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1914-1918

CONFERENCE PAPER • SQN LDR RANA CHHINA



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Bhadralok Warriors: The Bengali Military Experience in the First World War

Abstract

The British Indian Army was one of the strongest pillars of the colonial edifice in India. One of the central ideologies around which the army was structured was the martial races theory which restricted recruitment to a narrow demographic base. The unprecedented manpower demands of the Great War put traditional recruiting areas under great strain and opened the doors for enlistment from many classes hitherto labelled “non-martial”. Among the latter, none was more demonized by the colonial elite than the ethnic Bengali. Long derided as soft and effeminate, the educated, politically aware Bengali bhadralok was the antithesis of everything the colonial state determined its “martial” Indian soldiery to be. Yet, as the war progressed, Bengali representations for a more active role in the war effort began to bear fruit. Grudgingly allowed into the ranks, first as a volunteer ambulance unit, and then as regular soldiers in a “class” unit, the Bengali military experiment was unique in the Indian colonial experience. Doomed to failure, the Bengali unit was disbanded shortly after the war ended. This paper seeks to trace the history of Bengali involvement in the colonial military during the Great War and to examine the cultural, political and military factors that led to its inevitable denouement.

Profile

Rana TS Chhina served in the Indian Air Force as a helicopter pilot. A recipient of the prestigious Macgregor Medal for best military reconnaissance in 1986, he had the distinction of carrying out the highest landing in the world by a medium-lift class of helicopter. He is currently Secretary of the United Service Institution of India Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research and Vice President of the Indian Military Historical Society, UK. He is also a member of the IAF Aerospace Museum Apex Steering Committee and the Government of India’s Archival Advisory Board. The author of a number of books, he is presently a member of the joint USI-MEA Steering Committee responsible for coordinating international and national commemoration of India’s participation in the First World War in connection with the centenary of the conflict.