

Global histories

a student
journal

In An Alien City: American Soldiers in Wartime Calcutta (1942-1946)
Suchintan Das

DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2021.391>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 7, No. 1 (May 2021), pp. 140-167.
ISSN: 2366-780X

Copyright © 2021 Suchintan Das



License URL: <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>

Publisher information:

'Global Histories: A Student Journal' is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. 'Global Histories' is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

Freie Universität Berlin
Global Histories: A Student Journal
Friedrich-Meinecke-Institut
Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

**In An Alien City: American
Soldiers in Wartime
Calcutta (1942-1946)**

by
SUCHINTAN DAS

ABSTRACT

Calcutta had emerged as one of the most important fulcrums for coordinating the movement of men, material, and money during the Second World War. The advent of US troops in the city from 1942 onwards led to an unprecedented cultural encounter. This paper argues that the actual lived experiences of the American soldiers in Calcutta provided a stark contrast to their prescribed norms of conduct. This paper further contends that with their arrival, civilian-military relations were substantially reconfigured and the image of the British Empire was considerably damaged. An attempt has been made to set in relief the divergent experiences of the White American and African American troops besides mapping their experiences of and responses to the Bengal Famine. Lastly, this paper seeks to interrogate the globalizing nature of the Second World War by looking at Calcutta as a site of spontaneous and uneven cultural exchange where the US soldiers functioned as national emissaries and wartime cultural conduits.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Suchintan Das is pursuing an undergraduate degree in History from St. Stephen's College, Delhi. He is a Rhodes Scholar-Elect from India for 2021 to the University of Oxford where he intends to study German civilian internment in India during the Second World War.

“The last time when war had broken out...prices had gone up; food grains had become costlier. But it was nothing like the ominous possibility that looms large this time. Calcutta is being bombed, aircrafts keep flying over our heads, everything seems to be so different now.”
— *Narayan Gangopadhyay, Upanibesh*¹

“If you come here with an open mind you will find Calcutta is “Teek-Hai” (Okay). Of course, it’s just like visiting any big city back home: you can have a good time, or a bad time, depending on how well you take care of yourself.” — *Brig. Gen. R.R. Neyland, The Calcutta Key*²

INTRODUCTION: G.I. JOE IN THE CITY OF JOY

Death had been made “a part and parcel of everyday life”, reflected the author Sharadindu

Bandyopadhyay, when describing the grim realities of the Second World War in Calcutta.³ It was during this time, the author Manindra Gupta recounted in his memoirs, that “American soldiers of both races—white and black—with their plentiful equipment, appeared like aliens from another planet in the city.”⁴ Calcutta was a major city of the British Indian Empire—the erstwhile capital—which had become uniquely vulnerable to Japanese aggression after the fall of Singapore in February 1942. Defence of India in general, and Calcutta in particular, was of paramount strategic importance for ensuring an Allied victory. Apart from being the nerve centre of logistics and communications in eastern India, Calcutta was the major British port overlooking the Bay of Bengal, and was also the closest Indian city to Burma and China.⁵ Moreover, as Yasmin Khan notes, even though it was neither a home front nor a war zone, “India was nevertheless critical to the war effort as a source

- 1 Narayan Gangopadhyay, *Narayan Gangopadhyay Rachanabali (Vol. III)*, eds. Asha Devi and Arijit Gangopadhyay (Kolkata: Mitra & Ghosh, 1980), 94. All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.
- 2 *The Calcutta Key* (Guidebook for US Military Personnel in Calcutta, Prepared by Services of Supply Base Section Two Information and Education Branch United States Army Forces in India-Burma, 1945), http://cbi-theater.com/calcuttakey/calcutta_key.html.

- 3 Sharadindu Bandyopadhyay, *Sharadindu Omnibus (Vol. II)*, ed. Pratul Chandra Gupta (Kolkata: Ananda, 1971), 1.
- 4 Manindra Gupta, *Akshay Mulberry (Complete)* (Kolkata: Ababhas, 2009), 194.
- 5 Director of the Service, Supply, and Procurement Division War Department General Staff. *Logistics in World War II: Final Report of the Army Service Forces (A Report to the Under Secretary of War and the Chief of Staff)* (Center of Military History, United States Army: Washington D.C., 1993), 46-47.

of military manpower and industrial production.”⁶ It was in this context that Calcutta emerged as one of the most important fulcrums for coordinating the movement of men, material, and money in the China-Burma-India theater (hereinafter CBI). The city doubled as a necessary transit point for Allied troops pouring into Assam and Burma from across the subcontinent, and more importantly as a centre of rest and recreation for troops returning from assignments at the front. The arrival of American troops (popularly known as G.I.s) from February 15, 1942 onwards set in motion a series of administrative, economic, and demographic changes in Calcutta.⁷ With this influx, the cosmopolitan character of the city was heightened and the stage was set for an unprecedented cultural encounter that took many forms and had many faces. Calcutta, its urbanscapes, amenities, people, and the alien US troops were the primary protagonists in this encounter.

The normative experience of an average American G.I. in Calcutta was sought to be shaped by the guidelines issued and restrictions enforced by the US Military

Command, the British Colonial Government, and the American Red Cross (hereinafter ARC). Needless to say, their actual lived experiences in wartime Calcutta differed substantially. The first section of this paper aims to contextualize and juxtapose these varied experiences, as recorded (penned and photographed) and remembered by the American troops. In the second section, their perceptions of Calcutta and interactions with its people will be examined to understand to what extent and how civilian-military relations were sought to be reconfigured. The policy of racial segregation in the US military will be treated as an important fault-line to find out if there was a discernible divergence in the experiences of White and African American troops stationed in the city in the third section. An endeavour will be made to gauge how far the American soldiers were aware of the Bengal Famine and how they responded to it in the fourth section. Lastly, by way of a conclusion, this paper will try to interrogate the ‘globalizing’ nature of the Second World War, by looking at Calcutta as a site of spontaneous cultural exchange where US soldiers functioned as national emissaries and wartime cultural conduits.

6 Yasmin Khan, “Sex in an Imperial War Zone: Transnational Encounters in Second World War India,” *History Workshop Journal* 76 (Spring 2012): 241, <https://doi.org/10.1093/hwj/dbr026>.

7 Yasmin Khan, *India At War: The Subcontinent and the Second World War* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 324.



FIGURE 1: “The American Red Cross Burra Club, leave center for GI’s and recreation spot for all enlisted men. The unpretentious façade belies an interior complete with dormitory, snack bar, restaurant, music room, games room, lounge, barber and tailor shops, wrapping service department, and post exchange.” Photograph and caption by Clyde Waddell. (Available in the public domain and free of known copyright restrictions: <https://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0002/html/mscoll802.html>)

THUS SPOKE UNCLE SAM: PRESCRIPTIONS, PROSCRIPTIONS, AND TRANSGRESSIONS

From 1942 onwards, more American soldiers came to India “than would actually see fighting on the fronts of Burma.”⁸ Some 150,000 G.I.s poured into India between 1942 and 1945 with the veritable goal of ‘saving China’, large parts of which

8 Khan, *India At War*, 142.

were under Japanese occupation.⁹ They were to be stationed in India with the primary tasks of airlifting war material and food aid into China, besides constructing a land supply route through Burma—the Ledo Road—so as to relieve the beleaguered Chinese.¹⁰ In doing so, the American G.I.s “found themselves in alien and unknown landscapes, dealing with Indian traders, merchants and craftsmen, trying to thrash out a war plan in a densely populated, and unfamiliar, part of the world.”¹¹ As Ian Stephens recounted, by 1943, Calcutta:

was a great war-base... a vortex of humanity into which men doing war-jobs from all over the world, uniformed or not, were being sucked... American forces started arriving; and with their high living standards and total ignorance of India probably felt most alien of all.¹²

All of a sudden, metropolitan cities in the subcontinent were flooded with American troops, who were disconcerted by the stark realities of Indian life that were thrust upon them. In the words of Sergeant Burton Lester Cochran, “I found one thing—a very poor travel position. The—them seats on the—on the—we were using were, I think, about third

class. You see, they class everything over there [in India].”¹³ Calcutta was no exception. It was described by Sergeant Lowell H. Russell as “the debarking center for the United States for practically all of the military in India. One can imagine the crowded conditions and hyper.”¹⁴

Bewilderment inflected the average US soldier’s first impression of India. As Yasmin Khan put it, “The ‘real’ India was a contrast to the jolly, sanitised newsreels which troops had been shown prior to their departure, in which they had been promised tropical fruits, constant sunshine and cheap shopping.”¹⁵ This reaction was anticipated well by the US Military Command. Together with the American Red Cross in India and the British Colonial Administration, they sought to mitigate the shock and decisively shape the experience of the American troops in India.¹⁶

⁹ Ibid, 267.

¹⁰ Ibid, 259-260.

¹¹ Ibid, 142.

¹² Ian Stephens, *Monsoon Morning* (London: Benn, 1966), 102-103.

¹³ Burton Lester Cochran Collection (AFC/2001/001/26839), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.26839/>.

¹⁴ Lowell H. Russell Collection (AFC/2001/001/10225), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.10225/>.

¹⁵ Khan, *India At War*, 144.

¹⁶ One of the ways in which this was sought to be done was by deploying female Red Cross workers to provide much-needed care, camaraderie, and entertainment for the benefit of war-weary and homesick soldiers. Virginia Allen was one such ‘G.I. Jill’ stationed in Calcutta, who served as a radio

For this purpose, they came up with pocket guides, written in a manner of providing friendly advice, and containing norms of conduct the G.I.s were supposed to adhere to, during their stay in India. These guides were quite detailed, providing extensive information about almost everything that the American soldiers in India needed to know—ranging from commentaries on the Indian caste system to locations of nearby departmental stores. Needless to say, there were pocket guides for Calcutta as well, one of which, called *The Calcutta Key*, listed out the following prescriptions which deserve to be quoted in full:

TRY THESE “DO’S” FOR SIZE:

1. Avoid political discussions.
2. Act here with the same common courtesy you use at home.
3. Guide the other fellow’s conduct; ‘breaks’ reflect on all.
4. Replace “Hey you!” with “Bhai!” or “Brother!”
5. Discuss Indian customs out of their sight and hearing.
6. You’re in Rome. Keep your ways; let the Romans have theirs.
7. Keep your temper; the Indian will keep his.

personality and performed in plays all over India, from 1944 to 1946. See Sara K. Eskridge, “G.I. Jinny,” *W&M* 83, no. 3 (Spring 2018), <https://magazine.wm.edu/issue/2018-spring/index.php>. I am grateful to Shayna Allen for drawing my attention to this.

8. An attitude of respect leads to ‘breaks’ being forgiven.

9. Take pictures only of the laboring classes (and then only if they consent); upper-class Indians don’t like to be photographed.

10. Look at passing British and Indian women without tossing remarks at them. Four out of five women over here are offended by “yoo-hoos.”¹⁷

Political neutrality, courteous manners, appreciation of difference, respect for societal norms, and tolerance in conversations were recommended. Yet, Uncle Sam’s prescriptions and proscriptions went far beyond these recommendations, which were not always upheld.

Incidences of transgression were not infrequent and can be examined under four diagnostic rubrics—politics, shopping, delinquency, and prostitution.¹⁸ *A Pocket Guide to India* declared, “India is a complex country, difficult for people like ourselves to understand. It is a country whose people are going through a far-reaching political upheaval. They, as we did over 160 years ago, seek to gain political independence.”¹⁹ Notwithstanding

17 *The Calcutta Key*.

18 This is not to suggest that the incidences of transgression were limited to these domains.

19 *A Pocket Guide to India* (For use of US Military Personnel in India, Prepared by Special Service Division, Army Service Forces of United States Army), <https://cbi-theater.com/booklet/>

this obvious parallel, American troops were expected to steer clear of Indian politics. Political discussions on the Indian situation were outright discouraged. According to one guide:

Americans are in India to fight the Axis. You should stick to that and not try to settle the Indian political problem. What we want is to cooperate with both the British and Indians to beat the Japanese. Your place is to keep your eyes and ears open and your mouth shut.²⁰

Another handbook cautioned, “The political situation in India is not easily understood and a short stay in India is not long enough to be informed about it.”²¹ One of the prime reasons why the top brass of the US military desired the G.I.s’ political ignorance was the sheer complexity of Indian politics of the time, which they perceived to be too deeply enmeshed in religion.²² For the British Colonial Government, while the presence of American soldiers was reassuring on the one hand, their possible undesirable involvement in local politics was a matter of concern on the other.²³ Yet, the American

troops were hardly insulated from the undercurrents of Indian politics.

The Indian nationalist leader Jayaprakash Narayan appealed to these “soldiers of freedom” to “understand and appreciate the [Indians’] fight for freedom” and to let “[their] countrymen, [their] leaders and [their] government know the truth about India.”²⁴ The truth, however, was not always conveyed to the G.I.s by the US Military Command. For example, they were told that “Indians want us to win. No group in this country has any love for the axis.”²⁵ At this time, one of the most prominent Indian political figures, Subhas Chandra Bose, was parleying with the German government in Berlin, and his speeches from the Azad Hind Radio Centre were regularly reaching his followers in India, who did not necessarily desire an Allied victory. Moreover, American soldiers did talk politics with the local people, when the need arose. In his memoirs, veteran G.I. Malcolm Harvey Stilson recounted conversing for long periods on war, peace, business, art, politics, and more while purchasing gems from a Calcutta jeweller.²⁶

24 Srinath Raghavan, *The Most Dangerous Place*, 113.

25 ‘Know Your India’, *C.B.I. Roundup* I, no. 9, November 12, 1942, <http://cbitheater.com/roundup/roundup111242.html>.

26 Malcolm Harvey Stilson Collection (AFC/2001/001/02056), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <http://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.02056/>.

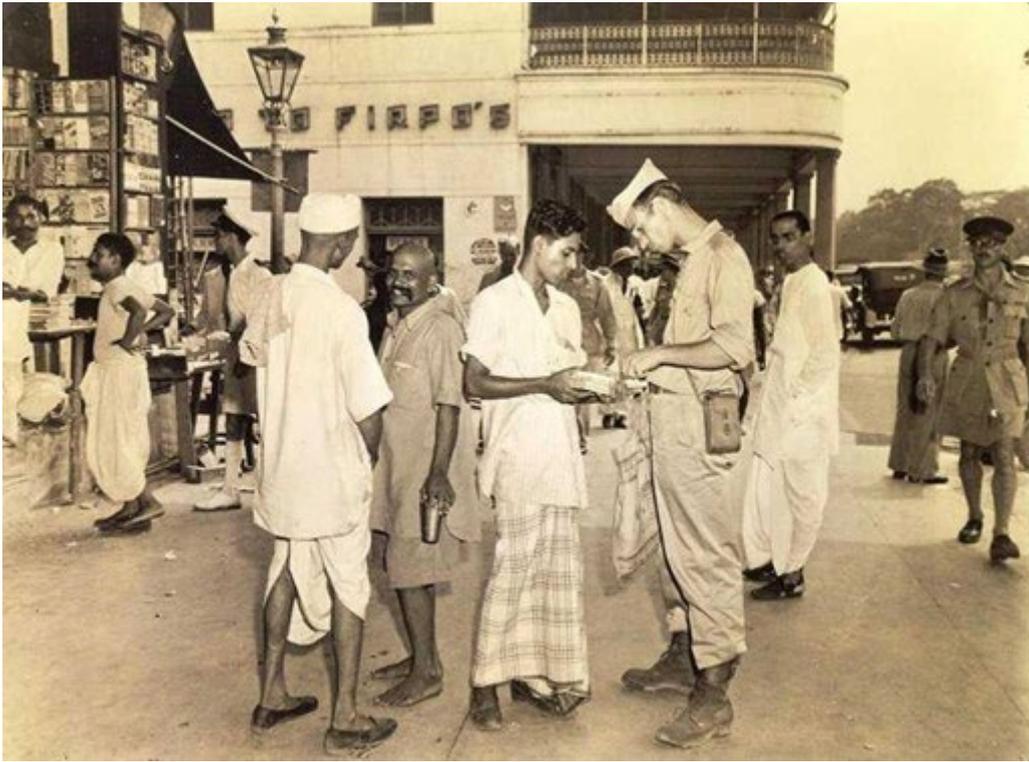
[guide-to-india.html](#).

20 Ibid.

21 Khan, *India At War*, 146.

22 *A Pocket Guide to India*.

23 Tathagata Niyogi, “Wartime Calcutta: Walking a Gut-Wrenching Disaster,” *The Calcutta Blog*, <https://medium.com/the-calcutta-blog/wartime-calcutta-walking-a-gut-wrenching-disaster-b12e9d04b3aa>.



Politics, though officially proscribed in discussions, did percolate through occasional banter, often while shopping.

Calcutta, with its attractive marketplaces, offered ample opportunities for the stationed soldiers to shop for their daily needs and also to indulge themselves with the occasional souvenir. *The Calcutta Key* (hereinafter the *Key*) warned the G.I.s about the perils of bargaining. In fact, it was quite categorical in its suggestion:

In all the other stores and in the markets or bazars a deliberately high price is quoted to you for an article, and it is then

FIGURE 2: “The GI tourist here ponders the purchase of a ‘rare gem’ --- a typical camera study of life on Chowringhee during the war. Firpo’s famous restaurant is in the background, and dhoti-clad Indians and a British officer in shorts lend a bit of atmosphere.”

Photograph and caption by Clyde Waddell. (Available in the public domain and free of known copyright restrictions: <https://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0002/html/mscoll802.html>).

up to you to argue the price down to somewhere within reason - without in the process losing your reason. You seldom win. If you leave any shop in India confident that you out-smarted the salesman, then be sure of this: YOU DIDN'T! You can profit by the experience (paid for) of other American soldiers. Buy sound products in reliable stores at fixed prices.²⁷

According to the *Key*, that the Americans would inevitably be fooled was a foregone conclusion. Nonetheless, the G.I.s continued to indulge in bargaining and did make purchases from shops in Calcutta other than those officially recommended. So much so, that the *Key* went on to add:

In partial contradiction of foregoing advice, and advocated as a part of your adventures in India, don't neglect to try bargaining (in a small way) as the accepted minor sport east of Suez. But in doing so, avoid street peddlers and side-street stalls and instead, visit the New Market where you will find a real interest in the bazar itself as well as get a kick out of horse trading with the salesman over their great variety of wares.²⁸

The lure of the 'oriental' market was too strong to resist.

²⁷ *The Calcutta Key*.

²⁸ *The Calcutta Key*.

Haggling had to be tacitly accepted as a rather innocuous wartime distraction.

In spite of repeated reminders to the American troops in Calcutta to put their best foot forward, occasional delinquent behaviour on their part had the possibility of heralding ominous repercussions. For instance, Benod Behari Basu (younger brother of the Bengali revolutionary Benoy Krishna Basu and later known as the Father of Boxing in Bihar), remembered having knocked out an American G.I. with a sharp blow to the chin, for passing objectionable comments about a few Indian women at Esplanade. A crowd gathered quickly, and the fellow American soldiers left the site with their injured mate, without confronting Mr. Basu.²⁹ Such incidences were hardly rare. As Yasmin Khan notes, "[p]etty conflict between soldiers, local townsmen, and villagers featured routinely in newspapers by 1944, and was particularly noted as a problem in Bengal and Assam."³⁰ Incidences of serious crimes were not absent either. When an Anglo-Indian boy, Eglind Roze, attempted to steal an American military-vehicle parked near the ARC Burra Club at Dalhousie Square, he was shot to death by a few American soldiers. His family had to be immediately compensated to avoid a public embarrassment of the

²⁹ Personal correspondence with Prof. Amit Dey (to whom Mr. Basu had narrated this anecdote in the late 1970s) on June 28, 2020.

³⁰ Khan, *India At War*, 274-275.

US Military Forces.³¹

One of the leading faces of Hindu belligerents in the Calcutta Riots of 1946, Gopal Mukhopadhyay, later claimed to have procured two American pistols and a few grenades from American G.I.s, back in 1945: “If you paid two hundred and fifty rupees or bought them a bottle of whiskey, the soldiers would give you a .45 and a hundred cartridges.”³² Illegal sale of arms and ammunition was certainly not approved of by the US military command. At least a few American soldiers were involved in this practice nevertheless. In Calcutta, the docklands, which were considered absolutely essential in the war effort, emerged as the prime centre of contraband and conflicts. As a policeman stationed in that area later recounted:

the docks boiled with activity (and crime) as vast amounts of military ordinance poured in, and the Burma front and Nationalist China (via the Ledo Road) were kept supplied by troop and ‘military special’ trains through the Herculean efforts of the East Bengal and Assam-Bengal Railways. Soldiers, sailors and airmen from all the Allied nations wandered the streets in search

of “rest & recreation” which usually consisted of a feed, a fight and sex (in any order) inevitably necessitating much police intervention.³³

Prostitution also required much policing in wartime Calcutta. In the words of Peter R. Moore, “The Calcutta police were responsible for interning aliens from the Axis nations—including foreign sex workers from the European brothels in Karaya and the Japanese bordello in Watgunge.”³⁴ Needless to say, none of these locales fell within the area which was “in bounds” for the American troops, i.e. the “area which, in general, [lay] south of Bow Bazar Street and west of Lower Circular Road up to its intersection with Bow Bazar Street.”³⁵ The *Key* warned G.I.s about the possibility of contracting venereal diseases in its characteristically inimitable manner:

As in any port city in the Orient, Calcutta is riddled with venereal diseases. Studies show that professional prostitutes are 150% infected (half have one and the other half have two). Even in the native population

31 Ibid.

32 Debjani Sengupta, “A City Feeding on Itself”: Testimonies, Histories, and Literature on ‘Direct Action Day’, Calcutta, 1946”, 17, https://shodhganga.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/10603/18707/6/06_chapter%201.pdf.

33 Janam Mukherjee, “Hungry Bengal: War, Famine, Riots, and the End of Empire 1939-1946,” (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2011), 226.

34 Peter R. Moore, “Calcutta’s War Police”, *The Telegraph*, March 21, 2010, <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/west-bengal/calcutta-s-war-police/cid/1269986>.

35 *The Calcutta Key*.

the rate is well over 50%. That good-looking amateur whom you think you convinced by your personal charm may be just the baby to hand you a gift package—unwrapped.³⁶

This, however, was advice that fell on deaf ears. In fact, the language of this guide was simply not found to be proscriptive enough. On the contrary, visiting the brothel was perceived as something that was tacitly condoned by even the top brass. The colonial administration considered the levels of venereal diseases to be “appallingly high” in Bengal and took cognizance of the widespread publicity of prostitution in Calcutta. The fear of racial miscegenation also led to political ferment and the development of anti-G.I. feelings among the Indian populace of the city.³⁷ Yasmin Khan provides some idea about the increase in policing demand that these ‘forbidden’ brothel-visits necessitated: “[t]wo hundred extra Military Police were recruited in Calcutta at a time of extreme manpower shortage to patrol brothels and unusually the military invested in civilian clinics.”³⁸ According to India Command’s consultant venereologist, Eric Prebble,

[T]he Military Police was ‘completely inadequate to deal with the situation’ and the

local police shied away from disciplining foreign soldiers. ‘Pimps and touts abounded wherever the troops were stationed or on leave’, and taxi and rickshaw drivers and men employed in the cantonments acted as local middlemen.³⁹

As a consequence of these transgressions, by the end of the war, Calcutta would have one of the highest rates of venereal diseases in the world, more than many cities which were actually located in war fronts.⁴⁰

THE CITY OF DI(STINK)TION: PEOPLE, PLACES, AND PERCEPTIONS

Calcutta was not just a centre for coordinating war efforts in eastern India, as it also offered many wartime distractions for G.I.s who were stationed in the city. The sights, smells, and sounds that the American soldiers came across here shaped their perceptions of the city to a great extent. They came in frequent contact with civilians and often developed friendly relations with them.⁴¹ While the British troops

39 E.E. Prebble, ‘Venereal Diseases in India,’ *Sexually Transmitted Infections* 22, no. 2 (June 1946): 55-62, <https://doi.org/10.1136/sti.22.2.55>.

40 Khan, *India At War*, 149.

41 For understanding the discernible divergence in the experiences of White and African American troops stationed in the city due to the US military’s policy of racial

36 *The Calcutta Key*.

37 Khan, *India At War*, 150.

38 *Ibid*, 241.

were more reserved in their dealings with Indians, American G.I.s were much more easy-going and tended to blend in better with the local populace. The *Key* offered some sound advice in this regard:

You do see that the Indian is different from yourself. Granted. But - do you see that that difference between the two of you does not give you a reason to criticize the Indian?...To repeat, yes, the Indian is different. But instead of merely noticing that difference and judging it hastily, suppose we take a good long second look and attempt to understand the fellow's customs and ways of living. Remember, it is an age-old failure to laugh at things that you do not understand.⁴²

This sermon, however, did not always prevent the G.I.s from having a little fun at the expense of their Indian acquaintances. In spite of this, or perhaps because of this informality that characterized American-Indian interactions in wartime Calcutta, military-civilian relationships underwent a reconfiguration. While

segregation, see Nico Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism: The Shared Struggle for Freedom in United States and India* (Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, 2012), and Gerald Horne, *The End of Empires: African Americans and India* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2008).

42 *The Calcutta Key*.

on the one hand, British troops were more squarely identified as part of the 'occupying forces', American soldiers were perceived to have much more of a 'touristy' air about them. This becomes amply clear from the fact that the ARC Burra Club organized free tours of Calcutta for the American G.I.s, whose photographs documented the urbanscapes of and life in the city in a very tourist-like fashion.

The street-life of Calcutta was effectively captured in photographs by many G.I.s.⁴³ The tram, the double decker bus, the ubiquitous stray cow, carts drawn by oxen, the hand-pulled rickshaw, barbers and vendors, mendicants and urchins, and bootblacks and washermen featured prominently in John H. Smith's photographs of Calcutta.⁴⁴ His collection also contained pictures of one 'Mr. Nunday', presumably an Indian friend, whose daughter accompanied them on a visit to the Jain Temple of Calcutta. The 'exotic' snake charmers had a pride of place in most American photo albums. However, nobody

43 See "Bob Fagelson's Images of India," *China-Burma-India: Remembering the Forgotten Theater of World War II*, <http://cbi-theater.com/bf-india/india.html>; "Glenn Garrelt's India," *China-Burma-India: Remembering the Forgotten Theater of World War II*, <http://cbi-theater.com/glenn/india.html>.

44 John H. Smith, "Images of India: 1944-1946," in *China-Burma-India: Remembering the Forgotten Theater of World War II*, <http://cbi-theater.com/164th/164th.html>.



FIGURE 3: “A Group of GI’s take a close look at the snake-wallah’s hooded cobra. Both the snake and his master are good specimens. The fangs of course have been removed so the reptile can strike at will, scaring no one.” Photograph and caption by Clyde Waddell. (Available in the public domain and free of known copyright restrictions: <https://openn.library.upenn.edu/Data/0002/html/mscoll802.html>).

documented G.I. life in Calcutta better than the military photographer (and later Press Attaché to Lord Mountbatten) Clyde Waddell. Some of his photographs were elegant aerial shots of the city. Many featured the American soldiers manoeuvring their way through the streets. Most depicted scenes from regular Indian life with remarkable honesty and somewhat of an ‘Orientalist’ tinge—but more importantly, all were accompanied by his idiosyncratic annotations.⁴⁵ It is from Waddell that

45 Clyde Waddell, *A Yank’s Memories of Calcutta* (Houston: Self-published, 1947), <http://hdl.library.upenn.edu/1017/d/>

one gets to know that a co-pilot had to accompany a taxi-driver (almost always a Sikh) in Calcutta from 1944 onwards, “following an affray in which a soldier knifed a driver.”⁴⁶ Another photograph featured two Indian movie actresses, Binota Bose and Rekha Mullick, both of whom were “well educated and prefer[red] American books, pictures.”⁴⁷ Waddell captured the contradictions of urban life seamlessly. His collection featured temples and burning ghats, street performers and Indian women clad in sarees, the chaotic stock exchange and “patty-cake annies”,⁴⁸ addicts of the Chinatown opium dens and G.I.s bargaining with the “red street lassies”.⁴⁹

The commotion and filth of the city hardly went unnoticed. The first thing that the American troops registered upon their arrival in Calcutta was the din of the railway station. In the words of Malcolm H. Stilson, “The station is a cavernous place in which thousands of people literally dwell, and where everything from coition to childbirth takes place.”⁵⁰ The absence of sanitary conditions in Calcutta annoyed the G.I.s, who found the clean gurudwara

to be a welcome respite, and developed much admiration for the Sikhs. This sentiment was so strong that Stilson went to the extent of calling Calcutta “a city of di(stink)tion” in his memoirs. One of his poems captured this emotion quite effectively:

Dawn walks the streets of
Calcutta
Swathed in a grey swirling cloak
Frightening the cockroach
Into his crack.⁵¹

This was corroborated by Waddell in the caption of one of his photographs:

One of the commonest street vendors is the Paan wallah, or betel nut vendor. One tenth of the world chews the mixture of leaf, spices, nut and other variable ingredients. Chief by-product of the habit is a reddish splatter of stain, indiscriminately spat upon walls and sidewalks in Calcutta by carefree chewers.⁵²

Lack of hygiene was not the only cause of worry for the American soldiers in Calcutta. The tropical weather added to their woes, so much so that *CBI Roundup* (“weekly newspaper published by and for the men of the United States Army Forces in China, Burma, and India”) ran a hilarious weather report about

[medren/9949134203503681](https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-1234567/v1).

46 Waddell, *A Yank’s Memories of Calcutta*.

47 Ibid.

48 Nickname given by G.I.s to women who dried dung-cakes to later use them as fuel.

49 Waddell, *A Yank’s Memories of Calcutta*.

50 Malcolm Harvey Stilson Collection (AFC/2001/001/02056).

51 Ibid.

52 Waddell, *A Yank’s Memories of Calcutta*.

snowfall in Indian cities in the middle of July.⁵³

One crucial axis along which American-Indian interactions took place in wartime Calcutta was that of providing and receiving service. According to Yasmin Khan, “American soldiers and airmen in India often had their own ‘native bearers’, locally recruited manservants who swept, dusted, polished shoes and, fetched and carried tea and snacks, thus helping, as one GI magazine joked, ‘make a perfectly lazy man out of a soldier.’”⁵⁴ More often than not, these bearers were christened with ‘comical’ nicknames, and the G.I.s joked about their mannerisms and unsuccessful attempts to pick up a few English expressions in a bid to secure greater wartime opportunities and camaraderie from the relatively friendlier Americans:

Our bearer’s name is “Smokey.” We’ve forgotten why we call him that, but there are no objections, since his real name is “Pabitra Mondel.” Aside from his regular duties, Smokey spends most of his time learning GI ways...“Sahib – Bird, Sahib – Cow, Sahib – House, Sahib – ABCDEFY,” and so it goes all day. Smokey is learning English. Things have changed in our barracks. No longer does Smokey roam

around picking up Cigarette butts and trash. No longer does Smokey sweep the porch. Smokey is learning English.⁵⁵

The British soldiers were envious of the fact that their better-paid American counterparts could afford to have personal bearers and would often make pointed remarks at what they perceived as a juvenile American dependence on their Indian manservants. A member of the *CBI Roundup*’s staff noted this rather sportily in a report written for *Life* magazine: “Hullo, dear. Did your bearer brush your teeth and tuck you in last night? So far no one has found any better answer than the simple ‘Yes, he did.’ After all, he might have.”⁵⁶

The soldier-bearer relationships often grew mutually paternalistic. According to Yasmin Khan:

Sometimes soldiers were invited back to local homes and introduced to families, or the soldiers helped pay for the cost of weddings or for the education of young children. For most of the people who worked as servants on airfields, at barracks and bases, the job gave them opportunities to

53 ‘Weather SOARS ABOVE ZERO’, *CBI Roundup* I, no. 44, July 15, 1943, <http://cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup071543.html>.

54 Khan, *India At War*, 148.

55 Jack Shelton, ‘Smokey Takes A Furlough’, *Hellbird Herald* I, no. 2, February 20, 1945, http://cbi-theater.com/superfort/hellbird_022045.html.

56 ‘Dear Mom, I Got A Valet’, *Life*, November 30, 1942, <http://cbi-theater.com/life-roundup/life-roundup.html>.

learn some English and to earn inflated wages. For the most entrepreneurial, contact with the bases was even more lucrative: an opportunity to act as guide, procurer of alcohol and women, interpreter and general right-hand man.⁵⁷

However, the potential for conflict was not entirely absent either. American soldiers could not always comprehend the prevalent segregation of labour on the basis of caste and often ended up misunderstanding the refusal on part of their bearers to perform certain duties:

One American officer fired his bearer when that worthy refused to remove a small piece of lint from the floor. "Am I a donkey, horse, nothing?" the bearer heatedly demanded... Righteously angry at what he considered the "snobbishness" of the bearer, the officer refused to give him a letter of reference and thereby incurred the enmity of his and all other bearers in the neighborhood...[who] formed a tight little union and no one would work for the offender until he wrote the chit.⁵⁸

Another domain in which Americans often brushed shoulders with Indians was that of sports. The

CBI Roundup ran a story on how the American tennis star (and a Special Service Officer in the CBI) Lt. Hal Surface defended his East Indian Lawn Tennis Championship title by defeating the top seeded Indian player, Ghaus Mohammed, in the finals.⁵⁹ Another top wartime sporting attraction of Calcutta was the All Allied Boxing Crowns, involving service boxers from the American, British, and Indian forces fighting to attain the annual glory.⁶⁰ In addition, boxing offered an avenue for civilians to come in close contact with the American troops. Mr. Asaf Ali, a Calcutta University Blue (who later worked in Air India), practiced boxing with the American G.I.s and improved his English by frequently conversing with them.⁶¹

Another prominent site for wartime distraction and American-Indian interaction in Calcutta was The Grand Hotel. The destination provided a space where the soldiers could "'Forget the War!', with Teddy Weatherford on the piano in the American Cocktail Bar, Chinese jugglers, raffles, quizzes, and 'hand-picked dance hostesses'."⁶² As

59 'Surface Defends Indian Net Title', *CBI Roundup* II, no. 17, January 6, 1944, <http://cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup010644.html>.

60 'Ringside at Calcutta', *Yank* (The US Army Weekly) CBI Edition, June 2, 1945, http://cbi-theater.com/yankcbi/yank_cbi_5.html#RINGSIDE.

61 Personal correspondence with Prof. Amit Dey (Mr. Ali's nephew) on June 17, 2020.

62 Khan, *India At War*, 156.

57 Khan, *India At War*, 148-149.

58 'Dear Mom, I Got A Valet', *Life*, November 30, 1942.

mentioned earlier, the American soldiers provided a stark contrast to their British counterparts, both within and beyond the city. Among other places of elite colonial recreation, “[i]n the clubs of Simla, the rumours of increasing American designs on South Asia, the strength of American imports and the sexual irresistibility of American men all mingled together to create profound wariness about the new allies.”⁶³ Some G.I.s even got married to Jewish women in Calcutta.⁶⁴ Yasmin Khan has rightly argued that “[t]he purchasing power and superhero stature of the American GIs made much of the Raj look fossilised and diminished.”⁶⁵ This metaphor can be pushed a bit further to claim that the dynamism and affability of the American soldiers in their interactions with the Indians made much of the Raj appear rather debilitated and overtly paranoid. Through their varied interactions with the local Indian populace in Calcutta, the American soldiers ended up substantially reconfiguring civilian-military relationships—undermining the unmitigable distance and inescapable hierarchy that existed between the colonial officers who commanded the British Indian Army and the ordinary Indian people.

63 Khan, *India At War*, 151.

64 “List of Calcutta Jewish women who married American and British Servicemen: Compiled by Nancy Pine and Flower Silliman,” *Recalling Jewish Calcutta*, <http://www.jewishcalcutta.in/items/show/1400>.

65 Khan, *India At War*, 151.

JIM CROW IN CALCUTTA: TWO ARMIES OR ONE?

Out of about 150,000 American troops who were stationed in India during the Second World War, 22,000 were African Americans.⁶⁶ Given the volatile political situation in India, the British Colonial Government had apprehensions about the reception that these troops were likely to receive in the subcontinent. The problem, however, was entrenched in the structure of the US Military Forces. According to Nico Slate:

[T]here was not one but two American armies in India—one white and one Black. From the day they registered for duty, African American soldiers faced racial discrimination, both official and unofficial. Jim Crow followed African American soldiers abroad, where they often traveled on segregated ships, ate in segregated mess halls, slept in segregated tents, and labored and fought in segregated platoons.⁶⁷

In Calcutta, African American G.I.s had a segregated ARC Club at Dalhousie Square called the Cosmos Club, with canteens staffed exclusively by African American women.⁶⁸ While White American troops were billeted in camps

66 Ibid, 267.

67 Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, 152.

68 Khan, *India At War*, 267.

(Karnani Estates and Camp Knox) and hotels within the city, Joseph E. Davies remembered African American contingents being allotted accommodation far from the city, often opposite the river Hooghly, thereby limiting their access to and scope for wartime recreation.⁶⁹

In 1945, a swimming pool for US servicemen was opened on a segregated basis. In reality, it was reserved for White Americans almost all the time. Racial stereotypes such as the supposed greater adaptability of African Americans to the tropical climate were cited to justify this:

When Black soldiers were excluded from a Fourth of July celebration at the pool sponsored by the Red Cross, nearly the entire staff of the Cosmos Club, the Black Red Cross club, signed a letter of protest sent to Red Cross headquarters. Several of the volunteers, including Geraldine Smith, a teacher from Chicago and the assistant director of the Cosmos Club, resigned in protest. On its part, the army's report presented the segregation of the pool as equitable, adding, "Complaining of segregation, however, Negroes have completely boycotted the pool."⁷⁰

In the internal reports of the US Military in India, African American

troops were consistently portrayed as the archetypical 'deviant', or more prone to disobedience. This was supposedly borne out by the frequency with which they got into trouble with Indian labourers and Indian women, and were consequently reported by the Military Police (MP).⁷¹ Consistent protests regarding discriminatory treatment by military police led to positions for Black MPs being created near the end of the war. Protests also led the military to find a new rest camp site near Calcutta for Black troops.⁷²

African American soldiers in Calcutta were perceived as naturally delinquent by the colonial administration. As Janam Mukherjee notes, "[the]disparagement of American black soldiers may have been a recurrent theme in explaining the chaos on the docks."⁷³ In their report on an incidence of shelling at the Calcutta Dockyards, the Commissioners for the Port of Calcutta noted that the "behavior of the American Negro troop... was disgraceful."⁷⁴ The trope of the 'fiendish black man'—slovenly and cowardly in their demeanour—loomed large in the British colonial imagination. Crimes, real and imagined, were more frequently attributed to the African American soldiers:

71 Ibid, 156.

72 Ibid, 153.

73 Mukherjee, "Hungry Bengal," 235.

74 Ibid.

69 Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, 152.

70 Ibid, 154.

In Calcutta a handful of incidents occurred in which Black soldiers seriously wounded Indian taxi drivers, although there is no evidence that race played a factor in these assaults. Bengali anti-black prejudice was revealed in rumors that black soldiers kidnapped children and, according to at least one confiscated letter, ate them.⁷⁵

Contrary to the expectations of the colonial administration, however, interactions between the African American G.I.s and the local populace were not underwritten by racial tensions or latent hostility. As Corporal Charles Pitman recollected, “The Indian people were cool to us at first but once they found we were not like the lies told about us they became friendly.”⁷⁶

On the contrary, their relations were largely characterised by mutual respect and amity. According to one officer, “Negroes frequently are invited to attend native civilian parties to which White troops are not invited.”⁷⁷ Others reported that Black troops were “invited to the best Indian homes.” Nico Slate went so far as to suggest that “African American soldiers and Indians were able to forge solidarities, based in part on colored cosmopolitanism and a shared opposition to racial oppression.”⁷⁸ According to Gerald

Horne, the official history of the CBI also noted that the African American troops ‘mingled more frequently with the Indians than did their white comrades.’⁷⁹ Yasmin Khan put this very succinctly:

Black troops and Indians found common cause contrary to imperial expectations. Local people chatted and traded with the troops, striking up friendships even in the marketplace and the streets. Banned from using some of the facilities allocated for white soldiers and housed initially in the densely populated area of Howrah in Calcutta, black GIs spent more time in local markets and backstreets...As a consequence, black soldiers made new friends, received invitations to local parties and dances and were more likely to have an Indian or Anglo-Indian lover.⁸⁰

In spite of facing blatant racial discrimination within the military due to segregated amenities, poor living conditions, second-class medical treatment, and disproportionately incurring the wrath of the Military Police, the experience of African American G.I.s in wartime Calcutta was not a complete nightmare. This was not because the colonial administration was more considerate, but because Black soldiers were

75 Slate, *Colored Cosmopolitanism*, 156.

76 Ibid.

77 Ibid, 157.

78 Ibid.

79 Horne, *The End of Empires*, 166.

80 Khan, *India At War*, 268.

able to forge amicable relationships with the local Indian populace even amidst a global conflict.

HARD TIMES: SCARCITY, STARVATION, AND THE SOLDIERS

Besides opportunities for such cultural contacts, the war also brought immense hardship in its wake. Apprehensive of an impending Japanese invasion, the colonial administration of Bengal undertook a ‘denial scheme’ and adopted a scorched earth policy at a time of war-induced food shortage. Black marketeering and hoarding added to people’s miseries. Author Manindra Gupta witnessed truckloads of food grains procured from different districts of Bengal by the colonial government and the Ispahani Merchant Company being stored with the cosmetic protection of tarpaulins in the Botanical Garden at Shibpur. Heaps of these undistributed food grains became infested with fungi during the early monsoons of 1943 and were consequently rendered inedible—worse than even animal feed.⁸¹ Freehand military requisitioning greatly aggravated this scarcity. As Yasmin Khan notes, “Initially, American quartermasters in India dealt directly with food suppliers, negotiating prices and buying directly, with dire consequences for some local

81 Gupta, *Akshay Mulberry*, 208.

markets.”⁸² Janam Mukherjee provides an example of this:

The high demand for ice by military personnel [particularly by the Americans] put a further strain on fish markets (which depended on ice for preservation during transport), thus denying a primary source of protein to middle-class residents of Bengal. In some districts, fishermen, already crippled by “boat denial” were forced to throw away as much as a third of their catch due to a lack of ice.⁸³

The price of rice increased from \$1.60/maund before 1941 to \$10/maund by 1943.⁸⁴ The *CBI Roundup* even ran an unabashedly self-seeking story to this end titled “Sky-High Prices in India Justify Wages of G.I.’s”.⁸⁵ Urban panic gripped the residents of Calcutta. Fear of Japanese bombardment triggered a mass exodus from the city to the countryside. Meanwhile, snowballed by the factors listed above, the Bengal Famine sparked off a humongous displacement of hungry, famished people, from the agrarian hinterlands to the metropolis of Calcutta.⁸⁶

82 Khan, *India At War*, 202.

83 Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 163.

84 1 maund = 80 pounds (approximately).

85 ‘Sky-High Prices in India Justify Wages of G.I.’s, U.P. Man Writes’, *CBI Roundup* I, no. 38, June 3, 1943, <http://cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup060343.html>.

86 See Chittaprosad, *Hungry Bengal*:

The unfolding of this unfathomable human tragedy did not go unnoticed by the American troops in the city. The *Key's* description of the omnipresent 'homeless man' personified suffering on the streets and alleys of Calcutta:

At some time or other while you are here you will witness the sight of a crowd of men, women, and children who seem to move together like a herd of sheep. They huddle together, or they rush across the street in a mob, or they gather in a group shouting and jabbering - they are new arrivals in the city. Driven here by the famine, by flood, drought, or other causes, they come from Bengal itself, from Bihar, Orissa, or Assam. Homeless, helpless, hopeless when they reach Calcutta, they fare as men have always fared, in that the able-bodied and the strong among them as usual survive and soon find their way into the immense labor corps around the city - the rest,

they soon vanish - some die in the epidemics, others just disappear.⁸⁷

Clyde Waddell photographed the human figures and faces of this tragedy and took note of the prevalent public apathy:

Death - a way of life? The indifference of the passer-by on this downtown Calcutta street to the plight of the dying woman in the foreground is considered commonplace. During the famine of 1943, cases like this were to be seen in almost every block, and though less frequent now, the hardened public reaction seems to have endured.⁸⁸

The ordinary American G.I.s frequently came across people driven to destitution by the famine and expressed astonishment at their miserable conditions: "The unutterable filth and dirt of the Indian beggar is really astonishing...in spite of all I had read about it. I half way expected it, but even then, I was surprised."⁸⁹

Corpses piled up on the streets of Calcutta and the Municipal Corporation was overburdened, which caused the US Military Forces to step in at this juncture. In the

A Tour Through Midnapur District, by Chittaprosad, in November, 1943 (Bombay: New Age, 1943); Famine Inquiry Commission of India, *Report on Bengal* (New Delhi: Government of India, 1945); Tarashankar Das, *Bengal Famine (1943) as Revealed in a Survey of the Destitutes in Calcutta* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1949); Paul Greenough, *Prosperity and Misery in Modern Bengal, The Famine of 1943-44* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1982).

87 *The Calcutta Key*.

88 Waddell, *A Yank's Memories of Calcutta*.

89 Malcolm Harvey Stilson Collection (AFC/2001/001/02056).

words of Kermit A. Bushur:

[W]hen I was in Calcutta, not having any company commander or anything like that, I was getting all the dirty details. And the dirtiest they had at that time was going into town and picking up the dead. See, the country was in a famine and they were starving people, they were elderly people, but they came to Calcutta so they could bathe in the River Ganges. To their religion they'd have to bathe in the River Ganges to be saved. Well, then they went going into town. They'd unroll their little bamboo roll that they had. They'd lie down there and go to sleep and sometimes they didn't wake up. So, every day there had to be a truck go through the entire city and pick up the dead. And then we would take them down to the river, put them on a big pile of wood and burn them. That became very, very disheartening and very sad to see that happening. And I was catching that detail every day, every day.⁹⁰

Although Roosevelt ignored the question of channelling UNRRA food aid to Bengal, so as not to

90 Kermit A. Bushur Collection (AFC/2001/001/29937), Veterans History Project, American Folklife Center, Library of Congress, <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/loc.natlib.afc2001001.29937/>.

offend Churchill, the US troops in Calcutta did not passively observe the unmitigated escalation of this humanitarian crisis.⁹¹ They responded effectively, as they had after the cyclone of October 1942, by raising funds to provide relief to the distressed districts of coastal Bengal.⁹² As Yasmin Khan has pointed out, “[s]oldiers of all nationalities felt disturbed by what they saw in Bengal in 1943 and many, deeply moved by their inability to alleviate suffering, did what they could, offering up their own rations and helping children to welfare centres.”⁹³ This has been further corroborated by Tathagata Niyogi:

It also appears that the US Army in India started a voluntary food donation scheme by saving from their weekly rations of canned food. It was some of these cans that kept my family in Metiaburuz fed during the war. Also, quite intriguingly, it appears that the British Government in Calcutta tried its best to conceal the gravity of the famine from the

91 For a detailed account of how the UNRRA food aid to Bengal was blocked, see Manish Sinha, “The United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) and the Question of Food Aid During the Bengal Famine of 1943,” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress 73* (2012), 1042-1052.

92 ‘Bengal Relief Funds Still Trickle Through’, *CBI Roundup* I, no. 12, December 3, 1942, <http://cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup120342.html>.

93 Khan, *India At War*, 213-214.

American troops in the city by regularly transporting the starving urban poor into food-camps in or outside the city.⁹⁴

This paranoia of the colonial government stemmed from deep political insecurity. The British Raj was growing senile day by day while fissures within the Indian body politic were widening to the point of a rupture. The American soldiers had arrived in Calcutta when the country was going through a great political turmoil. They were leaving Calcutta when the city was gripped by a dangerous religious conflict. Thomas Ray Foltz recounted his experience of witnessing these riots:

On February 29, 1946, several thousand G.I.'s and I packed our duffel bags and boarded a truck convoy which drove us down to the King George Docks to board the *U.S.S. General Hodges*. By that time the Indian people of Calcutta were rioting against the British in their quest for independence. Our convoy had to travel through very hazardous areas and the trucks were pelted with stones and other debris thrown by rioting Indians. The trucks were covered by canvas to help protect us from the objects being thrown. Luckily, I was not hit. To make matters worse in Bengal, Moslems and Hindus were at each other's

94 Niyogi, 'Wartime Calcutta: Walking a Gut-Wrenching Disaster'.

throats, fighting to become independent states. Mass killings were becoming a way of life.⁹⁵

This saga of bloodshed was punctuated with incidents that still evoked some hope. Golam Kutubuddin, a cloth merchant for generations, and his family took refuge at the American military barracks by the lake, when his house in a Hindu-majority neighbourhood was besieged by a rioting mob.⁹⁶ Shortly after the outbreak of these communal hostilities at the end of the war, the American soldiers were issued instructions to return to the US. They did not stay back to witness the worsening whirlpool of violence that would engulf the city during the Great Calcutta Killings of August 1946.⁹⁷ The last issue of the *IBT Roundup* came out on April 11, 1946, following which a smaller weekly news sheet called the *Chota Roundup* continued to be published until May 16, indicative of the increasingly dwindling presence of the American contingent in India. By the 31st of May, almost all the

95 Thomas Ray Foltz, "My Life As A G.I. Joe in World War II," <http://cbi-theater.com/gijoe/gijoe.html>.

96 Mukherjee, *Hungry Bengal*, 339.

97 For a detailed treatment of this theme of exacerbating communal violence during the 1940s, see Anwesha Roy, *Making Peace, Making Riots: Communalism and Communal Violence, Bengal 1940-1947* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018).

American troopships had departed from the port of Calcutta. Only a handful of “G.I. Joes” remained in this city of the India-Burma Theater thereafter.

CONCLUSION: ‘GLOBALIZING’ EFFECTS OF A GLOBAL WAR?

There is no doubt that the Second World War was a global conflict. It was fought across continents with supply chains stretching across different theaters of war, and its conclusion was followed by a substantial restructuring of the international geopolitical order. Much light has been shed on this dimension of the war, to the extent that that other important aspects have frequently been eclipsed.⁹⁸ As Tarak Barkawi has argued, “War and armed conflict very often have been the leading edge of transregional interconnectedness.”⁹⁹ The Second World War exemplified this. It was

a war involving peripatetic armies fighting far away from their home fronts. These troops came face to face with people from very different cultural backgrounds, with whom they had to communicate on a regular basis, in alien cities during a protracted global conflict. Perceptions of a mutual cultural otherness permeated their mundane interactions under extraordinary circumstances. The situation of American soldiers in wartime Calcutta was no different. *A Pocket Guide to India* tendered some advice in this regard:

As you see more of the Indian people, you will encounter many customs that are strange and new to Americans. A large number of them have grown out of the religions of the country and are therefore most sacred. You should respect them as you would wish your own beliefs and ways of living respected by strangers.¹⁰⁰

In spite of such cautioning, misunderstandings were not a rarity. The experience of an ordinary G.I. in the city was usually characterized by ‘fascination’ and ‘bewilderment’. Malcolm H. Stilson, for example, even noted the aggression with which a priest at the Kalighat Temple had stopped a fellow G.I. from photographing a customary goat sacrifice.¹⁰¹

98 See Jeremy Black, *World War Two: A Military History* (London and New York: Routledge, 2003); David Reynolds, *From World War to Cold War: Churchill, Roosevelt and the International History of the 1940s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006); Thomas U. Berger, *War, Guilt, and World Politics after World War II* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

99 Tarak Barkawi, “Connection and Constitution: Locating War and Culture in Globalization Studies,” *Globalizations* 1, no. 2 (December 2004): 168, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1474773042000308532>.

100 *A Pocket Guide to India*.

101 Malcolm Harvey Stilson Collection

However, these interactions were not underwritten by cultural anxiety and suspicion alone. These were opportunities for forging lasting cultural contacts and often provided impetus for coming to terms with otherwise incomprehensible cultural differences. An intriguing parallel drawn by Stilson while recounting his visit to the Kalighat Temple will illustrate this point further:

This is the mother side of the great, many armed Kali, goddess of childbirth. And I think back to the cathedral in San Antonio, Texas, where the Catholic women prayed to the statue of the virgin Mary to grant them children.¹⁰²

The American soldiers were constantly reminded that they had a purpose beyond fighting in a foreign country. They were also supposed to don the hats of envoys representing the goodwill of the United States.¹⁰³ No matter how annoyed they were with “Indian children ranging from two to seventy years old” bickering after them for “Baksheesh”, they had to remember this sermon:¹⁰⁴

(AFC/2001/001/02056).

102 Ibid.

103 *A Pocket Guide to India*.

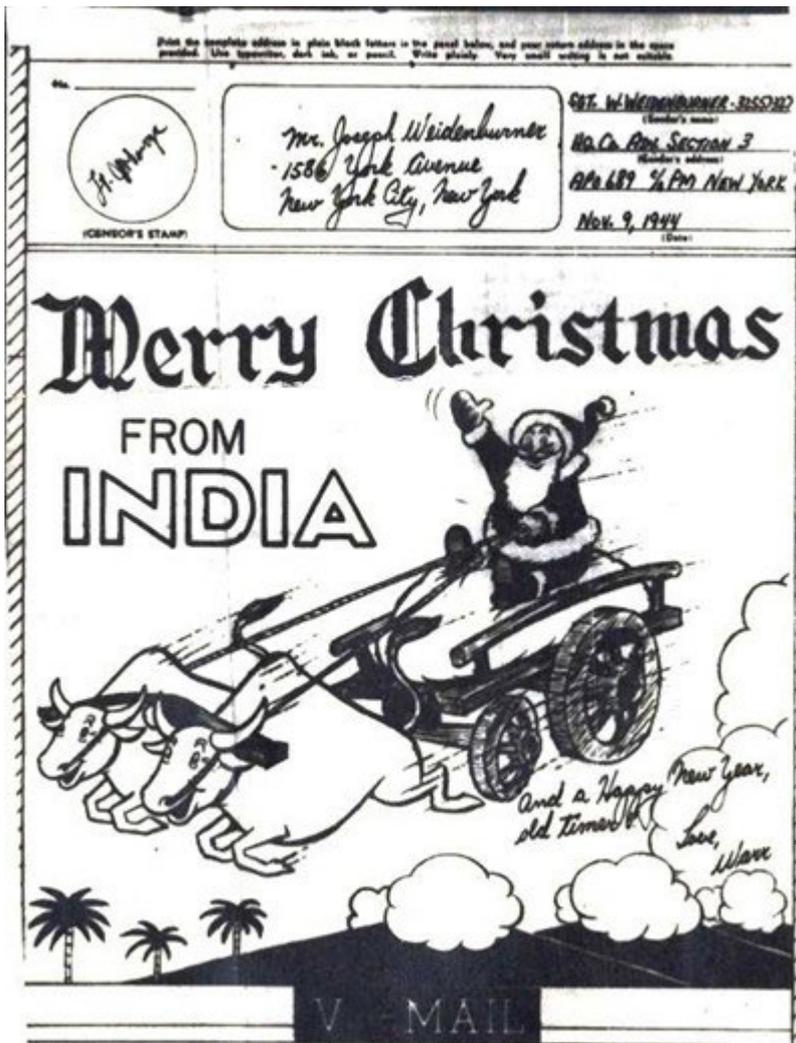
104 Kennison Cook, ‘Revised List of “Things We Can Do Without”’, *CBI Roundup* I, no. 20, January 28, 1943, <http://cbi-theater.com/roundup/roundup012843.html>.

What you may not have stopped to realize is that after the war, in any permanent plan for peace that includes (and must include) Southeast Asia, India must and will assume a prominent role. You are a practical person from a practical nation. You can see that it makes common sense for anyone to cultivate a lasting friendship with India. Go to it, then. YOU - you’re the one who is going to do it. It is part of YOUR JOB.¹⁰⁵

In a global war such as this, soldiers were not merely combatants. They were links between cultures which were literally oceans apart. In spite of the uneven nature of their interactions with local inhabitants across different theaters, they functioned as wartime conduits for the flows of ideas and information, cultural traits and habits, and perceptions regarding peoples, places, and nations. Notwithstanding the diversity in their experiences, these soldiers had one thing in common. They brought back stories of their military lives in alien cities, loan-words from alien tongues, and more importantly, they transmitted hybrid cultural motifs.¹⁰⁶ Very few documents can testify to this better than Warren Weidenburner’s 1944

105 *The Calcutta Key*.

106 See Eugene B. Vest, “Native Words Learned by American Soldiers in India and Burma in World War II,” *American Speech* 23, no. 3/4 (Oct.-Dec., 1948), <https://www.jstor.com/stable/486923>.



Christmas V-Mail to his father Joseph, depicting Santa Claus riding a sledge-cart drawn by a pair of excited Indian oxen.¹⁰⁷

The Second World War was not just a global war; it was a

FIGURE 4: Warren Weidenburner's 1944 Christmas V-Mail to his father Joseph, depicting Santa Claus riding a sledge-cart drawn by a pair of excited Indian oxen. (Courtesy: Carl W. Weidenburner)

107 Carl W. Weidenburner, 'China-Burma-India Christmas,' in *China-Burma-India: Remembering the Forgotten Theater of World War II*, <http://cbi-theater.com/christmas/cbixmas.html>.

globalizing phenomenon in many respects. Cities like Calcutta became wartime sites of spontaneous cultural exchange among participants who operated within contrasting contexts and under varied constraints. The kaleidoscopic experiences of American G.I.s stationed there bore this out again and again. While their encounters with the local inhabitants were framed in terms of military obligation, possibility of adventure, wartime recreation and cultural immersion, the experiences of these encounters for the people of Calcutta were put into sharp relief by war-induced economic hardship, colonial coercion, subversive politics, and communal violence. A city which was starved and bombed for most of the war years and was greatly unfamiliar could still be “Teek-Hai” for soldiers engaged in an unprecedented and uneven global conflict, far from their homeland.