



Daniel P. Marston and Chandar S. Sundaram, eds. A Military History of Indian and South Asia: From the East India Company to the Nuclear Era. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008.

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The eminent South Asia expert Stephen P. Cohen notes in his foreword that this collection of essays is a breakthrough because never before—at least from a western perspective—has someone attempted a military history of India, as opposed to writing about specific periods and wars. This is both the book’s strength and its weakness.

For the newcomer to the field, the book is an excellent primer. It deals with the circumstances in which the East India Company set up three separate armies in India, British expansion and how that led to the Indian Mutiny (now seen as a war for independence by modern Indian historians), the British theory of martial classes, the Indian Army in the First and Second World Wars, the Indianization of the officer corps,

the deserter Indian National Army, the coming of independence, the continuing Indo-Pakistan conflict, the Sino-Indian War of 1962, Sri Lanka's war against the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam, and Indian nuclear policy.

This vast panorama spanning 270 years is unusual for two reasons. One, few have tried to discern a common thread connecting the disparate episodes of Indian military history from the arrival of the British to the modern day. Two, a conscious—and conscientious—effort has been made to tell the story sympathetically from the Indian viewpoint. This is particularly important in the case of the 1857-59 and the World War II Indian National Army mutinies. It is essential not just for foreigners, but also for Indians steeped in military history as written by the British, to understand the mutineers' perspective.

Yet, anyone writing a military history of India faces an insurmountable problem. We Indians are ahistorical, and few basic sources exist. Perhaps it is because we believe in reincarnation. To us time is timeless, and all that matters is the present. The past is gone forever, why concern ourselves with it? The future is ordained, so why worry about it? As a personal philosophy this may be admirable, but it creates impossibilities for the historian.

There is also the problem of language. Such records as may exist are written in regional languages, and are thus unavailable to those who work primarily in English. It seems inevitable then that this well-written and carefully researched book should begin with the East India Company, because the British were compulsive recordists. The Islamic invaders also kept detailed records, but again language makes these inaccessible to the majority of historians, otherwise the book could usefully have begun as far back as, say, 1100 AD.

And this creates a fundamental issue that is in no way the fault of the eleven historians gathered to write this book. Up to 1947, the book is a military history of the East India Company and the British in India, and only in passing is it a military history of India. The situation post-1947 is not much better. Indians have been free for six decades to write their own military history, but largely have chosen not to. For example, while the official versions of four major wars have been written, only 1947-48 has been published, and that took four decades. Thanks to the *Times of India*, the drafts of the 1962, 1965, and 1971 wars are available. What amazes is the lack of detail, ranging from

the level of battalions, squadrons, or warships doing the fighting to the highest echelons of national security. Individual writers have attempted to cover particular periods of modern Indian military history, but since they are denied basic materials, such as unit war diaries (themselves rather sparse), operational orders, memos, records and so on, they are limited in what they can achieve.

Speaking strictly for himself, this reviewer found the pre-1947 chapters of the book to be of the most interest simply because his focus has been post-1947 history. Even here the reviewer must utter a *mea culpa*: despite spending twenty years in India he never bothered to record interviews or search for documents. Of course, South Asian military history was for the reviewer an effort more to understand the national security processes of the present day rather than for the history itself. In 2005 the reviewer decided to atone for his sins of omission by setting up a website on Indian military history. He built it, but they did not come. In four years less than half a dozen contributors have sent material; most of what is on the site is written by the reviewer in time stolen from other tasks.

The reviewer knew nothing about the Indian National Army of World War II till he read the all-too-short chapter in this book. Accustomed to the conventional mindset of the Indian and Pakistan Armies, he studiously avoided the subject, considering the INA rebels as despicable mutineers who blotted the immaculate record of the World War II Indian Army, and the sooner forgotten the better. The chapter was a revelation of an alternate universe, making possible an argument that the INA were the true heroes of the Indian Army because as nationalists they challenged the legitimacy of the colonial power. It also becomes possible to appreciate why independent India's political leaders so distrusted the Indian military, despite the latter's continuation of the British tradition of unquestioning loyalty to the civil authority, and the completely apolitical nature of the officers and their men.

Similarly, the reviewer was quite ignorant of the role Indian money played in sustaining the East India Company's military forces. The Indians provided not just the manpower for subjugation of their own people, they also provided the cash, which at some level leaves one in awe of the British for their cleverness, and forces one to wonder why the Americans are so stupid as to pay vast sums for the dubious benefits of their colonial ventures in Indochina, West Asia, and Afghanistan.

The chapter on the Indian Army on the Northwest Frontier 1901-1947 is an absolute must-read for anyone interested in the latest Afghanistan War. If you are unfamiliar with the Frontier campaigns, as was this reviewer, the book is worth more than its price just for this one chapter. It is a frightening and fascinating discussion that forces one to utter, Yogi Berra-style—"It's déjà vu all over again." Read about the high military skills displayed by the "savages" of the day, and how they adapted to their lack of resources and used the terrain to their advantage—the authors could be speaking of the Taliban operates. Read about the vast supply trains and slow movement of the British-Indian Army, and you will learn everything you need to know about today's lack of success on the part of the US, NATO, and Pakistan Armies in today's war. This reviewer believed that the foremost need for casualty avoidance that dictates the war against Taliban was something modern. Not so, as this book clearly shows.

British-centered the pre-1947 material may be, but at least there are detailed records on which to draw. Not so for modern South Asian history, which is an insider's preserve. So only insiders can know, for example, that Neville Maxwell's (in)famous book India's China's War, banned in India for many years, is not just another book by an ignorant Britisher determined to trash India. It is actually *the* definitive and true account of the 1962 defeat because it is based on the Indian army's official—but suppressed even till today—inquiry into the disaster. The inquiry was loosely called the Henderson-Brooks Report, after the Indian general who investigated. Precisely three copies were made, evidence of how badly the Government of India and the Indian Army wanted to hide the truth from the Indian people. Two of the three copies are accounted for. But the third was taken by Henderson-Brooks himself and given to the young, aggressive British reporter, possibly for money.

Can that statement be proved in a court of law? No, even if there is any point to doing so. But Henderson-Brooks migrated to Australia shortly after completing the inquiry and the third copy was never seen again—until large parts appeared in Maxwell's book. Few Indians have bothered to read the book even when it became freely available, and it is always amusing to hear Indians reject it as a calumny, though it correctly places the blame for defeat where it belongs, and is effusive in its praise of the fighting capabilities of the Indian Army, though not of its generalship or political leadership.

Similarly, you cannot understand the 1971 War unless you understand its aims, which have never been revealed, officially or unofficially. The War was not about India reacting to a Pakistan attack on December 3, 1971 as is popularly believed, or even November 22, when what the book describes as a “clash” took place between Indian and Pakistan forces in East Bengal.

Almost from the start of the Pakistan civil war Prime Minister Indira Gandhi wanted overt Indian military intervention. Unusually for an Indian general, Sam Manekshaw, Chief of Army Staff, stood up to the political authority and refused to move until he was ready. He was ready on the night of November 21/22, when the Indian Army attacked East Pakistan in *full* force. The objective was to seize territory to permit the declaration of Bangladesh. It was outright war, not a clash. Till then Mrs. Gandhi had to be content with an ever-growing clandestine effort to undermine Pakistan Eastern Command. As part of this effort, Indian Border Security Force battalions were already fighting *inside* East Pakistan before the war began.

Pakistan’s attack in the West on December 3 was simply a badly failed attempt to preempt Phase 2 of the war, the invasion of West Pakistan. And Phase 3, the destruction and disarmament of Pakistan, never got anywhere near starting, because during Phase 2 itself the United States and the Soviet Union teamed up to stop what was not in their interest, the turning of Pakistan into a vassal state of India. There is no blame to any historian for not knowing this, because the great majority of Indian generals themselves did not, and still do not, know.

It was even more so with General K. Sundarji’s plan to complete what India had failed to do with Operation *Meghdoot*, the 1984 seizure by India of the Siachin Glacier ostensibly to preempt a Pakistan move. That too was just a prelude, to be followed by an Indian seizure of all North Kashmir. In the winter of 1986/87, General Sundarji and the Defense Minister Arun Singh planned to complete the job, and if Pakistan were to retaliate by crossing the international border, then India would do what it should have in 1971, which was to destroy Pakistan. The war plan was labeled an exercise to hide its purposes; to this day almost everyone thinks it was just an exercise.

Incredible as it may seem, the Prime Minister and Cabinet had no clue as to what was up, neither did Army and corps commanders or their subordinates. It was only

after the Navy and Air Chiefs complained to the President of India in January 1987 that the Army Chief planned to go to war without even informing the other services that this reviewer got wind of the story. Of course, by then the war had been cancelled for reasons beyond the ambit of this article. Even after several months of investigation, this reviewer did not get the full story because no one except the two protagonists actually knew what had happened. Perhaps the reviewer would have learned the truth earlier had he stayed in India, but he left in 1989, and it was only in 2008 that he got the final details. Till then he honestly believed General Sundarji and Arun Singh planned to provoke Pakistan to start a war in the West, and then retaliate, finishing the job the Prime Minister's mother had begun but abandoned sixteen years previous. Unless Arun Singh chooses to tell his side of the story some day, and it is unlikely he will, the world will never know. General Sundarji died without saying a word, leave alone writing anything down.

The point is simply this: when even insiders can be magnificently ignorant of the true state of India's military affairs, when the historical record is sketchy in the extreme, and when whatever records do exist are hidden from view, no one can blame any historian who fails to fully understand India's military history after 1947.

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