



Radhika Singha. *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labor in a Global Conflict, 1914-1921.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. Illustrations. 256 pp. \$59.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-752558-6.

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In *The Coolie's Great War: Indian Labour in a Global Conflict 1914-1921*, Radhika Singha expertly analyzes the work and experience of those who accompanied (or followed) the British military during the Great War: the mule drivers, cooks, water carriers, grass cutters, grooms, laundrymen, cobblers, sweepers, stretcher-bearers, porters, and construction workers. In so doing, she opens an important new channel of dialogue between labor and military histories. In framing the war period as 1914-21, the author commendably pushes us to reimagine the constructs and experiences of war. Singha uses a host of archival sources to retrieve the silenced histories of Indian menial laborers in the Great War: workers on whom the war effort of the British Empire was hugely dependent. This is a timely study which builds on recent scholarship on the roles of Indians in the Great War. While most of this scholarship has focused primarily on the military service of the so-called martial races, Singha expands this thriving field by forcing us to think about the class and caste hierarchies that were woven into the fabric of the empire and the Indian Army at the time of the Great War and that separated Indians from each other. The author has clearly done a commendable job of re-visioning the history of global conflict through the lens of Indian workers, whose labor was essential in supporting the military infrastructure of the British Empire.

I was delighted to see Singha highlighting the term “coolie” by including it in the title of her book. In my own work, I have pointed out that even though “coolie” has often been regarded as a stigmatized term, and more affluent descendants of manual laborers have sometimes sought to distance themselves from it, some former coolies are proud of their achievements and see dignity in their labor. It is a term that should be reclaimed and this book is important in that respect.

Coolie's Great War is divided into six chapters flanked by an introduction and an afterword. Chapter 1 provides the contextual settings within

which the work of the “Coolie Corps” was crafted and explores the issues surrounding the imperial use of “coolies” as war labor. Singha shows how the work of the Coolie Corps was simultaneously inclusive and yet alienating. On the one hand, it made certain racial, social, and caste barriers permeable by bringing soldiers from other castes, classes, and “races” closer to the “coolies,” who usually came from the so-called untouchable castes or tribal communities. Yet, on the other hand, they were marginalized and alienated by official procedures that constantly highlighted the hierarchies of work, ranking the martial bodies of soldiers above the subordinated bodies of auxiliary laborers, whose contribution was marginalized and sometimes feminized in contrast to the masculinity attributed to combat arms of the military. One of the most striking contributions of this chapter is Singha's revelation of how the Indian government and the Indian middle classes sent the “coolies” to the theaters of war within the framework of military organization, thus hiding them from the controversies around the export of indentured plantation labor that had begun peaking around the time of the Great War. The coolies were not civilian laborers but noncombatant members of the Indian Labor and Porter Corps: a force within the Indian Army. Singha notes that by including them in the anonymous ranks of an army that was always represented by images of combatants, administrators largely concealed the labor of wartime coolies from the pages of history.

In chapter 2, Singha profiles the protagonists of the book and their world of work. Highlighting the work and commitment coolies offered the empire, readers are left in no doubt that the followers were as much war heroes as those who engaged in combatant work. Not only did coolies sometimes have to work under fire, in such hazardous roles as battlefield stretcher-bearers, but they could also be subject to significant risks of disease, contamination, or accident while working in environments ranging from hospitals to construction sites or ammunition depots. Chapters 3 through 5 focus

largely on colonial anxieties following brief episodes in which recruiters encountered resistance from certain communities of followers. In these chapters, Singha also shows how India functioned as a sub-imperial center, within which British imperial foreign policies were often crafted and administered. Chapter 6 remarkably gives readers a chance to fathom how the war affected the social and bodily memory of those who served and how they carried these memories into a postwar theater of nationalist politics.

Themes of race, caste, and religion permeate all chapters of the book. Caste, however, appears as a central theme. In chapters 1, 2, and 4, Singha shows how caste concerns influenced the appointment, pay, treatment, and bodily experiences of workers in the wartime context. Themes of borders and mobilities permeate chapters 5 and 6 with Singha's focus on how men and commodities of war moved around in circuits of militarized zones from India to other scenes of the empire. Singha masterfully brings out the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in the various borders that workers had to navigate.

The greatest difficulty the book faces is in accessing the voices of the coolies themselves. Marginalized within both British imperial and Indian social hierarchies and without the practical means to produce their own texts, lower-class laborers are inevitably seen largely through the eyes of army officers and colonial administrators. Nevertheless, we do hear coolies' voices in chapters 4 and 5, often as a result of conflicts or resistance that administrators and record-keepers were unable to ignore. Moreover, Singha draws attention to coolies' agency by describing their use of the war service and the empire's need for their labor, not only to secure material benefits but also to raise their status within Indian society.

The wartime world that Singha opens to our gaze is inevitably a male-dominated world. However, Singha briefly discusses how the departure of military "followers" changed the labor scene for

the women and children back home in India. There is certainly room for more research in this area: the effects of the Great War, and of Indian participation in it, were felt not only on the battlefields of Europe or the Middle East but also in India itself. The effects of the war on gender relations in Britain are well documented, but there is still much to explore in relation to India.

Another area where Singha's work might inspire further research is labor corps from other parts of the empire. While the coolies of the Indian Army were the largest such group, there were several other labor corps, including a Chinese force of 140,000, a number of whom won gallantry awards and which, among other duties, played a significant role in burying the battlefield dead. A comparison of the experience of these forces and the impact of their service on their home countries could be very revealing.

Singha's work is a significant text, which will be important to scholars invested in the study of the British Empire, South Asia, colonialism, labor, and the Great War. But that said, the book could also appeal to a general audience who will surely enjoy the rich narrations about the little-known experience of the Coolie Corps in the Great War.

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