The South Asian seaman’s role during the wars

Ansar Ahmed Ullah, 2012

Introduction

Whose Remembrance? Project is a scoping study project, running from February 2012 to September 2012 and aims to investigate and open up understanding of the role of colonial troops and civilians in the two world wars.

Hundreds of thousands of Africans, Indians, Caribbeans and other people from former British colonies contributed to the winning of the two world wars. Their story remains under-researched and relatively little known. There are still many ways in which the ‘colonial story’ has yet to be fully told. A central objective of the project is to uncover emerging trends in work that has already been done or is currently underway, and to establish how the IWM and other repositories of relevant information can contribute to a fuller understanding of different communities’ past heritage and history.

My chosen topic

I was chosen as one of three external specialist researchers to assist IWM in addressing how BME visitors to the IWM’s physical and virtual sites can be increased, and how fuller understanding by minority groups with a past history can best be developed. I looked at gaps in research and how these might be best addressed so as to allow the investigation and presentation of a more comprehensive and coherent story.

I chose South Asian seamen, to be more specific seamen of Bengali origin who were from present day Bangladesh, which was one half of Bengal province of the then British India.

The reason I chose this topic was because I felt this was a natural progression from my last research project ‘Bengalis in London’s East End’ that looked at the first Bengalis who settled in the East End of London.

From our research, we know that the Bengali seamen formed the first sizable South Asian community in Britain. They settled in London’s East End close to the Docks. These early Bengali seamen were commonly referred to as ‘lascars’. The word was once used to describe any sailor from the Indian sub-continent or any other part of Asia, but came particularly to refer to people from West Bengal and modern-day Bangladesh. It comes from the Persian Lashkar, meaning ‘military camp’, and ‘al-askar’, the Omani word for a guard or soldier.
During the First World War, more lascars were needed as local crews were engaged with the British Navy. As a result, the numbers of Asian lascars grew. By the end of the First World War Indian seafarers made up 20 percent of the British maritime labour force. The Indian Army itself expanded from 200,000 men in the 1930s to two and half a million during the Second World War.

During my previous research, I visited Tower Hill Memorial, a monument commemorating British Merchant Seamen who lost their lives in the First and Second World Wars, in Trinity Square Gardens, near Tower Hill tube station. This Monument also features in IWM’s display ‘Survival at Sea’ featuring stories of Merchant Navy on the first floor.

Many of the names on the monument indicate seamen of Bengali origin such as Miah, Latif, Ali, Choudhury, Ullah or Uddin. However, these named individuals only represent the privileged few Bengalis employed as British crewmembers, and exclude some 4,000-5000 lascars who died at sea and whose names were never known.

Indian sources give the figure of 3,427 lascars dead and 1,200 taken prisoners in the First World War. The total loss recorded at Tower Hill is 17,000. The IWM exhibition ‘Survival at Sea’ states a total of 14,721 lives lost during First World War.

Indian sources also give an estimate of 6,600 Indian seamen dead, 1,022 wounded and 1,217 taken prisoner in the Second World War. Employed at a fraction of the normal rate for seamen, lascars trapped in the engine rooms suffered a particularly high casualty rate. The total figure of merchant seamen who gave their lives is recorded as 32,000. Tower Hamlets Memorial recorded 23,857 losses during the Second World War. The IWM exhibition ‘Survival at Sea’ states 30,248 lives lost during Second World War.

At a ‘workshop for historians’ held on 19 July at IWM, Marika Sherwood (Institute of Commonwealth Studies), said that during Second World War 2.5 million Indian soldiers took part and 30-40% of merchant marines were colonial troops. It would be useful to discover the exact numbers. She also stated South Asian seamen received less pay, less food and were allocated smaller space for accommodation, and that their death rate was higher compared to White sailors.

Official tables exclude lascars amongst the names of 26,833 killed, despite the fact that they made up 50,000 of 190,000 crew members at war. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission should have a comprehensive list. At the same workshop for historians held at IWM in July, I was informed by Professor Michèle Barrett (Queen Mary, University of London), that the reading room at IWM should have a register of the Tower Hill Memorial. Many Lascars received military awards for their service aboard ships in the merchant navy. Any trace at IWM would be helpful too. In addition, Dr Florian Stadtlér (University of Exeter) mentioned of 7,000 Indian troops taking part in the D-Day landing. Any information on this from the IWM collection would be fascinating.

After our project publication ‘Bengalis in London’s East End’, we were approached by the Federation of Merchant Mariners-Merchant Navy stating that many Bengalis served in the Merchant Navy with
courage and fortitude and they deserve recognition. They were also looking for any living South Asian seamen, who served in the armed forces, to award Seafarers Veterans Badge.

I was contacted by a Steve Rogers from Portsmouth whose grandfather Ashi Ullah who came to Britain as a seaman, worked as a chef, was a founding member of the Muslim funeral service - which is still operating from the East London Mosque - and served during the war. Steve Rogers has given me information about his grandfather’s soldier service book (see Appendix 1). It would be interesting to find further information about Ashi Ullah or about the Corp he served in. While I am aware IWM doesn’t hold personal stories of colonial soldiers I am hoping to find information about Ashi Ullah’s unit. On contacting IWM’s Collections Access staff member Sarah Paterson, I was informed (see appendix 3 for full details) that it was difficult to trace any information about the Indian Pioneer Corps as it was not a front line unit. There is a very good regimental history, but unfortunately it does not have a usable index, and it is rather a case of ploughing through it to see what information it contains.

I visited IWM’s research room to see some of the collection on Pioneer Corps. I found an excellent brochure on the Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps: His Majesty’s Army, file no 02 (41). 734 (Pioneer Corps)/SAcc. No. K 90 / 999 and an excellent book by Brigadier A D Magnay titled, ‘The Second World War 1939-1945 Army: Miscellaneous ‘Q’ Service’. The Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps was formed in 1939 to assist with clearing of obstacles, smoothing of roads and execute repairs. Furthermore, I found papers by Col B W W Gostling who commanded the Pioneer Corps (file BWG3 T P144 Col B W W Gostling’s Second World War & Miscellaneous papers).

The 80 Company was active during the Blitz in London, and was established to attract Indian residents in Britain in early 1940. Although it was anticipated that the London docks would be a fruitful area for recruitment, the numbers were never as great as hoped for. The highest number of Indian other ranks at its peak in June 1941 was only 172.

There is also a film footage (AYY 57) of Company of Indian members of the Auxiliary Military Pioneering Corps (recruited mainly from Lascars at docks and ports) clearing up Sloane Street underground station (Sloane Square tube station), London, after an air raid.

I was informed by Sarah Paterson that the Royal Pioneer Corps Association may be able to help further: http://www.royalpioneercorps.co.uk. They also have access to the excellent Corps magazine for the war years, which may have some details about the Company which is currently kept at Duxford.

Amazingly, by sheer chance I bumped into a Harun Raha Chowdhury recently who claimed to have known of Ashi Ullah but said his name was Ashik and not Ashi. According to him, he knew of Ashik (Miah) who was one of the five founding members of the Muslim funeral service in London. He said that Ashik Miah came from Khadimpur village, Balagonj in Sylhet and lived in Heneage Street, London E1. He was married to a White woman and had four daughters. I am assuming Steve Rogers is the son of one of the daughters.

Collections
The Imperial War Museum (IWM) has extensive collections in the form of its own website, books and publications including printed ephemera, booklets, handbooks, maps, newspapers and journals, arts, documents & sound, exhibits, film & photographs.

In addition, the IWM has very strong collections on the theme of colonial troops, although they tend to be slanted towards the experiences those who commanded its armed forces and who undertook related activity, rather than to the experiences of the men and women in the colonies who joined up or who contributed to the war effort.

Suzanne Bardgett (Head of Research, IWM) mentioned the collection at Duxford Airfield of BBC Monitoring Reports. They are transcripts of what came over the radio during the Second World War. There are transcripts from so-called 'Freedom stations' - who were broadcasting against the British government's line.

My research & findings

For my research I have mainly focussed on photographs and film footage including visiting the Research & Reading Rooms at IWM, and Duxford. I initiated my search with IWM’s website.

Typing in the word ‘Bangladesh’ produced 57 items – mostly books but also some photographs e.g. an old Navy ship sold to the Bangladesh Navy, Bangladesh Army training abroad with the UN, and films mainly of Chittagong. I was not expecting to find a large collection as Bangladesh as an independent state did not exist during either the First or Second World Wars. Interestingly, I came across a film showing 81st West African Division fighting the Japanese from Mowdok, India (Bangladesh). I wasn’t aware of African troops fighting in Bangladesh.

Typing in ‘Bengal’ produced 687 results, including photographs of woman’s handbag (with a Bengal Light Infantry badge), young boys playing, RAF Hawker Hurricane planes lined up in Chittagong, RAF flying over Bengal and the 99 Squadron RAF based at Jessore, northern Bangladesh.

I then came across of a photo of a Bengali in London in 1940, titled Turkey in London: referring to a Turkish restaurant in Frith Street, London in 1943. The photograph featured a Miah Jorif (I suspect they got his name the wrong way round, it would normally be Jorif Miah); a waiter at the Istanbul restaurant in Soho, at work at the salad table, which, according to the original caption, is “the pride and joy” of his heart. The caption states that Miah is originally from Bengal and has been in Britain since 1940.

Another photograph titled, Muslim Community: Everyday Life in Butetown, Cardiff in 1943 shows visitors to Butetown for the opening of the new Mosque enjoying a meal at 'The Cairo' cafe. In the photograph are Abdul Aziz, from Calcutta, who runs a cafe in South Shields, Mrs Aziz and their daughter Joynob, Mrs Annie Nian, with her son Kenneth and Azin Ulla, a seaman from Bengal. This was my first discovery of a direct reference to a Bengali seaman.

I then typed ‘Indian’ and was overwhelmed with 10,134 results. I was about to give up after couple of hours of searching when I came across an Indian seaman (though perhaps not a Bengali); a Zavier Fernandez from Bombay who was injured when the Russian convoy in which he was sailing was
attacked. He was in hospital, undergoing a process of rehabilitation in 1942. Under related collection items, I came across another photograph (catalogue no D 10966) of a seaman, who seemed a Bengali, by the name of Mohamed Maberzak (I am assuming his last name is spelt incorrectly and perhaps should be Mubarak) undergoing treatment at the same hospital.

My search for ‘Indian seamen’ produced 209 results, though mainly of British seamen serving in India or Indian Ocean.

When I narrowed it down to ‘lascars’ the website only produced 31 results, with two direct references to Lascar. The first item I came across (which was also pointed out by Suzanne Bardgett and later by Sarah Paterson) was a film of the Company of Indian members of Auxiliary Military Pioneer Corps clearing up Sloane Street tube station after an air raid. What is interesting to note is that the crew was recruited mainly from Lascars. Ashi Ullah, whom I mentioned earlier – a seaman from Bangladesh, whose grandson Steve Rogers is trying to find out more about his grandfather – had served in this unit.

Next was a photograph of Second World War that mentioned five Lascar survivors after their vessel had been sunk by a torpedo in 1944. The website did not show the photograph as it hadn’t been digitised. On viewing the hard copy at IWM collection, I was disappointed as it was only a photograph of the White officer of the vessel.

Indian Royal Navy produced 1364 results. I know from my previous research most Bengali seamen worked in the engine room as ‘donkeywallahs’ (because the engines were ‘donkey engines’) and those who greased and oiled machinery were known as ‘telwallahs’. Others worked supplying the furnace with coal and disposing of the ashes. The working conditions were harsh and hot, and many seamen died of heat stroke and exhaustion. You can imagine my delight at discovering a visual image (catalogue no IB 1558) of three stokers of the Royal Indian Navy on the mess deck of the sloop HMIS SUTLEJ in 1944.

We also know from research that many Bengali seamen worked as cooks. I came across a photograph (catalogue no A 10545) of the Royal Indian Navy at Stamshaw, Portsmouth in 1942 on training, showing cooks with some of their specially prepared dishes on their way to the mess.

There are many photographs of Indian Naval officers & sailors, both Indian & British. Of the Indians, it is difficult to know if they were Bengalis as there are no names mentioned in the photo captions. All the photographs I found are listed in Appendix 2.

I visited Duxford Documents & Sound Section on 30 July 2012. Stephen Walton, Senior Curator, Documents & Sound Section at Duxford Repository was kind enough to show me the collection. Duxford Repository has a vast collection that hasn’t been digitised but the process has begun. Under India there are a total of 28 files/boxes (India (with Burma) 1941-1948 file no. G122-132 and India & Pakistan file no. G 133-137, G 85-96).

I looked at file G123 and G122. The broadcasts are of the India/Burma border area conflict, tribesmen serving with British, Japanese boat sunk by the US, Eastern Bengal (referring to today’s Bangladesh) refugee camps, Chittagong, Dhaka, Comilla (incorrectly spelt Kumila - see Appendix 5), Sylhet (all cities in
Bangladesh), Bengal Premier, air raids in Calcutta & Eastern Bengal, Bengal govt, Bengal mine sweeper (which had crew from Bengal) and of disturbances by locals in 1942.

The ‘Bengal’ minesweeper broadcast (see appendix 4) was made by the BBC on 30/11/42. It read “Heroic R I N minesweeper ‘Bengal’ returns to port”, referring to the minesweeper belonging to the Royal Indian Navy which sank a Japanese tanker about 1000 miles South of Java arriving at an Indian port. The Flag Officer commanding the Royal Indian Navy sent a message to the personnel of ‘Bengal’ saying, ‘We are all proud of you.’ Crowds flocked to the waterfront to see the minesweeper, which bore scars of the battle. The ‘Bengal’ company included men from widely separated parts of India, including Bengal and the Punjab.

A broadcast by General Wavell made in 1942 on the BBC speaks highly of the contribution of Indian forces, ‘The Indian Navy and the Air Force are growing in numbers, equipment, skill and reputation. Men who broke the Italian line at Sidi Barrani, men who stormed the heights of Amba Alagi, men who took Damascus in face of great odds, men who fought the rear-guard actions in Malay and Burma, men who stood and stand against the Germans, men who now protect India on all fronts from her foe, men who fight as comrades side by side whatever their tasks be – these are the defenders of India in her hour of danger ...who fight alongside British and Allied troops these are true representatives of India’s nationhood’. Wavell went on further to say, ‘As their representatives I proclaim to you my admiration for them, my pride in them and my trust in them! By their valour we shall conquer’.

General Wavell mentions Indians breaking the Italian line. While communicating with Jahan Mahmood from Birmingham, who spoke at the workshop for Museum Professionals, Community Representatives and Social Scientists at IWM on 19 July, he mentioned Muslim soldiers in Italy. He said while researching Muslim fatalities of the Italian Campaign he came across the gravestones of five Muslim soldiers from areas now located in Bangladesh.

One in particular was called Shams Ul Haq from Barisal, he was a soldier and part of RIASC. He was only 24 when he died. He was part of the struggle against Hitler's Army in Italy. Brave Bengali Soldiers up against some of Hitler’s finest units in Italy!

Jahan has a picture of the gravestone. It is in colour and has the details of the soldier’s age, rank number and regiment on the gravestone as well as a Quranic inscription. I am trying to obtain a copy of the image.

General Wavell is also mentioned in Catherine Wilson’s article ‘Responsible History? Churchill’s Portrayal of the Indian Army in The Second World War’ where Wavell encouraged Churchill to consider sending a special message to armed forces in the India Command, as this token of his appreciation would greatly hearten them when events elsewhere were making them feel a little out of the picture. We also see General Wavell in a film footage where he welcomes Indian political leaders to a talk (INR 122). Moreover, the same film has clips of Indian Merchant seamen repatriated from German prisons back to Calcutta. This is a second film footage that I came across during my search that has features Bengali seamen.
Duxford collection

Duxford has a wealth of archival documents including the proceedings of Nuremberg and Tokyo war crime trial – something of interest to me as Bangladesh itself is at present proceeding with a war crimes trial of the Bangladesh War of 1971. Within the Tokyo trial papers, I came across a Bengali Justice Radhabinod Pal who was representing India. I also came across a broadcast where Mohammed Ali Jinnah is asserting for a Pakistani state as a land for India’s Muslims.

South Asian historians who are studying India’s independence and the partition would find Duxford collection hugely useful as a source of evidence to cross check or to use it as a supplementary source.

Colonial film

Roger Smither, Research Associate and former Keeper of the Film Archive at IWM gave me a link to www.colonialfilm.org.uk which has collection mostly from the IWM and the Bfi. Search is by country or topics (Themes, Genres, Productions organisations & Events). Countries are grouped under Africa, Asia including Middle East, the Caribbean, Central America & the South Atlantic, Europe and North America. Under Topic-Production organisations there are the Colonial Film Unit, the Indian News Parade and Information Films of India.

The word ‘Asia’ in a search produced 48 items. A search for Lascar produced 48 items (probably the same as under Asia) including the same film of Auxiliary Military Police Corps clearing after an air raid.

But the best find was ‘A scene of Strangers Home for Asiatics-Lascars sitting in courtyard’. A search for seamen search produced ‘His Excellency The Viceroy visits the Docks & Harbour at Bombay’, India News parade: Indian Merchant seamen repatriated, a boy joins the Royal Indian Navy, India’s Navy grows and Indian Naval vessel fires. Not all the footage is available on the website. So it’s not possible to know without viewing if this footage shows South Asian seamen in action.

In addition, I also found films of general interest to Bengal including work of a district officer in Bengal (viewable on website ID: 20034), Jute, tea, Bengali movie, Calcutta, partition, Bengal lancer, Sunderbans including Bengali boatmen (viewable on website).

Conclusion/recommendations

In my short period of research I found only a handful of direct references to Bengali seamen or Lascars but that is not to say there are no other references in other vast collections of IWM. Research is a very laborious and time-consuming task. One would need to probe further into the collections for a larger find.

The cataloguing of IWM material seems fine. In fact, I have noticed in captions mentioning of Bangladesh in bracket when referring to Indian areas that are no longer in India but in today’s Bangladesh.

In order to make a larger or a specific discovery the IWM would need to,
dedicate a staff or a staff team to conduct research
and/or commission external specialists to focus on the specific area of search
focus on individual countries of South Asia (India, Pakistan & Bangladesh), Africa and the Caribbean or group them in continents

In addition to Amitav Ghosh’s Glass, I am also aware of Lascar literature both fiction and nonfiction of,

- *Probashir Katha* (The Tale of Immigrants) by Nurul Islam in Bengali but an English version is being published
- Caroline Adams’s *Across seven seas and thirteen rivers* factual account of a number of Bengali seamen
- Shahida Rahman’s novel *Lascar*
- Yousuf Choudhury’s *The Roots and Tales of the Bangladeshi settlers and Sons of the Empire*
- *The View from Shooters Hill: The Hidden Black and Asian History of Bexley* by Clifford Pereira
- *Bengalis in London’s East End* which touches upon the Lascars.
- Satyajit Ray’s Distant Thunder movie in Bengali language kept in IWM/colonial film collection

These titles can be added to any new list that is being compiled by the IWM for this project.

I do not recall seeing many films, television programmes (apart from portrayal of Asian spy Noor Inayat Khan), fiction, music, poetry and other art forms enlightening people about the role played by colonial troops. From what I have seen in the collection, the IWM could easily organise:

- Film Festivals of colonial troops either at the IWM
- or BFI
- or at any community centres/theatres close to areas with high concentration of Black/Asian population
- or screen them on mainstream TVs including Asian satellite channels.

In the current climate of war against terror, the concept of Britishness and the attempt to instil the idea of being British amongst the Muslim youth of Britain seems imposed. Identity is very fluid and is constantly being influenced by social, cultural and political process. A number of contributors at the history workshop held on 26 July 2012 at IWM picked up on the subject of British identity including Clifford Pereira, Stacey Bains, Patrick Vernon.

My own view is one will only feel part of an identity if they are made to feel part of that concept. And one way of addressing the issue of identity of minority communities in Britain would be to document the heritage and history of these communities as Britain’s history and then disseminate that information amongst the general population via

- IWM exhibitions
- gallery
- publications
- posters
• souvenirs
• and IWM learning packs aimed at young people

I believe that the IWM souvenirs and the learning pack would go a long way in promoting the history of military and related service by men and women from the former colonies. Imagine seeing an Asian face on IWM poster or a mug!

With the project findings, IWM can liaise with specific communities to run oral history projects and to compile learning packs to be used by schools. For example, last year I worked with a Bengali group, Amader Bhobishot in conjunction with Southwark Local History Library and Archive running an oral history project. This group is very close to the IWM and the young people involved with the project have acquired oral history skills. The IWM could tap into the skills of these young people.

The collection at IWM is not just about war or the military arsenals but covers a whole spectrum of social impact especially the destruction, devastation, death and tragedy it brings upon humanity and human triumph against all odds. At IWM’s collection, I was amazed to find photographs of Bengali seamen enjoying a day out in a cafe in Cardiff or a Bengali waiter working in a restaurant in London’s Soho. It was even more amazing to see moving images of Lascars working in London as members of Pioneering Corps clearing after an air raid or Lascars returning from German prisons and Indian soldiers in Italy relaxing like American GIs. In one scene you see Indian soldiers enjoying on Gondolas and if I am correct in one instant you see an Indian soldier passing a cigarette to an Italian lady.

Finally, in order to increase awareness of IWM’s collection and to get more visitors from the UK communities of colonial troops, I would suggest more networking events like the two history workshops followed by an end of project event. These events and others could be further heightened by inviting

• respected Black/Asian High Commissioners
• Ambassadors
• ethnic press & media
• hold press conferences pro-actively inviting ethnic press & media
• or organise press conferences solely aimed at ethnic press & media
• or send out press releases in ethnic languages

In Britain, a very vibrant Asian media exists comprising newspapers, magazines, websites, blogs, TV and radios. In 2000, the Commission of Racial Equality published a very comprehensive list of all Asian media http://www.cre.gov.uk/media/em_media.html I am not sure if this list still exists. Some of the current key South Asian media organisations are EMMA http://www.emmatrust.com/, Indian Press Association, London Bangla Press Club and the UK Bangla Press Club amongst others.

I noticed none of the history workshops were photographed. Imagine IWM literature or promotional brochures showing photographs of Black and Asian people making presentations and the affect it may have on the Asian community. Perception is very important for a public institution especially when it is trying to reach the hard to reach. For additional publicity this report (and the other two reports) could
be published in ethnic media. In addition, my report could be translated (if budget allows) and published in local Bengali papers.

I would also highly recommend ongoing engagement with the community/communities and community experts, compile a directory of community specialists and/or form a consortium of community specialists as suggested by Suzanne Bardgett.

I must mention that it’s a credit to the IWM that its staff has been most helpful and extremely cooperative when contacted by email, phone or in person during my research for this project.