





JOURNEY FROM HOME

WE
WERE
THERE
TOO



What is this project about?

Believe in Me CIC and We Were There Too have created the Journey from Home project funded by The Heritage Lottery Fund. This project has sought to research and make accessible the stories and experiences of the men from many faiths (Muslims, Sikhs, Hindus) that came from South Asia and were part of the British forces during the First World War. Those stories and experiences have been used for reflection and to inspire discussions around identity, sacrifice, community and Remembrance for community groups in the UK today.

This project is about understanding the shared experiences of the men from South Asia from the different faiths, who are more usually addressed separately despite serving together. We are working with communities and young people to develop their knowledge about the past and how to respond to it creatively today.

The project provides an important link for the current South Asian community to recognise its connection to wider First World War centenary events across the UK in 2018 and for informing British society of the diversity of those that fought. This project is a mix of the past and the present and how journeys can bring communities together.



@bimcic



@bimcic

@Wewerethere2



@bimcic

At the start of the twentieth century the British Empire stretched around the globe. Approximately a quarter of the world's population came under either direct control or at least its influence with territories in Asia, the Americas, Africa and Australasia. When Britain declared war in 1914 appeals went out across the Empire for support – that support was pledged without hesitation. The support came from local Governments, representatives and in India from the British authorities and the local leaders.



© Courtesy of We Were There Too



© IWM Q4997

The Maharaja Ganga Singh in his palace in Bikaner in Rajasthan wrote in a telegram to King George V, for whom he had been an Aide-de-Camp, on 4 August 1914:

“Having just heard of the outbreak of hostilities between Russia, France and Germany, I beg leave most dutifully, should Great Britain also have resort to arms, to place my own sword and services at Your Imperial Majesty’s command,


either as member of Your Imperial Majesty’s Staff or at the head of my troops and Rajputs, all of whom are equally eager to fight for your Imperial Majesty in Europe, India or elsewhere for the safety, honour and welfare of your Imperial majesty and your dominions”

This communication between India and the UK is important, not only for revealing that many of those from the Indian governing classes were supportive of the war but also for providing one of the many pieces of physical evidence of attitudes to the conflict.



© By permission of the British Library

In the years that have passed since the war and the tumultuous events that have occurred in the intervening 100 years opinion and argument have often affected people's attitude to past events. In this project 'Journey From Home' the story of the Indian involvement has been explored using the letters and images of the period. We have chosen to examine themes that have arisen from that time and to discuss some of those themes through the learning and physical journey of young people today as they find out about the history of the British Indian involvement in one of the most important events of the modern era.

This project is part historical investigation and part reflective responses by young people of mainly Indian (including  Pakistani and Bengali heritage). Two types of journeys made for different reasons but all encountering different experiences and challenging ideas.

Just like the men of 1914 – 18 the young people involved with the project were self-selecting volunteers. However, a marked contrast on this modern journey was that those who wanted to participate were overwhelmingly young women.

'Grandfather dear, I understand these things perfectly well, though they are still hidden from my revered elders. I know well that a woman in our country is of no more value than a pair of shoes and this is the reason why the people of Indi are low in the scale. You educated Ramjas, and got him a situation, but you never thought of educating any of the girls. You said to yourself 'Ramjas will be able to help me in my old age, but the girls will get married and leave the house and will not be able to do anything for me'. I should like to write to my wife, but she would have to get the letters read by somebody else and all the home secrets would come out. When I look at Europe, I bewail the lot of India. In Europe everyone – man and women, boy and girl – is educated. The men are at the war and the women are doing the work. They write to their husbands and get their answers. You ought to educate girls as well as your boys and our posterity will be the better for it.'

**Dafadar Ranji Lal (Jat) to Prem (Rohtak District, Punjab.)
20th Deccan Horse, France, 26 November 1916**

In 1914 war was still a thing to be excited about, to write glorious patriotic poems about and for many an opportunity to demonstrate courage, bravery, loyalty and equality. The reality of the next four years would change many peoples attitude to the glory of war at the time and leave most of society with the legacy that war was something to be avoided.

British Indian regiments were part of Britain's professional forces for over half a century before the First World War. Indian volunteers were sought from parts of the subcontinent that were deemed to be particularly 'warrior like' and loyal to the British. A variety of ethnic and religious groups served – Hindus,



© By Permission of The British Library

Sikhs and Muslims. Once war was declared further volunteers would be sought from across India and all the religious groupings.



© IWM Q823

they weren't all 'exotic'. Look at the picture here closely and the one in the exhibition with the men sat with a French church in the background. The men are a mix of Indian with different tied Turbans and British. In 1914 white British Officers of the Indian Regiments wore turbans just the same as the men under their command, it is only in 1916 when all men were offered the metal Brodie helmet that turbans started to be worn predominantly by the Sikh soldiers.

The Indian troops left India in August 1914 on ships – they included men of many different faiths and ethnicities. Their arrival in France was greeted with cheers and parades – they were the 'exotic soldiers' of the orient there to fight for the Allies. Of course

The newspapers of the period in Britain, France and India showed the troops arrival and welcome. Funds were quickly established to properly kit out many of the men, who had been dispatched in the incorrect kit for fighting on the Western Front in autumn. It wasn't just the fighting men that were dispatched. Huge arrangements were made to mobilise the non-combatant forces needed to provide the men with supplies and especially the food needed to follow their dietary needs.

The arrival of the Indian Forces on the Western Front was big news and it made a huge impact to British troops who had taken a larger knock than expected in the opening days of the conflict. Images of the men in the trenches, at prayer, in the rest period and on the march were printed everywhere. They were sent back to India to encourage recruitment and they were printed in the UK and France for a multitude of propaganda reasons. Once the Indian forces were engaged with fighting special military hospitals were established on the British South Coast. The most famous was the conversion of the Brighton Pavilion into a military hospital for Indian troops. At the Pavilion there were nine temporary kitchens established to cater for the different religious and ethnic needs and the King and Queen were visitors.



© Courtesy Of Royal Pavilion Museum, Brighton and Hove



© By Permission of The British Library

Throughout their time on the Western Front and elsewhere the men would write home. During the First World War any letters sent from the Frontline to friends and loved ones had to pass through the censor. For the Indian soldiers that meant they were usually translated into English first. The original letters were sent on but the censors copies were kept and are now held by the British Library. Alongside discussions about domestic plans are letters about fear, hopes, injury, the activities they carry out in their spare time and the conditions of battle.

One strong theme that emerges is the contrasts that the soldiers make between Western Europe (Britain and France) and the Indian sub-continent, in particular the discussions around education and women.

'A matter which I am desirous to urge on you is this - that in the mosque you should establish a teacher to give instruction to the little boys and girls. Whatever money is required to carry out this plan, I will provide. You should apply yourself earnestly to this work, because, through learning, the conditions of the various parts of the world and the characteristics of the various peoples become known. The people in other countries (than India) live in a happy and prosperous fashion. In my young days I did not learn anything, and to this day I am regretting my mistake.'

Lance Daadar Mahomed Khan (Pathan) to Arsalla Khan (Rawalpindi District, Punjab), 38th CIH, France, 5th May 1917

It is clear from a number of the letters that the war experience has been greater than just fighting – the men are now keen to make changes to their own societies back home. During the war the authorities were keen to keep the Indian soldiers and civilian women apart for a number of reasons. Nonetheless the Indian soldiers were able to observe the difference between the treatment and education of women amongst the different cultures and a number of them wrote home urging their families to educate women and children more.

I send you the picture of a girl equipped for battle. Certainly nowadays honourable young girls are making themselves fit for battle, and for those reason – that they may, if required fight for their King and country....

**Mir Jaffar (Punjabi Muslim) to his niece (Amritsar District Punjab)
Ambala Cavalry Brigade, France, 16th May 1916**
(He encloses a postcard depicting a French girl in military uniform with full accoutrements.)

A strong part of the project was the opportunity for young people to immerse themselves in the research experience, to do this they were taken to visit: The Woking Peace Garden, created for the memory of Muslim troops; the Chattri outside Brighton; the National Archives; the National Army Museum, London; the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing in Ypres, Belgium with the panels of Indian names; and Commonwealth War Graves Commission Cemeteries where Muslim, Sikh and Hindu soldiers are buried and Neuve-Chapelle Memorial in France which commemorates more than 4,700 Indian soldiers and labourers who lost their lives on the Western Front and have no known grave.



© *We Were There Too*

From these experiences the young people were able to create their own responses to the war years and those men and women that were there rather than just absorb figures and cold facts around battles, jingoism and equipment.

One of the things that the young people involved with the project found so remarkable was the fact that many of many faiths served and are remembered together. In the Commonwealth War Graves Commission cemetery of Bedford House just outside of the Belgian town of Ypres lay buried a group of Indian soldiers including Sikhs and Muslims, close by are Christians and Jews. The topic of unity and comradeship often came up in discussion and in their creative responses.



© *By Permission of the British Library*

The young people who came on the 'Journey from Home' with us created art works that demonstrated some of the thoughts and insights that they had discovered on their way. As young women and men they were interested in the legacy of service and female involvement.

'And my dear friend, this is the photo of our King's granddaughter – he who was King of the Sikhs, Ranjit Singh. She has distributed her photo amongst Sikh brethren at the depot on the evening of the 23rd February at five O'clock.'

**Kartar Singh (Sikh, 15th Sikhs) to Gurdit Singh (Raswind, Punjab), Milford-on-Sea, 24th Feb 1916.
Written on the back of a photo of a lady friend , signed Sophia A. Duleep Singh 1916.**



As young people who had learnt about the journey of thousands and been on their own personal journey for knowledge and insight they wrote their own letters that demonstrate an understanding of that time and why it matters to them and wider society now. They seem to be interested in friendships and links rather than on conflict.



This project has concentrated on the role and contribution of Indian Forces on the Western Front, of course The British Indian regiments served in Gallipoli and across the Middle East as well but for reasons of geography and the current day relationship of those of South Asian descent in the UK we chose to concentrate on the Western Front experience.

Over the course of the conflict Indian Forces would contribute around 1.4 million men to the war, nearly 900,000 of whom would be combatants. Approximately a quarter of the British army were Indian forces. Indian troops would be awarded 11 Victoria Crosses and numerous other awards for bravery. After the loss of many of the white British officers the Indian NCO's (Non Commissioned Officers) would take on more authority and the Indian Officers would be given a greater level of command (although not over white British troops). This would have a long term impact on military structures and eventually on who could be commissioned, including the commissioning of Indian men as officers.



© By Permission of the British Library

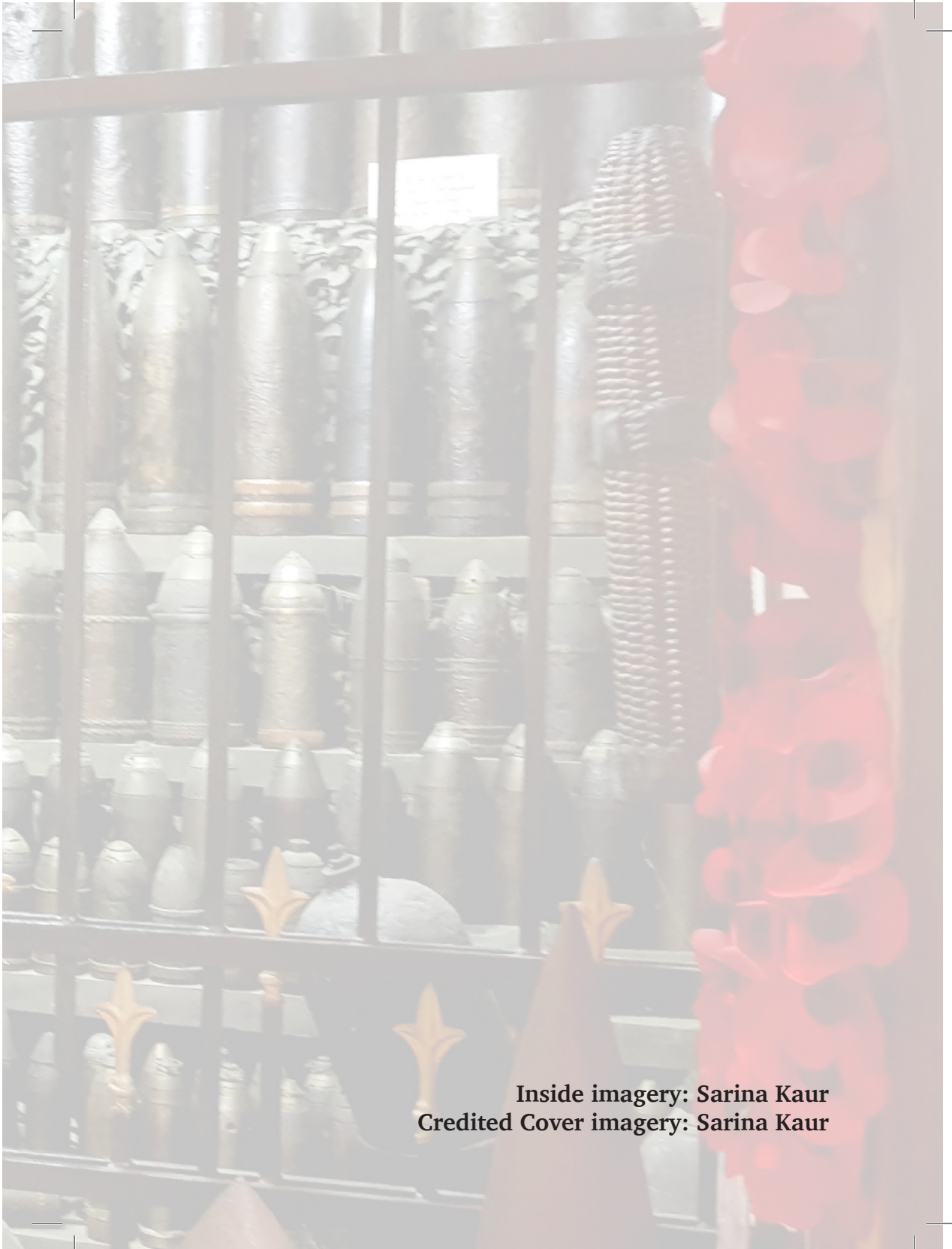
Under the project 'Journey From Home' the impact is less pronounced but it has been deep. The questions, ideas and creative responses that the young people have created are a new legacy to an old story that they will now help to tell to generations to come.



© Courtesy of We Were There Too



© Courtesy of We Were There Too



Inside imagery: Sarina Kaur
Credited Cover imagery: Sarina Kaur