



**Panel's title :**

***Representing global war in colonial India: photographic image, spoken text and broadcast word***

**Coordinator:** Suzanne Bardgett (Head of Research at the Imperial War Museums, London)

**Language :** English

**Topics :** South Asia, War Studies, Literature, Media, Sound Studies

**Panel presentation :**

This panel investigates representations of British rule during global war contained in various media: photographs of atrocities committed during the First World War, distributed as propaganda for the Khilafat movement, which arose in support of the Ottoman caliph and was later to become part of the Indian independence movement; letters sent by Indian soldiers during the Second World War, dictated to scribes and then intercepted by the colonial censor; interviews of Indian civil servants and social activists, recounting memories of the same period, but recorded in the 1970s, which were subsequently edited to produce a popular BBC radio series.

Written from the disciplinary perspectives of media, literary and sound studies, all three papers emerge from material relating to colonial India held at the British Library: a collection of proscribed publications, military censorship reports and BBC recordings. The papers read these sources against the grain by focusing on the different media through which they were transmitted, the context in which they were embedded, and the means by which they were disseminated.

Particular attention is paid to the editorialising of this material – captioned photographs, censored words, excluded interviews. All three papers explore how these efforts were undercut by the dynamic nature of the communication process, whereby the significance of a message varies depending upon author, audience and the historical moment in which it is circulated.

A time of global war has been selected as a period in which the contingent nature of this process is heightened, as disparate peoples are connected and spatiotemporal distances collapsed. Colonial India has been chosen as a context of low levels of literacy but high levels of literacy awareness, in which interconnections between image, word and sound are particularly clear in texts meant to be seen and heard as much as 'read'.

*Key words :* colonial India, global war, media, censorship, resistance, life writing, radio, photography.

**Participants :**

- 1) Pragya Dhital (SOAS)

**Communication's title :**

*The atrocity photograph in colonial India: trophy, spectacle and nationalist propaganda*

**Language :** English :

**Presentation :**

From Felice Beato's artful depictions of the Sepoy Mutiny (carefully composed pictures of hanging mutineers and the corpse-strewn courtyard of Sikander Bagh palace), to photographs of the First and Second World Wars, images of war circulated widely in pre-Independence India. In periods when photography was a slow and cumbersome process, and photographers reliant on official



support, the execution photograph seems to have been a particularly favoured genre. However, in these depictions the desire to create a striking image often threatens to undermine their effectiveness as reportage or state propaganda – a feature that could be exploited when, in turn, they were used as anti-British propaganda.

This paper will draw upon the British Library's archive of proscribed publications in colonial India: nationalist texts intended for a mass audience during a period of low literacy levels, which were often multimedia in format (meant to be sung, orated or seen). It will focus upon photographs produced during the Balkan and First World Wars, which came to be distributed as part of the Khilafat movement in India, and analyse the techno-material constraints and ideological perspectives through which they were disseminated.

*Key words:* Photography, War, Colonial India

2) Diya Gupta (King's College London)

**Communication's title :**

*The protean word: battlefield letters by Indian soldiers in the Second World War*

**Language :** English :

**Presentation :**

“Letters mean half meetings and they are a great consolation to us,” writes an Indian soldier from the Middle East, serving in the colonial Indian Army during the Second World War. His ardent desire to hear from home reaches us today through military censorship reports archived at the British Library. Soldiers’ letters were written in Hindi, Gurumukhi, Urdu, Bengali and Tamil, and often dictated to scribes by illiterate Indian sepoys. They were then translated for the censor, who compiled quotations from the letters into a report testifying to the Indian soldiers’ ‘morale’. Anonymised, stripped of the names of places and individualised context, these textual shards hover in the censorship reports representing a vast and complex range of colonial wartime experience.

This paper will examine the relationship between censorship and the textual form, particularly as the latter shifts from the verbal to the transcribed, Indian vernaculars to the English language. How do we gain insights into the emotional lives of colonial soldiers through the censored word? How is the textual form itself affected by the letters’ reception by family and friends in India and the military colonial gaze? And how do such letters become textual connectors between remote villages spread across India and theatres of war thousands of miles away?

*Key words :* Literary studies, Life Writing, War Studies

3) Sejal Sutaria (King's College London)

**Communication's title :**

*Speaking of Subversion: Archives, BBC Radio, and Re-Rendering India's Colonial Resistance*

**Language :** English :

**Presentation :**

In 1975, historian and writer Charles Allen partnered with the BBC and the India Office to interview



British and Indian members of the Civil Service, the military, and the business community about their experiences of living in undivided India during the decades before independence. Together, these 82 interviews form the British in India Oral Archive; subsequently, Allen drew upon them to produce the *Plain Tales From The Raj* series that aired on Radio 4. While some of those interviewed express pro-imperial sentiment, many of them reveal anti-imperial, nationalist perspectives.

This paper investigates, then connects, two distinct yet arguably related threads of inquiry. First, what do these interviews reveal about the everyday resistance employed by Indians who supported Gandhi's 1942 Quit India movement and challenged India's forced involvement in World War II. Second, how were these testimonies of resistance re-rendered for a Radio 4 series produced at a moment when imperial nostalgia fuelled Britain's fascination with narratives like *Heat and Dust*, *The Far Pavilions*, or *The Jewel in the Crown*. An analysis of the tone, inflection, and framing of speakers' content reveals how the subversive retelling of Indian resistance complicates imperial nostalgia through the archive while its re-rendering for radio confirms its potency.

*Key words* : Literature, Postcolonial Studies, Sound Studies