

Shared Sorrows: Indians and Armenians in the prison camps of Ras al-‘Ain, 1916-18.

In Memory of Stephen Vertannes (1959-78)

1.



Noravank Monastery, Armenia

Armenians have been connected with India for a very long time. The foremost chronicler of the subcontinent’s Armenian community, Mesrovb Jacob Seth, tells us that it was at the express request of Akbar, the great Mughal Emperor, that Armenians settled in Agra in the 16th century. Akbar also took an Armenian wife, by the name of Mariam Zamani Begum. By the time the English arrived at the Mughal court the Armenians were already well established there: it was they who helped the East India Company acquire the Diwani of Bengal, which was a crucial step in the building of the British Empire.¹

For many years Calcutta, the city of my birth, was home to the biggest and most vibrant Armenian community in India. Even in my own childhood Armenians were an important presence in the city. As a boy I heard stories about famous Armenian boxers; my father would reminisce about old hotels and boarding houses that had once been run by Armenians. I would often walk past the Armenian School, which happened to be housed in the birthplace of the English novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray².

These connections and memories may explain why Armenian characters have figured in my books. In my novel **The Calcutta Chromosome**, one of the key characters is a Mrs Aratounian (a family of that name once ran a hotel in Calcutta); in my most recent book, **River of Smoke**, there is an Armenian watchmaker from Egypt by the name of Zadig Karabedian (he is the nephew of Orhan Karabedian, the icon-painter whose work can still be seen in the Church of the Mu’allaqa in Cairo).

As a writer of fiction I am accustomed to creating characters and inventing stories. But I also often deal with historical sources, and every now and again I come upon something that serves to remind me that reality often exceeds fiction in its improbability. Certainly, I could never have invented a story like the one I am going to recount here. The events date back to the latter years of the First World War, when groups of Indian soldiers and paramedics were imprisoned in the vicinity of Ras al-‘Ain, in what is now Syria. Some of the worst massacres of the Armenian genocide occurred in the vicinity of this town, and through force of circumstances, the lives of the Indians and the Armenians often became closely intertwined.

The reason the story has survived is that one of the Indian prisoners happened to write about about his war experiences forty years later. His name was Sisir Sarbadhikari and his book **Abhi Le Baghdad** (or *On To Baghdad*) appeared in 1958³: it was self-published and was probably only ever read by a handful of people. But the fact that the text was committed to print was crucial to its survival. It meant that a copy of the book had to be deposited in the National Library in Kolkata - this was the very copy that I sought out last year⁴.

Sisir Sarbadhikari was (as am I) a Bengali from Calcutta and he belonged to a middle-class Hindu family. This adds greatly to the improbability of the story, for in the early years of the twentieth century the chances that a young man from such a background would find his way into the front lines of a military campaign were close to nil. This is because Bengalis were not eligible for recruitment into the British Empire’s Indian army, which drew its soldiers (or sepoys) from certain specially designated ‘races’⁵.

The army’s recruitment policy excluded most Indians and was widely resented, partly because it was felt to be based upon demeaning racial stereotypes, and partly because it blocked access to one of the most important sources of employment in the colonial economy. The bar did not however apply to the army’s administrative and medical wings and many Bengalis found their way on to the military payroll through this route. When the First World War broke out some prominent Bengalis decided that the army’s medical services might be a means of furthering their claims to serve in the ranks of the regular military. To that end they offered to raise a unit of voluntary ambulance workers in support of the war effort. They reckoned that such an offer would not be refused at a time of crisis, and they were right. They were quickly granted permission to form a unit that came to be known as the Bengal Ambulance Corps (BAC).

This was the unit that Sisir Sarbadhikari volunteered for in 1915. He was in his early twenties and had just earned his Bachelor's degree. Such was his eagerness to join the BAC that he actually pulled strings to get in: he would later attribute his enthusiasm to the 'Spirit of Adventure', of which he evidently had more than his fair share. Nor was he the only eager volunteer: some were so enthusiastic that they falsified their ages in order to enlist. One of them, Bhola, was only sixteen when he joined up – he would become a close friend of Sisir's and he too would end up in the camps of Ras al-'Ain.

The BAC was a small unit, with a total strength of 117, of which about a third consisted of 'camp-followers' – that is to say, cooks, sweepers, water-carriers and so on. It was led by five British officers and about a dozen Indian NCOs. The remaining sixty or so members of the unit were privates, of whom Sisir was one.

Although lowly in rank Sisir was from a family of well-educated middle-class professionals – a class that is often referred to in Bengal as '*bhadralok*' or 'gentlefolk'. Sisir himself was well-read in English as well as Bengali: his book is embellished with lines of English and Bengali poetry and he frequently refers to Xenophon and other figures from antiquity.

Many of the other volunteers seem to have been from circumstances similar to Sisir's. They were not the kind of men who would have joined the regular army as privates, even if that had been a possibility. If the Ambulance Corps appealed to them it was probably because its medical associations lent it a touch of middle-class respectability.

The BAC volunteers were given three months training before being sent off to Bombay to join the 6th Poona Division which was on its way to Mesopotamia under the command of Major General Charles Townshend. They left Bombay on a hospital ship, the **Madras**, on July 2, 1915, and reached Basra a week later. From then on, they accompanied the 6th army as it advanced steadily northwards, towards Baghdad.

In the first few months of the campaign, the British-Indian forces met with little resistance from the Ottoman army. The going was so smooth that the campaign was described as a 'river picnic'. But just south of Baghdad, at the ancient town of Ctesiphon, General Townshend's army ran into a large and well-entrenched Ottoman force. The British advance was blocked and the 6th Army was driven back to a small town called Kut al-Amara. There, with just one month's foodstocks in store, the British-

Indian force endured a siege of five months, at appalling cost. Many soldiers died of hunger and disease before General Townshend surrendered to Khalil Pasha, the Ottoman commander on April 29th, 1916.⁶ At the time this was thought to be the greatest defeat that the British had ever suffered in Asia.



Samarra, Iraq

On the 12th of May, Sisir Sarbadhikari and the other prisoners of war were sent to Baghdad on a steamer. Sisir remained there for a couple of months, and then, on July 19th he and some other prisoners were dispatched to Samarra, about 60 miles away, by train. Then began a series of grueling marches, in the burning heat of the

Mesopotamian summer: the

prisoners were driven brutally northwards through inhospitable country with very little food and water. British accounts of the march speak of floggings, starvation and terrible cruelties: ‘troops (British or Indian) falling out of the line of march from sheer exhaustion were left to perish either of starvation or the probability of being murdered by the Arabs.’⁷

Cruelty and hardship figure in Sisir’s narrative too, but his tone is stoic, almost dispassionate, and he often pauses to reflect on history and comment on the beauty of the countryside. Of the horrors of the march, the recollection that was to remain most sharply etched into his memory was of the shouts with which the guards would wake the prisoners in the small hours of the night. (121)

In twenty-five days the prisoners marched from Samarra to to Mosul, by way of Tikrit, Sargat and Hammam Ali. It was after leaving Mosul that they began to see signs of the devastation that had been visited upon the Armenians of this region.

2.

But before I come to that, I'd like to say a few words about Sisir Sarbadhikari's book. *On to Baghdad* was self-published, as I've said, and it seems to have vanished quickly into obscurity. I first learnt of its existence through the work of a military historian, Kaushik Roy, but it was an essay by a brilliant young literary critic, Santanu Das, that prompted me to seek it out.⁸ Santanu is now working on a longer treatment of the subject and only after it is published will we have a full understanding of the book's historical contexts, the manner of its writing, and its place in relation to other accounts of the Mesopotamian war.

A detailed account of the making of *On to Baghdad* will be of immense value, not just in relation to the book itself, but also in regard to the muteness from which it emerges. For the most



Cover 'On to Baghdad' (Abhi Le Baghdad)

remarkable thing about *On to Baghdad* is that it was written at all: it is almost a lone voice, piercing a profound and puzzling silence.

In the hundred and fifty years before the First World War hundreds of thousands of Indian soldiers had fought for the British Empire, at home and abroad; during the First World War alone, over a million and half Indians were deployed on different fronts. Yet, mighty though these legions may have been in the field of battle, outside it they were as silent as an army of ghosts. Almost everything that is known about them is spoken in the voice and language of the soldiers' masters, the British. The number of accounts authored by Indian military personnel, in the century and a half that preceded the First World War, is so small as to be counted on the fingers of one hand. As a full-length, published memoir of the First World War, by an Indian, *On to Baghdad* thus stands almost alone on its shelf.⁹

India's literary silence about the First World War is especially notable because this great conflict was an enormously fecund subject for soldiers of other nations. In England, France, Germany and elsewhere it generated enormous amounts of writing, of many sorts. Yet even in this vast corpus *On to Baghdad* commands a place of special notice, and not only because it happens to be the only such account written by an Indian. This is because most of the writing about the war came from officers: Sisir's memoir is one of the few accounts to be written by a low-ranking private, (the

greatest of all First World War memoirs, Erich Maria's Remarque **All Quiet on the Western Front**, was another).

On to Baghdad is remarkable also because it is based on a very unusual source - a journal that Sarbadhikari kept through his time in the Middle East, including his years in captivity. His notes went on grueling marches with him, hidden in his boots; at the Ras al-‘Ain camp, where their discovery could have resulted in disaster for Sisir, they were buried underground. Yet, despite the attendants dangers, Sisir seems to have continued to make regular entries in his journal whenever circumstances permitted. There was only one prolonged break, during the months between March 1917 and April 1918.

In his entry of March 18, 1917, Sisir explains this break and describes the manner of his note-taking: ‘After this I couldn’t write in my journal for about a year. In the first place opportunities were hard to find. Apart from that I had to tear up many of my notes for fear that they would be found; I re-wrote some of them later; but I couldn’t with some. You [the reader] mustn’t make the mistake of thinking that the diary that I’ve referred to so far, and which I’ll refer to again, was my original diary (156). After the surrender at Kut, I ripped apart my diary, tore the pages into pieces, and stuffed them into my boots; using those scraps I filled out a new journal later – in Baghdad. This journal was also ruined when I crossed the Tigris on foot. But the writing wasn’t all wiped off, because I had used a copying pencil. I dried the book and used it for my notes of the march from Samarra to Ras al-‘Ain. At Ras al-‘Ain I had to bury the diary for a while but it didn’t suffer much damage. In the infirmary at Aleppo I wrote it out again. (157)’

The journal traveled back to Calcutta with Sisir and was put aside for decades. In his brief account of the writing of *On to Baghdad*, Santanu Das suggests that the book might never have been written if not for the encouragement and support of Sisir’s daughter-in-law, Romola Sarbadhikari.¹⁰ It is not uncommon of course to come across war memoirs based on notes made ‘in the field’ – but few indeed were the journals that survived the sort of captivity that Sisir had to endure. Indeed it was this journal’s very existence, insistently miraculous, that seems to have prompted Sisir’s daughter-in-law into midwifing the book into existence.

Sisir’s notes lend an extraordinary immediacy to *On to Baghdad*: at times the book has the quality of a diary. Sisir’s descriptions of battles, marches and life in prison-camp are sometimes startlingly vivid. The dates and details also serve to make his account unusually persuasive. There is no showing

off, no dwelling on personal injuries and hardship. Perhaps the passage of time had blunted the edge of Sisir's experiences, for he is able to write about even the most difficult situations with the detachment of an ethnographer. His book is also, to a quite extraordinary degree, free of rancour: he very rarely speaks of ill of anyone, including the 'enemy'. Despite the horrors that he witnessed and experienced, he evidently never lost his ability to perceive the humanity of others, his jailors and captors not excluded. This too must be considered a remarkable quality in a book about the First World War: this was after all a time when most European writers were scarcely able to appreciate the humanity of people outside their own class, let alone their nation. The much celebrated English war writer, Siegfried Sassoon, for instance, was also in the Middle East for a while – but he seems to have been largely indifferent to his surroundings, even though (or perhaps because?) he was himself descended from a Mesopotamian Jewish family.

For all these reasons, **On to Baghdad** is a book that is not just gripping to read but also very persuasive.

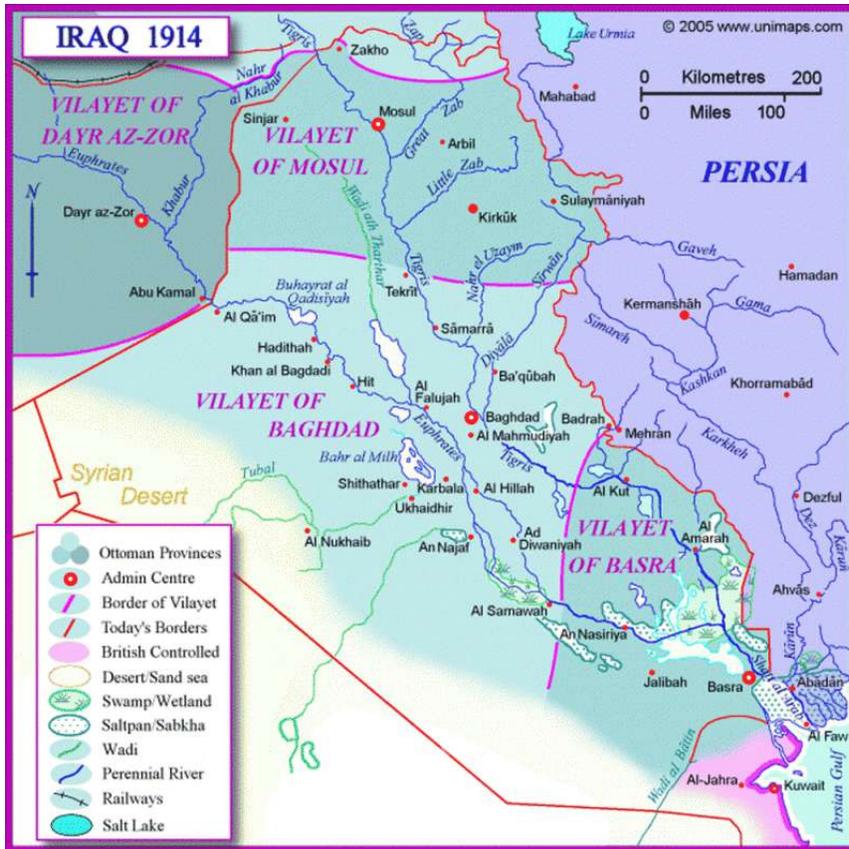
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Troops unloading baggage, Alexandra Docks, Bombay, 1st WW

To return now to Sisir's narrative. On August 25, when he and his fellow prisoners reached Mosul they still did not know where they were being taken. It was in Mosul that they received word of their destination: the Hindus (and Sikhs) were to be separated from the British and Muslim POWs; they would be sent to Ras al-'Ain, where they would work on a rail line. (124)¹¹

Although Sisir does not make much of it, there is something distinctive about his use of the word 'Hindu' here. The word does not occur often in the text, and until this point in the narrative, it has never been used to imply that various different non-Muslim groups in the British Indian army had felt themselves to be 'alike', and different from their fellow soldiers. His use of it in this sense here suggests to me that Sisir and his comrades were surprised and disturbed to learn that the Indian POWs, who had served together on the battlefield, were now to be split up along religious lines.¹²



Iraq 1914 (<http://musingsoniraq.blogspot.in/2009/11/blog-post.html>)

Many of them would probably have concluded that Hindus and Sikhs, being neither Europeans nor co-religionists of the Turks, would be sent to the worst camps of all.¹³ Their apprehensions would surely have deepened when they learnt that they were being sent to an area where thousands of Armenians had been confined to concentration camps. The sense of being singled out for a shared plight may have contributed to the bonds of

sympathy that developed between these Indians and the Armenians they encountered.

From Mosul the prisoners marched to Tell Kaaf.¹⁴ Shortly after this they entered a markedly different landscape:

‘Here everything is beginning to change’¹⁵, writes Sisir, ‘from the climate to the landscape and the appearance of the houses. It’s much cooler than before and the nights are cold. The terrain is no longer flat or undulating, we are now marching through mountainous country; the houses don’t have mud walls and roofs, they are made of stone. Before, there were no trees and no greenery, it was desolate, *barren*.¹⁶ Here trees can be seen. Amongst the stone houses, those that are clean, well-kept and nice-looking belong to the Christians (*‘Nasran?’*)... We are now on the frontiers of Kurdistan. The Kurds’ villages are mostly perched on mountain-tops, in inaccessible locations. How people can get to them is beyond our reckoning. The Kurds aren’t wanderers like the Bedouin (*‘Badu’*), they do some farming.’ (124-5)

Sisir's first mention of Armenians comes a few days later, on August 18th. In the course of that day's march the prisoners encountered two rosy-cheeked Armenian boys, eight to ten years old. Sisir notes that they had crucifixes on their chests. 'From what they said to us in broken Arabic,' he writes, 'we understood that the Turks had slaughtered their father and older brothers; where their mother was they did not know.' (126)

On the 23rd of August, the prisoners came to a small village. 'From a distance the small stone



'Armenian village of Gundemir' c. 1901 (Wikimedia commons)

houses, cradled by the mountains, were as pretty as a picture. On approaching closer we saw that they were empty of people. A dog emerged from an abandoned house... At that time we didn't know that the inhabitants of these villages were Armenians; the men had been slaughtered and the women and children had been driven away.'

(129)

Sisir's description of the village is accompanied by a few lines from Oliver Goldsmith's poem 'The Deserted Village':

Along thy glades, a solitary guest...

Amidst thy bowers, the tyrant's hand is seen,

And desolation saddens all thy green. (129)'

Sisir recounts another story about this village: when he went to look into a well a swarm of insects flew out. He explains that he had not intended to drink from the well; it was merely out of curiosity that he had looked inside. 'It was not at all advisable,' he writes, 'to drink from these wells; there were Armenian corpses rotting in many of them.' (129-30).

Over the next few days, as the prisoners marched northwards, they saw other empty, abandoned villages; a couple of them had been burnt down. After some forty days of marching they reached a town called Nisibeen¹⁷, now on the border of Turkey and Syria. Sisir writes 'In antiquity Nisibeen



Nusaybin 1916
(Mideastimage.com)

was a Roman town. Examples of their building styles can still be found. On the river the Roman bridge is still standing and it is used by heavy army trucks... Nusibeen is quite a big settlement; food is easily available there. The Khabur River (the Habur of the Bible) flows through the centre of the town so water is plentiful. It's different from the places we've seen so far; a fine place for bivouacking troops. The people are cultured and well dressed. None of the Armenian inhabitants are left. The

local people who remain are all Muslims or Syrian Christians.' (131-2)

Sisir would return to Nusibeen later, but his first stay there was quite brief. The prisoners soon continued their northward march, reaching Ras al-'Ain on September 2. They had marched for 46 days from Samarra to Ras al-'Ain, covering some 500 miles (133).

This is how Sisir describes the camp at Ras al-'Ain: 'For shelter [we had] Bedouin tents; like those at the Baghdad rest camp. There were gales all the time, with swirling sand – it was like sticking needles in the body.¹⁸ A hospital was nominally set up in a small room and serious patients were sent there. Medicines and supplies were few; but at least there was shelter from rain and wind... Rations were irregular ... they'd come after two or three days. They didn't give us any firewood for cooking; we'd have to wander three or four miles gathering twigs and camel dung. There were no trees to get branches from.' (138)



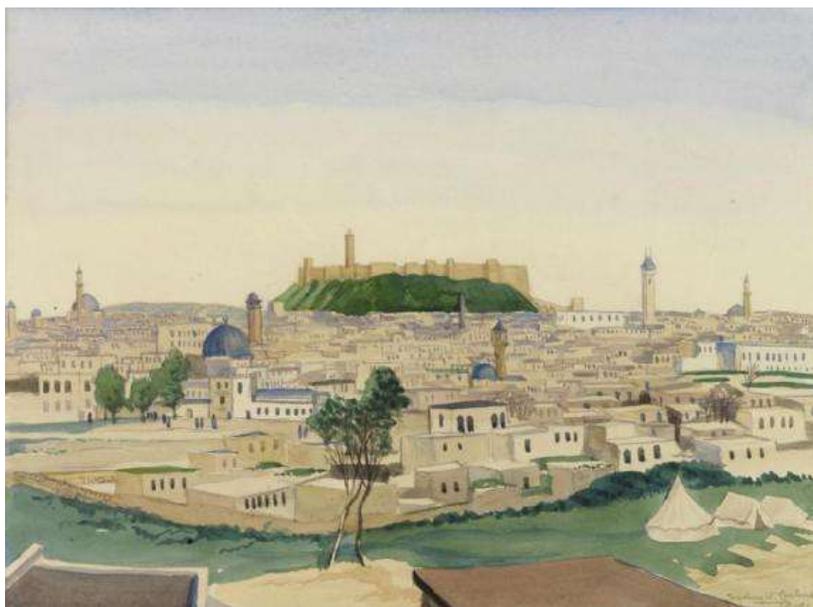
This picture is from the Imperial War Museum (via the First World War Poetry Digital Archive & the Ottoman History Podcast). It is tagged as 'Indian Engineers in Mesopotamia' with no other details. I remember seeing, on the Net, a similar picture of I

On September 7 one hundred prisoners started working on the rail lines. A few weeks later, the guards turned the officers' quarters upside down, during a search. It was

now that Sisir buried his diary, fearing that it would be found. He did not dig it up again until the trouble stopped. (140)

Over the next few weeks the camp's medical facilities were expanded. New doctors arrived, among them some Armenians. The relations between the Indian medical staff and the Armenian doctors were not always easy.

'One day,' writes Sisir, 'the hospital's Armenian doctor swore at Champati [an NCO] and had Sundar Singh thrown behind bars. The reason was that an Armenian prisoner from Russia



Aleppo, 1919, by Sydney W. Carline

complained about the hospital being staffed by Indians; he said they gave the Indian patients better food. Being an Armenian himself the doctor created an incident without inquiring further. On informing Captain Puri, Sundar Singh was let off. There was always friction between us and the Russian prisoners. After this it got worse.' (141)

In November typhus broke out in the Indian camp. An epidemic of the disease had already ravaged many of the Armenian camps in the Ras al-‘Ain area. It now began to take a serious toll on the Indian prisoners. Several members of the BAC went down with it, among them Sisir's friend Bhola – the 16 year old who had exaggerated his age to get into the corps. Sisir himself escaped this outbreak of the disease. He was occupied in tending to the stricken when it was decided that he would take the most serious patients to Aleppo (*Halbe*).¹⁹

Sisir was reluctant to go because he did not wish to be separated from his friends. He did not know it of course, but the order that sent him away from Ras al-‘Ain was a blessing in disguise. The coming winter would decimate the prisoners who remained in Ras al-‘Ain. Many would die of disease, exhaustion, and the cold. Had Sisir not been sent to Aleppo at this time, he may well have been among the casualties. Later, he would write: 'That was our first winter in Turkey and we had no

clothes to speak of; many didn't have boots... [The prisoners] would be taken to work barefoot on the line, in the snow. They would get frostbite at first and then the flesh would fall off and the wounds would turn gangrenous.' 167-8]²⁰ E.A.Walker, a British officer, estimated that 75 per cent of the Indian prisoners died in that first year. ²¹

On Nov 19, Sisir left for Aleppo with some 50 seriously ill patients, on a mail train. They traveled in awful conditions: locked in a windowless compartment they had to relieve themselves in the corners. But these circumstances did not prevent Sisir from noting that the stations were pretty, with tiled roofs – 'like stations in Europe'. (143)

They arrived in Aleppo a day later. The city created a strong impression on Sisir: he writes: 'Aleppo is not like the cities we have seen so far - Baghdad and Mosul. The houses are nice to look at; the roads aren't bad. We hear that it looks like towns in Europea. The people on the streets look cultured; their clothes are nice; European costume predominates. There are people of many communities – Turks, Syrian Christians, Rums (that is Greeks) and Jews.' (144)

On arrival Sisir and his patients were sent to the General Hospital (or Markaz Khastakhana) where some wards had been set aside for POWs. (144)

Sisir's account of his stay at the hospital is surprising in many respects. Even though thousands of Armenians were dying in the camps of Ras al-'Ain, a short distance away, in this Aleppo hospital Armenians were still an important presence. The commanding officer, Lieutenant-Colonel Bagdasar Bey, was an Armenian and most of the doctors were Christians. Sisir writes that some were *Nasranis* ('Nazarenes') or Syrian Christians; others were *Rumis* (that is to say 'Byzantines' or Turkish Greeks).

Sisir was put into a ward that was run by an Armenian doctor called Saghir Effendi – 'a wonderful man,' writes Sisir, 'he takes good care of the prisoners'. But Saghir Effendi was not to remain in the hospital for long. In January 1917, he stopped coming to the hospital. Sisir writes: 'We hear that he has been sent on to the firing line. We were saddened to learn of this. We will never forget his kindness.' (151)

Among the others who worked in ward, there was an Armenian woman called Marum who was especially kind – 'How well she looked after us!' Sisir remarks. (145) But this evidently did her no good in the eyes of the authorities for she was soon transferred to another ward and then dismissed altogether. (151-2)

It is impossible not to wonder about the state of mind of the hospital's Armenian staff at a time when so many members of their own community were being killed in nearby camps. Although the situation of the Indians was completely different, the plight of the Armenians would certainly have resonated with them: they knew very well what it was to serve an Empire in which they occupied a position of subservience.

Even in captivity the Indian POWs were constantly reminded of their inferiority in the imperial hierarchy. Sisir touches on this theme often, especially in relation to the sums that were disbursed to the POWs according to the laws of war. On February 12th 1917, he remarks that an official had visited the hospital and distributed money to the prisoners: 'Five liras for the whites, four for the Russians and three liras for us. The money comes from British or Indian POW funds, but still the Russians get more than us. Not only are we a defeated race, we're black on top of that.' (153)²²

Next year, in July he returns to this theme: 'Some funds have arrived for us from the Red Cross Society – 3 liras for the British, and one and a half liras for us. We all refused it... [But] After much persuasion ... we agreed to take the one and a half liras. What we said when we refused the money was that white soldiers are paid higher salaries in India (*bharatvarsha*) because they are serving in a foreign country and therefore have extra expenses.'... But that argument doesn't work in this instance. Turkey is not our country, just as it is not theirs ... The differences and distinctions that have been created between whites and blacks in all things is deeply insulting to us. A Hindustani sepoy receives half the pay that a white soldier gets; his clothing and uniform is different too – the white's is better. But the white Tommy and the black sepoy both put aside their love of life to go to war, they both suffer equally – yet in the midst of shared hardship, everything possible is done to make things better for Tommy.²³ Even his rations are different – Tommy drinks his tea with sugar, we drink it with jaggery. And what tea it is! Sacks of it lie in front of the store; people walk over it with their boots. If there's a canteen then we aren't allowed into it; only whites can buy from them... A lot can be written about this.' (187-8)

4.

Towards the end of November 1916 Sisir too was struck down by the typhus. For about a month he was so sick that at times he does not know whether he was dead or alive (148). But in December, he was once again the beneficiary of a stroke of good fortune: his friend Bholā was also sent to the General Hospital in Aleppo. After that Sisir's health began to improve steadily.

In Sisir's description, the conditions at the General Hospital in Aleppo appear as a startling contrast to the situation in the camp at Ras al-'Ain, where Indian prisoners were suffering terrible hardships. In the hospital, on the other hand, the POWs were in some ways, better off than the Turkish soldiers who being treated there. Sisir often remarks on the difficulties that the Turkish soldiers had to deal with: 'They were in a bad way,' he comments, 'they didn't have money for cigarettes and would beg from us.' (160)

Elsewhere, he writes: 'Today there was a pitiful sight in our ward. The Turkish soldiers don't receive any pay; they are all poor; they don't even have money for cigarettes. Some of them ask us for money; but mainly they pick up butts from the street, take the tobacco out and use it to roll cigarettes. Four or five butts yield one cigarette. (154).'

Sisir evidently made great progress with the Turkish language during his stay at the hospital. 'We were quite friendly with the Turkish soldiers,' he writes. 'None of them were literate but they were friendly and warm. They used to say, you can't fight us now, so we are all brothers or kardeshes. The word kardesh was much in use²⁴. If they saw someone they didn't know they would call him kardesh. We did the same.' (157)

The Turkish soldiers at the hospital were themselves quite a diverse group. While most were from Anatolia, there were also some from Bulgaria and Albania. (158) Sisir notes that there 'there was no lack of bad men amongst them ... Many times we were insulted by them and we often had to suffer their blows.' He describes how he once went to the hospital's barber for a shave, and was spat upon for no reason; he also mentions a corporal who would beat Indian patients for no reason at all. (159)

But the Indians and Turks also discovered many commonalities: 'We would talk about our countries,' he writes, 'and about our own joys and sorrows. If we said that we have this or that in our country but you don't have it here, they would say how can things improve in our country? All we do is fight, and that too with big and powerful countries. If you go into our country you'll see, even the fields are lying fallow. Who's to do the work? Everyone's away fighting; only the women are at home.' (158)



Evacuation of Ottoman wounded (Wikimedia Commons)

‘One thing they always said was this: What are you going to gain from this war? Why are we cutting each other’s throats? You live in Hindustan, we live in Turkey, neither of us have ever met, we have no quarrel with each other, but at the behest of a couple of men we’ve become enemies overnight.’ Sisir pauses to ask: ‘Is this what’s in

the heart of every soldier, in every country, at all times?’ (158)

Then he continues: ‘There was a man from Edirna-le or Adrianopolis who used to say, how will things improve? Sultan Abdul Hamid put a curse on our heads because of which we’ll have to be at war for a hundred years. Why he put such a curse on us I cannot say kardesh.’ (159)

Sisir tells some touching stories about his kardeshes. For example: ‘An old Turkish soldier came to our ward to collect cigarette butts. He was bent over with age, but he happened to look up and he caught sight of a young Turk in one of the beds. He gave a shout and then we saw that they were hugging each other with tears rolling down their faces. After they had calmed down a bit we learnt that they were father and son; for three years they had had no news of each other – and today this sudden meeting! ... In Turkey this kind of thing is not unusual – fathers don’t hear from their sons; the sons don’t know where their fathers are; householders go off to fight and don’t know what’s going on at home. They get news when they go back, or when others from their area return from leave.’ (155)

He follows this with a story that graphically illustrates the conditions of soldiering at that time: ‘There was a Turkish soldier in our ward, about thirty years of age, he had been wounded in the fighting. With him was a pretty young girl, of about five or six. Her name was Farida. She used to play with all of us. The soldier had no one at home to leave his daughter with, so he took her with him when he went to fight – he brought her to the hospital too. During the fighting he would leave

her in some safe place in the care of one of his comrades... (One day) I asked him: Kardesh, if you had been killed in the fighting what would have happened to your daughter? He smiled and said ‘Allah bilior’ – or ‘only Allah knows’... I never saw this kardesh looking gloomy. And the girl? She was always cheerful, busy playing.’ (155-6)

Amongst Sisir’s particular friends in the hospital there was an Armenian called George. ‘His home was in Diyarbakir;’ Sisir writes, ‘his sons and daughters had all been killed; he had somehow managed to escape to Aleppo with his life. George was given the job of cleaning the toilets. There was a huge hall, with many toilets side by side. George lived in one corner of this hall – he ate and slept there. On cold evenings we used to sit with him and warm ourselves at his brazier, and then we would talk.’ (159)



Ottoman soldiers at Gallipoli

Sisir’s stay at the hospital came to an end around June 1917, when most of the Indians were discharged. But for a while his luck held: amazing to relate, while other Indian POWs were dying of hunger and disease at Ras al-‘Ain, through a providential turn in the wheel of fortune Sisir and Bhola were sent to a rest-home (*Liaqat-khana*) to recuperate. The rest-home was in the Jewish area of Aleppo and they spent two months there. Only after their discharge did they learn that the Hindu POWs were to be sent to Ras al-‘Ain once again, while the Muslims would go to Islahiya, and the British to Belemedik. (165)

On returning to the vicinity of Ras al-‘Ain, Sisir found many changes. The railway line had been extended in the months that he had been away, and the Indian camps had advanced with it. The construction of the lines was being overseen by Germans, and they had taken charge of many of the area’s camps and hospitals.

For a while Sisir was in a camp that looked towards the town of Mardin²⁵, which he describes as being ‘in the interior of Armenia’. He writes: ‘We heard that the city of Mardin was empty ... there were no people in it. The houses were abandoned and it was like a ghost town.’ (168)

Sisir was then dispatched to another camp before finally ending up in a German-administered hospital in Nisibeen. It was here that he would become deeply enmeshed in the fate of Armenian refugees. ‘When I reached Nisibeen,’ he writes, ‘there were no Indian, British or Russian prisoners there. I was the only prisoner of war. The rest were Armenian mohajers (refugees); they were all women, only one had a little boy with her.’ (170)

‘I was given a small tent to live in and the big tents of the mohajer women were close by. There was no one to speak Hindi or English with, let alone Bengali – only with Meinhof [a German officer] would I exchange a few words in English. When there were chats and conversations with the mohajers it was always in Turkish. One of the mohajers, old Mary, would patiently inquire after the smallest details of my home and family. She was sad to learn that I had lost my mother; she would say that this was why I had been able to go to war; if I’d had a mother she would not have let me go.’ (170-1)

Sisir was assigned to the camp’s hospital but his duties were mainly administrative. ‘Two Armenian mohajer boys, Yakob and Ilyas, worked for me in the office,’ he writes. ‘Yakob was some twenty years old; he was from a very ordinary family, and couldn’t do anything that required reading and writing. Ilyas was from a well-off background: he was about fifteen and knew a little French; he didn’t have much to do – his job was to write down telephone messages. (175).

‘Ilyas’s home was in Erzurum. He and his father, mother, older sister and brother lived there in peace until the war started. When the Turks began to kill the Armenians, Ilyas’s father and brother were not spared. They were dragged out of their Erzurum house and driven along, here today and there tomorrow. There were many others in their group – apart from all the Armenians of Erzurum, all the others in the towns and villages along the way were also herded together, with them. They were brought to a place where they were told: Now the menfolk have to be separated from the others – they have to go to a separate camp. (176)



Transportation of Armenian refugees

‘[The Armenians] knew already that the men would be killed, so they realized that there was no other camp; it was a lie - they were actually being taken off to be slaughtered. There was much weeping and many tears, the women clung on to the men and would not let them go. But what could come of that? The men were dragged off by force, Ilyas’s father and brother among them. The next day one male from that group managed to escape, bringing back the news that all the men had

been killed. He had himself been badly wounded but was still alive. After a few hours he succumbed to his wounds.’ (176)

‘After that the women and children were driven along, to be abandoned in cities along the way. They had to forage for themselves, keeping themselves alive as best they could. On the way Ilyas was separated from his mother and sister; after much wandering he ended up in Nisibeen. When the Germans started building the railroad they assumed the responsibility for the Armenian mohajers and that made things a little better for them.’ (176)

‘From what we hear these terrible mass killings were not perpetrated by Turkish soldiers; they were done by Chechens and Kurds. Before we got to Ras al-‘Ain many Armenians had been brought there and killed. Sachin [a BAC volunteer] was in Ras al-‘Ain long before us; he told us that he had once witnessed the killings. A group of Armenians was made to stand up, their hands were tied, and their throats were slit one by one. Sachin said that those who did the killings were Kurds. There was a hill behind our camp in Ras al-‘Ain, it was on the other side that these deeds were done; Sachin once stole off there in secret and witnessed them with his own eyes.’ (176-7)

The word that Sisir uses to describe these killings is worthy of note. Earlier, when writing about the killings of Armenians he generally uses the word *kâtâ* : literally ‘to cut’ or slaughter. But here he uses the word *hatyakanda*, literally ‘killing-deed’, signifying mass killings.²⁶



Indian Cavalry charge, Mesopotamian front

Sisir was not the only Indian in the camp for long: it soon began to fill up with British, Russian and Indian POWs including many other members of the BAC, Bhola among them (172).

As the months went by the prisoners learnt that there had been a revolution in Russia; that Istanbul had

been rocked by unrest; and that British and Indian troops were making rapid advances in Palestine

and Mesopotamia. By the middle of 1917 it was apparent that tide of war was turning in the Middle East and the Turks were being beaten back.²⁷

For the Armenian refugees, this created a new set of anxieties for they were now seized by the fear that the Turks, faced with the prospect of losing the war, ‘would slaughter those of them who were still alive - and this time even the women would not be spared.’

But it still came as a surprise to Sisir and his friends when they discovered that the Armenians were planning an escape: it was Ilyas who revealed this to them.

‘Ilyas looked on Bhola and me like older brothers,’ writes Sisir, ‘and we too loved him like a younger brother. In 1918, towards the end of August or the beginning of September, when the Turks were in a much-weakened state, Ilyas came to us one night. At the time Phoni, Bhola and I were living in one room... Ilyas and Yakob were living a little distance away. What he whispered, after waking us, was this:

‘... For a few days [the Armenian mohajers] had been conferring in secret on matters such as how best they might escape to places that were now under Russian or British control. It seemed that they had not included Yakob in all this, perhaps because those who were planning to escape (177) were all residents of Erzurum and its surrounding areas. Yakob’s home was much further south.



Armenian refugee family

‘Now their destination had been decided on – where it was Ilyas did not yet know. They would flee that night, horses had been arranged. He had come to take his leave of us. Whatever warm clothing we had between us we gathered together and gave to Ilyas - the poor fellow had hardly any clothes.

‘He held me tight! None of us could say a word; nor was there any need for anything to be said.

‘In the dead of night Ilyas left. We never saw him again

‘Did he manage to reach home? Did he find his mother and his sister?’

Here Sisir quotes a line from a poem by Tagore: *Those who lose everything gain the whole world?* (178)²⁸

Ilyas and his fate weighed heavily on Sisir for a long time. Later in the book he writes: 'I still think of [Ilyas]. A boy of fourteen or fifteen; a really good fellow. Did he manage to get back to Erzurum in the end? Or did he die on the way? What happened to his mother and sister? It's not that these questions arise only in relation to Ilyas, thousands of Armenian families are dealing with this.' (189)²⁹

In early October, the situation in the camps suddenly changed. Sisir was told that the hospital was to be shut down at once and all the patients were to be discharged.

This had a dramatic impact on the mohajers. 'The Armenian women began to weep,' writes Sisir. 'For so long they had been sheltered by the Germans – it was like being in the shelter of a mountain; the Turks couldn't do anything to them. Now they were afraid that as soon as the Germans left they would be slaughtered; this time even the women wouldn't be spared.'

'Every day Yakob would come to us, lamenting and crying; he would say that he was trapped while Ilyas had got away in time (but did he get home? Poor Ilyas!) [But] we didn't worry so much

about Yakob, he was a clever fellow, tricky one might even say. (190)



Armenian refugees (Lib. of Congress)

Within a few weeks, things came to a head. 'Everything's in an uproar!' writes Sisir. '[Only] the Turkish soldiers seem to be indifferent; secretly they must be glad it's over. When the fighting's over they'll heave a sigh of relief. It's the Germans who are the most fearful; they're worried that they'll get stuck in Turkey and fall prisoner to the British. But the greatest terror is amongst the poor Armenians. Old Mary, Dudu, Haiganoush, Jarohi all of them are crying out loud, asking: what will happen to us now? Amongst them Dudu speaks some English. She has a boy of six or seven, and to please the Germans she had named him William. She's a clever woman, with an eye to the main chance. Now maybe she will change the name.'

‘Most of [the mohajers] are from Diyarbakır, Urfa, Siwas, Kaisariya, Maras, and Aindhab or Mardin. Later they had begun to come from Van and Bitlis. (191)

Soon after this the Germans decamped. The POWs and Armenian refugees were left to subsist on the hospital’s remaining stores of food. (191) The British were known to be advancing northwards but there was still no sign of them. This created great confusion.

‘We run into our Armenian colleagues every day,’ writes Sisir. ‘They’re in despair. But what can we do for them? If the British arrive soon, they’ll be safe.’ (193)

At the beginning of November 1918, Sisir writes: ‘I’m overjoyed at the thought of going back home, but in the midst of that I am despondent at the thought of the [Armenian] mohajers and their fate. We’ve worked together for so many days; we’ve shared sorrow and joy. They have become like our own. I wonder, even if the Turks don’t kill them, what will they find when they get home? Who will they return to? Who knows if they even have any homes left!’ (194)

On November 17th, all of a sudden the POWs were informed that a train would come for them that night. Sisir and his companions went to the station well ahead of time because they were concerned about finding a covered wagon. Sisir explains that this was because Turkish trains ran on firewood, there being a shortage of coal in the country: the engines couldn’t work up much steam: ‘At the slightest incline the engine would wheeze as if it had run out breath, and flames would shoot out of the chimney burning everything nearby.’ (198)

This was a hazard in an open wagon, because cinders and flames would be blown back, and would often cause fires. Sisir recounts that he was once traveling in an open wagon, with one of the BAC’s camp followers, a sweeper by the name of Jumman. A flaming cinder happened to fall on Jumman’s turban and flames shot up from it. Between the two of them they managed to put out the fire, but Jumman said afterwards, ‘lucky that I’m not a Sikh or my hair would have been burnt.’

Sisir and his four friends were lucky to get a covered wagon, and they occupied it at about nine that night. ‘After an hour or so,’ writes Sisir, ‘we heard Yakob’s voice whispering to us from the outside. When we went to him he said that we had to make space for him somehow in our wagon.’ (198) We said have you gone mad? How can that be done? To take you into our wagon will be dangerous not just for you but for us too. If the Turks find out they’ll give you such a beating that you may die of

it; and who knows what will happen to us? There'll probably be a court-martial. We can't do anything like that.' (198-9)

'But Yakob was stubborn, he began to weep. He said the blame would be his alone; if the Turks caught him then there was nothing to be done; he would die anyway if he remained in Nisibeen; if he was going to die then he might as well make an attempt to get away. In the end we let him in. It was only the four of us in that wagon– Phoni, Jagdish, Bhola and I. Had there been anyone else we wouldn't have dared.

'Although we let him in, we couldn't of course let him sit on a bench where anybody could see him; he had to be hidden. The only hiding place was under the bench. Here lay the problem. Yakob may have been young but he had a big belly; it was impossible to get him under the bench. In the end Bhola pressed his belly and somehow shoved him in. Yakob's pants' buttons popped open and his chest and stomach were grazed and bloody. He remained there that whole night and the next day and night as well. After that he got off at a station; he said he would be all right from there on.' (199)



Indian soldiers with Armenian widows and orphans

On November 26th Sisir and his comrades reached Tripoli; and on December 4th they embarked on a ship that took them to Port Said.

But before they could embark, there ensued one of the strangest episodes in this story. At the centre of it was one of the BAC's 'camp-followers', a sweeper called Jumman. It's best that Sisir tells the story himself:

'When we were marching [northwards] from Mosul, Jumman saw an Armenian child on the banks of a stream near Ras al-'Ain and picked him up. His mother must have died, and his father must have been killed... Jumman took on the responsibility of looking after the boy and named him Babulal. He used to call Jumman father ('Baba').' (175)³⁰

This story would be hard to believe if it were not confirmed by other sources. But E.A. Walker, an English officer, came upon a group of 'Indian sepoy prisoners in a holding camp at Ras-el-Ain' in

1916. He noted in his diary, which is now in the Imperial War Museum, that they ‘had with them a ‘small Armenian boy of about ten or so’ who was the sole survivor of thousands of Armenian women and children who had been massacred.’³¹

Sisir notes that Babulal soon began to speak Hindi and that once he was old enough he began to work as a fifer for the BAC³². This was a job that by long tradition of British Indian army, had been performed by orphaned Eurasian boys – so the tale is not as unlikely as it may sound.

But at Tripoli a problem arose: ‘Before embarking on the ship to Suez Jumman was told that he would not be allowed to bring Babulal with him. An Armenian padre came to take Babulal away. But why would Babulal go to him? He made a huge fuss and cried up a storm of tears; and Jumman wept too, holding on to the boy. In the end Jumman was allowed to take Babulal home with him.’ (175)

Babulal, Jumman, Sisir and their surviving comrades reached India on January 8th, 1919.

Amitav Ghosh

Aldona

Goa

October 15, 2012

¹ Cf. **Armenians in India: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day**, by Mesrobian Jacob Seth, first published Calcutta 1937, reprinted Asian Educational Services, New Delhi 2005, chapter 1.

² The school was originally known as the Armenian Philanthropic Academy. The building, at 39 Free School Street was purchased in 1883, for Rs. 48,000. W.M.Thackeray was born there on 18th July, 1811: *ibid*.

³ *Indians at Home, Mesopotamia and France 1914-1918; towards an intimate history* (in Das, Santanu (ed.): **Race, Empire and First World War Writing** (CUP, 2011) that prompted me to seek it out.

⁴ I owe many thanks to Dr. Swapan Chakravorty and Sri Ashim Mukhopadhyay of the Indian National Library, Kolkata, for their help in this regard. The page references (in parentheses) are to this copy of **Abhi Le Baghdad**.

⁵ Cf. Barua, Pradeep P., *Inventing Race: The British and India's Martial Races*, **Historian**, 58(1), 1995, pp. 107-16; & Roy, Kaushik: *Recruitment Doctrines of the Colonial Indian Army: 1859-1913*, **Indian Economic and Social History Review**, 34 (3), pp. 322-54, 1997.

⁶ The precise numbers remain undetermined but it is estimated that about 3,000 British and 10,000 Indian soldiers went into captivity after the surrender. Cf Heather Jones: *Imperial Captivities: Colonial Prisoners of War in Germany and the Ottoman Empire, 1914-1918*, in Das, Santanu (ed.): **Race, Empire and First World War Writing**, CUP, 2011.

⁷ Quoted in Heather Jones op. cit.

⁸ Santanu Das, op. cit.

⁹ Murali Ranganathan has very recently unearthed another First World War memoir, written in Gujarati by a Parsi, Nariman Karkaria. This is how he describes it: ‘this book was published in 1922 by D A Karkaria from the Manek Printing Press in Mumbai. It is deceptively titled **Rangbhumi par rakhad** which I would translate as *Sorties on Stage*. It was perhaps intended as pun for jangbhumi, a word he uses often in the text.’ For more on this, see my blog post of Oct 15, 2012 (www.amitavghosh.com/blog/). I am convinced that other such accounts were written in languages like Marathi, Punjabi, Pahari and Gorkhali. But as of the time of writing, I do not know of any.

¹⁰ Cf. Santanu Das op. cit. For a more complete account of the making of **On to Baghdad** and for a fuller picture of the wider contexts of the Mesopotamian campaign, we will have to wait for Santanu’s next book, which is, I am told, nearing completion. I eagerly await its publication.

¹¹ Cf. Heather Jones, (op. cit.) suggests that the separation of prisoners happened at Ras al-‘Ain: ‘Non-Muslim other rank Indian prisoners were eventually segregated at Ras-el-Ain to work on the railway line; Muslim and British other rank prisoners were transported on from Ras-el-Ain by train to separate camps in Turkey proper.’ But Sarbadhikari’s account suggests that it happened earlier.

¹² The term ‘Hindu’ was perhaps more relevant to the British army’s administrative practices than to the conceptions of the soldiers themselves. In dividing the Indian soldiers by religion the Turks were possibly following British practices.

¹³ It is generally agreed that Indian Muslim troops were better treated by the Ottomans; whether this was true of British troops is not clear. For a full discussion of this issue see Heather Jones op. cit.

¹⁴ Vedica Kant, an Indian research scholar in Turkey, suggests that this was probably a small town to the north of Mosul. I am very grateful to Vedica for looking up place names, and for providing translations of some of the Turkish words that occur in the text.

¹⁵ The English traveler J.S. Buckingham, also remarks on the distinctiveness of this general region and its inhabitants, **Travels in Mesopotamia**, London 1827 (204-5).

¹⁶ Sisir uses the English word. Here and elsewhere I have italicized words from the text that seemed interesting to me for one reason or another.

¹⁷ This town, now on the border of Syria and Turkey, is currently known as Nusaybin. But Buckingham refers to it as Nisibeen, and argues that it was the ancient ‘Nisibir’: ‘The first foundation of Nisibeen is of an antiquity beyond even the reach of records; since it is thought, by some learned divines, to be one of the places enumerated in the Scriptures, as built by Nimrod, “the mighty hunter before the Lord... Its name is more frequently written “Nesibis”, on the medals which are preserved of it. It is found to be written “Nisibis” in Greek authors, while the present pronunciation of the name, “Nisibeen”, or “Nesbin”, is said, by D’Anville, to be in conformity to Abulfeda, the Arabian geographer.’ Op. cit. (242-3).

¹⁸ E.A.Walker, as quoted by Heather Jones, (op. cit.) describes the Indians’ accommodation at Ras al-‘Ain in the following words: ‘they had ‘no shelter; only their own blankets, bare Turkish ration to live’. Although there is no disagreement in the two accounts, I am struck by the marked contrast in tone; here, as in other parts of the narrative, Sisir’s description is remarkably matter-of-fact, his attitude stoical. Perhaps this was because his account was written long after the events, when the raw edges of the experience had been smoothed by the passage of time. Or was it because, as a private, and an Indian, he expected less and was more accustomed to difficult conditions?

¹⁹ Sisir generally uses the Arabic words *Halbe* or *Halab* for Aleppo.

²⁰ Santanu Das writes: ‘according to a British eye-witness account, [the Hindu prisoners were like] ‘animated skeletons hung about with filthy rags’. Cf. *Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history*, in Das, Santanu (ed.): **Race, Empire and First World War Writing**, CUP, 2011.

²¹ Quoted in Heather Jones, op. cit. (IWM 76/115/1 Diary of E.A.Walker, 17/7/16).

²² Racial issues recur constantly in both British and Indian writing about the colonial army, irrespective of class and rank. Writing about the diaries of Amar Singh, a Rajput nobleman, Santanu Das observes: “Slur’ is a recurrent word and emotion in the diaries; a constant oscillation between class privilege and racial discrimination forms their emotional core. Experiences of ‘slight’ range from the refusal of the English soldiers to salute him (though he was King’s Commissioned Officer) to being teased for not eating beef to being ‘very rudely’ asked to leave the room

when important military details are discussed. The personal and the racial are interlinked' (*Indians at home, Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918: towards an intimate history*, in Das, Santanu (ed.): **Race, Empire and First World War Writing**, CUP, 2011. Elsewhere, in the same article Santanu points to the British insistence on maintaining racial boundaries: 'In *In Kut and Captivity* (1919), Major Sandes writes that on reaching Baghdad, 'our first business was naturally to get separate accommodation for the Indian officers': 'we explained also that Indian officers ... were always of inferior ranks to British officers'.²² Even in captivity, the colonial, racist hierarchy is put forward as 'natural'.'

²³ In this passage, as elsewhere, Sisir consistently uses the Bengali words *gora* for to refer to 'white' soldiers. He uses *kalo* (black) to refer to himself and other Indians.

²⁴ Vedica Kant suggests that this term was: 'kardeş (pronounced kardesh) which is the term for brother.' I have followed her suggestion here although Sisir's spelling of it would properly be transcribed as 'kardash'.'

²⁵ Mardin has long had a large Armenian population. J.S. Buckingham, in describing Mardin, writes 'The population is thought to amount to twenty thousand, of which, two-thirds at least are Mohammedas, the remainder are composed of Christians and Jews. Of the Syrians, there are reckoned two thousand houses, of the Armenians five hundred, and of the Jews four hundred', **Travels in Mesopotamia**, London 1827 (191-2).

²⁶ The word 'genocide' had not of course yet been invented, nor its Bengali counterpart.

²⁷ Chronologically speaking Sisir was once again able to rely on his journal from this point on for his notes resume from April 1918 (the gap dates back to April the year before).

²⁸ The poem is '*Hatobhagyer gaan*', written in 1899 (1305 by the Bengali reckoning); it is included in Tagore's *Gitobitan*. I am grateful to my sister Dr Chaitali Basu and Dr. Swachhatoya Bannerjee for tracing the poem.

²⁹ It isn't clear whether Sisir wrote this episode from memory or had notes to rely on. Chronologically, the episode occurred after the resumption of his journal. But in the book he tells the story out of chronological sequence.

³⁰ In the text this story is told out of chronological sequence.

³¹ Heather Jones, op. cit. I am very grateful to Santanu Das for bringing this reference to my attention. The catalogue number of E.A.Walker's diary is: IWM 76/115/1 Diary of E.A.Walker, 17/7/16.

³² In the British Indian Army, by long tradition, fifers and drummers were recruited from orphanages for Eurasians. The recruits were often children.