisms of different ideological hues.”²

² Sugata Bose, *His Majesty’s Opponent: Subhas Chandra Bose and India’s Struggle Against Empire* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2012), p. 87.

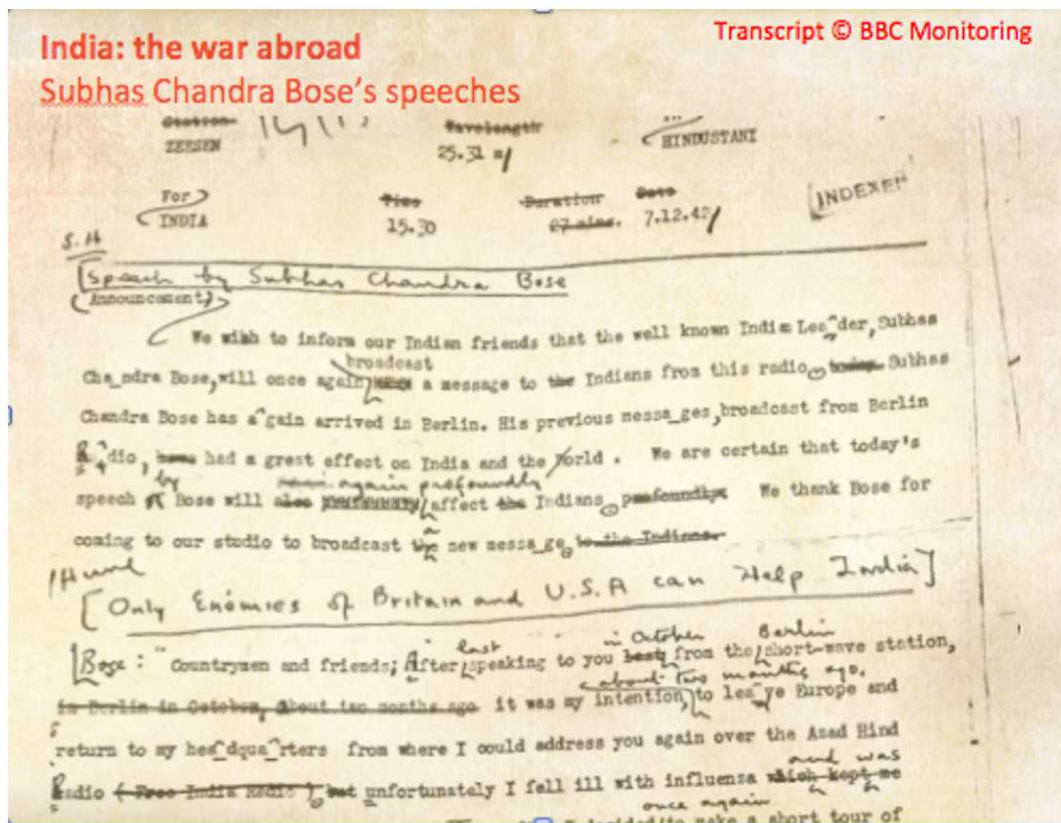
India: the war abroad Subhas Chandra Bose and India's "destiny"

Transcript © BBC Monitoring



File Reference: E212 and E214, Azad Hind broadcasts

The above extract addresses in more detail the question of the perceived Axis "sympathy" for India, again being broadcast in Hindustani to India. It comments on Bose's meeting with Hitler and Mussolini, and Indian "jubilation" at this meeting. This broadcast endorses a different type of propaganda, one that troublingly connects the movement for Indian independence with Axis victories and a new world order, and provides symmetries between the Axis imperialist leaders and Bose: "A great Indian leader met European leaders who are struggling with Japan for the establishment of a New Order in the world. India's destiny is closely connected with this New Order. This historic meeting proved that the Axis Powers fully sympathise with the Indians and their Struggle for independence."



File Reference: E212 and E214, Azad Hind broadcasts

The final extract (see photograph above) is from one of Bose's speeches to India, broadcast again from Zeesen in Hindustani in December 1942. The extract highlights the critical role played by broadcasts, and how they underpin propaganda, during the war: "Subhas Chandra Bose has again arrived in Berlin. His previous messages, broadcast from Berlin Radio, had a great effect on India and the world." The words written by hand just above Bose's speech are particularly significant: "Only enemies of Britain and USA can help India." This handwritten sentence is the transcriber's summary of Bose's speech, perhaps, or Bose's own heading that the original typed transcription may have omitted. It highlights a clear political positioning on Bose's part in organising resistance to the Raj outside India.

The BBC Monitoring transcripts are significant in providing us with a granular view of undivided India in the final years of the British Empire, as well as glimpses into Bose's life and political influence outside India. The materiality of the transcripts themselves also captures a sense of historical circumstance as

lived experience. In their many amendments and corrections, these documents feel 'live'; almost manuscript-like in providing testimony to historical forces that shaped not only Europe but also the colonised world.



Poster © <http://www.psywarrior.com/AxisPropIndia.html>

I would like to conclude by briefly commenting on the rich intersections between the BBC Monitoring transcripts and wartime propaganda pamphlets related to

India. This wonderfully colourful cartoon-like depiction of Subhas Chandra Bose shows him heading the Indian National Army (formed from Indian prisoners-of-war and expatriates in Singapore), onwards towards Delhi to topple the British Raj. This is a Japanese propaganda pamphlet dropped, most likely, on the Indo-Burmese border in 1944, where the Indian Army, along with other colonial and British troops, were amassing to reclaim Burma. In Urdu, Hindustani and Bengali – three of the most widely spoken Indian languages – the message is the same: “Come, march towards Delhi! Assemble below the Indian freedom flag under the leadership of Mr Subhas. Independence and freedom are now at your doorstep!”



Poster © <http://www.psywarrior.com/AxisPropIndia.html>

And finally, this is the Japanese propaganda pamphlet that best encapsulates to me India’s position as a contested site between rival imperialist powers. Here is, on one end of the pamphlet, an Indian soldier, literally blind to the reality of his wartime effort, being driven forward by a highly caricatured whip-wielding Churchill. The soldier is stopped in his tracks by a stern-faced Japanese soldier at the Burma border. In Hindi and Bengali, the message on the pamphlet asks the question: “What will you gain if you fight against Japanese soldiers?” The BBC

Monitoring archives provide a rich variety of broadcasts that highlight the ways in which India debated for and against this very question.

- Diya Gupta