

# On to Baghdad



Cover of 'On to Baghdad'

Sisir Sarbadhikari's **Abhi Le Baghdad** (*On to Baghdad*) is in my view, one of the most remarkable war memoirs of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In no small part does the book owe this to the diary on which it is based. This diary (in various iterations) accompanied Sarbadhikari through his travels around Mesopotamia, Syria, Turkey and the Levant. It went on many grueling marches with him hidden in his boots. He kept it with him even in prison camp, where its discovery could have resulted in disaster for him. That it survived

the war is nothing short of a miracle.

Sarbadhikari explains the history of his journal quite late in the book, in a brief paragraph.

March 18, 1917

After this I couldn't write in my journal for almost 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 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. 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 completely effaced 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. (156-7)

These notes lend an extraordinary immediacy to **On to Baghdad**. Sarbadhikari's descriptions of battles, forced marches and prison-camps are sometimes startlingly vivid. I know of nothing like it in Indian writing (although I have a feeling that a similar text may exist in Marathi, since many of the soldiers who fought in Mesopotamia were Marathas).

But it isn't just the immediacy of the text that makes the book so remarkable: it is something about Sarbadhikari himself. Not only is he a fine observer, he is also to a quite remarkable degree, free of rancour and prejudice. Despite the horrors that he witnesses and experiences, he never loses his ability to perceive the humanity of others, 'enemies' and captors not excluded.

He evidently became quite fluent in Turkish and this gave him unusual insights into the lives of ordinary Turkish soldiers: he understood that many of them were worse off than the prisoners they were guarding. There is sometimes an almost ethnographic detachment in his writing. There is also something very winning about his lack of grandiosity and pretension: never does he try to 'come the old soldier' – the whole book is pervaded by a kind of ingenuousness.

These qualities are unusual in any depiction of war, but they are particularly so perhaps in memoirs of the First World War. For this was a time when writers, sometimes even very gifted writers, had difficulty in recognizing the humanity of people outside their own class, let alone those of other races, religions and nations.

The quirky appeal of Sarbadhikari's sensibility is evident in his choice of title. Here is how he explains it:

Major-General Charles Townshend, the Commanding Officer of the 6<sup>th</sup> Poona Division, said in his Order of the Day of November 3, 1915, 'we have successfully taken Sahil, Qurna, Kut al-Amara and other such places so our aim now is to move on to Baghdad'. We all assumed that Baghdad would be easily taken; that any other result might be possible never so much as entered our minds. In many units, British officers began to say that they would celebrate Christmas 1915 in Baghdad.

But instead of taking Baghdad we were forced to retrace our steps and retreat. After Umm al-Taboul there was a rearguard action and we had to go on marching, without once halting for a rest. Marching beside me was a Muslim sepoy of the 66<sup>th</sup> Punjabis: he had taken his boots off his feet, and tied them together by their laces; with his rifle in hand he was limping along and saying to himself 'Ya Allah, abhi le Baghdad', meaning by this: "On to Baghdad' you said; now enjoy this.

## 2. Joining Up

Sisir Sarbadhikari's **On to Baghdad** has much in common with **Kalyan-Pradeep**. Sarbadhikari's war experiences in Mesopotamia and his time in captivity overlapped closely with Capt Kalyan Mukherji's. They were in the same places, often at the same time, and they knew each other. They were both from Calcutta and belonged to families of lawyers and doctors; they were both well-informed and widely-read.

Capt. Mukherji was in his early thirties at the start of the war; he was a married man, with a child. He was also a doctor, and a career officer of the Indian Medical Service (the medical wing of the British-Indian army). Sarbadhikari was in his early twenties, and he volunteered to serve as a private in a hastily-formed auxiliary medical unit – the Bengal Ambulance Corps. Sarbadhikari mentions Capt. Mukherji a few times, but his name never figures in Capt Mukherji's letters to his family.

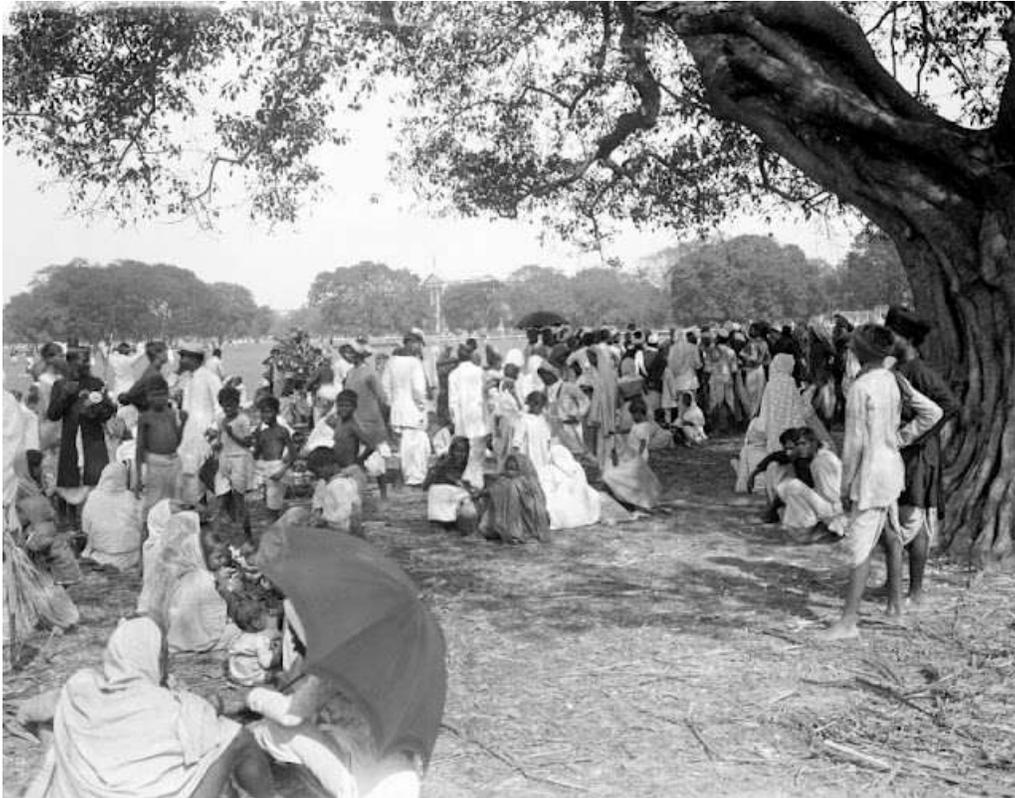
There is some degree of overlap even in the history of the two texts. Capt. Mukherji's letters became the basis of his grandmother's book, **Kalyan-Pradeep**, which was published eleven years after his death in a POW camp at Ras al-'Ain. Sarbadhikari's book was published forty years after the war, in 1958. Santanu Das, who has interviewed his daughter-in-law, Romola Sarbadhikari, tells me that she was instrumental in collating his notes and persuading him to write the book.

Both books were self-published: evidently, publishers did not think that these books would be of interest to the reading public of Bengal. It is easy to imagine

how dispiriting this must have been to the two families. It is a tribute to their persistence that the texts found their way into print and have survived.

But these similarities are, in a sense, incidental: in form, style, and even, content, the two books bear almost no resemblance to each other.

This is how Sisir Sarbadhikari's story starts.



**Maidan, Calcutta, 1912-14 (source-oldindianphotos.in)**

1914. I've just passed my B.A. and have nothing much to do. No that isn't quite correct, I've actually entered my name in the rolls of the Law College, and am looking for a job. In the meantime the First World War breaks out. Of course, at that time nobody knew that this war would come to be known as the Great War, or that some twenty years later it would earn the designation of 'First' following on another World War. When we first heard the news none of us were particularly interested. Who cared where Sarajevo was and which Archduke had been assassinated there? We barely took the trouble to look at the reports in the

newspapers. We thought it was just a little bit of bother that would soon be sorted out.

But it wasn't. On August 4, England declared war on Germany and Austria. Within a few days troops were dispatched from India to France. Now everybody was suddenly eager to know more about this war.

At this time Bengali leaders decided that this was a golden opportunity to establish a foothold in the armed services [i]. They held a meeting in Calcutta's Town Hall and it was resolved that they would write to the Viceroy requesting permission to send an Ambulance Corps, staffed with doctors and volunteers, to the front. Soon it was learnt that permission had been granted and that recruiting offices had been set up. One such office was set up in College Square: I went there, entered my name and signed the forms. [ii]

Sarbadhikari was so keen to volunteer that he actually pulled strings to get into the Bengal Ambulance Corps. Fortunately for him an uncle of his, a prominent doctor, had played an important part in setting up the Corps. Evidently a bit of nepotism was necessary even for someone who was volunteering to risk his life on foreign soil.

Sarbadhikari's eagerness to join was largely based, by his own account, on the 'Spirit of Adventure' (he uses the English phrase). This same spirit, he writes, would prompt him to volunteer for service again during the Second World War when he was over fifty. So it happened that he found himself under siege in not one but two world wars, in the second instance in Imphal in 1942, when the town was besieged by the Japanese. [iii]

### **3. From Calcutta to Aziziya**

Sisir Sarbadhikari [iv] moved into the Bengal Ambulance Corps barracks, at Alipore, on April 1<sup>st</sup> 1915. The volunteers' training was completed in three months at the end of which its total strength was 117: it was led by five British officers – a Colonel and four lieutenants. For the rest there were 72 NCOs and privates, and 41 camp-followers (cooks, bhisties, sweepers etc).



Howrah Station, Calcutta

Sisir and the other volunteers left by train from Calcutta's Howrah Station on 26<sup>th</sup> June and reached Bombay on June 28<sup>th</sup>.

On June 30<sup>th</sup> the volunteers watched as the 6<sup>th</sup> Poona Division embarked at Alexandra Docks.

On the 30<sup>th</sup> heavily loaded ships left with Indian battalions. They were all Marathas. Some said they were going to Egypt, some said France. Their parents,



Indian troops embarking at Alexandra Docks, Bombay

wives and children came to see them off. Tears flowed! Slowly the ships began to move and the battalion bands struck up 'Auld Lang Syne'. (12)

The Ambulance Corps left a couple of days later, on the **Madras**, a hospital ship.

At 9.30 am on July 2 the ship pulled away from the dock. It was just two days since the Marathas' families had come to see them off – with copious tears. No one came to see us off but we were still pained by the thought that we were leaving our country. The surprising thing was that when we left Calcutta none of us were as sad as we were now. Amongst those who came to see off the Marathas there was an old man who wept as he asked his son if he would ever return to the country. Would we return either? But thoughts like these did not weigh on us much at that time. (13)



Basra Canal (Wikimedia Commons)

The **Madras** reached Basra on July 9 and a couple of days later the BAC was sent upriver to Amara. They remained there for a month and a half before being sent northwards. On the 10<sup>th</sup> of October they reached Aziziya after a series of forced marches – but they were still well behind the front line.

It so happened that Capt. Kalyan Mukherji was marching with them part of the way and on Oct 10 he wrote a letter home:

32 lads from the Bengal Ambulance Corps marched with us with 5 stretchers.

The poor fellows aren't accustomed to this kind of thing and their eyes and noses were flowing. In the first place they have to put up with the dhamkaoings of the Sahib officers; then they have to associate with lowly doolie-bearers; nor is the food to their liking – and on top of that they have to march 20 miles a day. They're in a bad way.

Most of them say 'if we knew that it would be like this then which damn fellow would have volunteered? We thought we'd see a few battles, pour water on the lips of the wounded, tie bandages and show everyone how brave Bengalis are (they're very enthusiastic about all of this) – but we haven't even heard the sound of artillery, let alone do any of that; all we do is work as coolies, they're going to kill us with these marches.'

Ever since they said they'd send a Bengal Ambulance Corps into service in the field, I knew that these kids had no idea what they were getting into. A daily 20 mile march and on top of that rationed water – they never even dreamt that it would be like this. But even then they're willing to put up with it, so long as the officers don't treat them as coolies.' [v]

Capt Mukherji probably had good reason for his rather harsh judgement of the BAC volunteers. Like millions of young men who were volunteering for the war, in Britain, France, Germany and elsewhere, Sisir and his comrades clearly had no idea of what they were getting themselves into; with barely three months training before being sent into the field, many of them may well have regretted joining up.

But in Capt. Mukherji's tone there is also a touch of the professional's scorn for the amateur, the career officers' disdain for the short-service soldier. In fact it was Capt. Mukherji who was behind the times. This was not a war of professional soldiers – the great majority of the men who were drawn into it were, in fact, volunteers like Sisir.

But it would seem that Capt Mukherji soon changed his mind about the 'kids' – and they, for their part, would soon hear plenty of artillery.

The battle of Ctesiphon was fought on November 22, 1915, six weeks after Capt Mukherji wrote the letter above. On the retreat he met up again with Sisir and the other BAC volunteers.

Writing about this encounter, Sisir notes: Capt Puri was in command of our convoy. Capt Mukherji was with him; he had been injured and his arm was still in a sling. He told [Havildar] Champati that the officers had been all praise for the BAC during the battle of Ctesiphon. (45)

#### **4. The Battle of Ctesiphon**

Sisir Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps arrived in Iraq on July 9, 1915. In the following months General Townshend's British-Indian force pushed steadily northwards, towards Baghdad.

The Turkish army offered little resistance and such hitches as there were came mainly from within.

Yesterday (23<sup>rd</sup> October) a Pathan sepoy of the 20<sup>th</sup> Punjabis deserted after firing on a Sikh havildar. There were many Pathans in the 20<sup>th</sup> Punjabis: they had said quite clearly that they would not fire on Baghdad-sharif. So the 20<sup>th</sup> Punjabis have been sent back to Amara. (27) [iv]

By late November General Townshend's 6<sup>th</sup> Division was closing in on Baghdad. But between them and the city lay the ancient township of Ctesiphon (also known as Salman-i-pak), where a large Turkish force were waiting for them, in a well-entrenched position.

On the morning of November 21 the Ambulance Corps received orders telling them to be ready at all times because an attack could start at any moment. They were then told that the march would start at 9 that night.

'Fall in' was at seven and once again we went over the rules of night marching. But this time one thing that was emphasized was that we were to be very careful in using our water. In the event of victory in the battle (and we took it for

granted that victory was inevitable) then we would have to march straight on to Baghdad and there would be no water for twenty or thirty miles.

Why did we think that victory was inevitable? Our 6<sup>th</sup> Division had repeatedly defeated the Turkish forces and taken places like Qurna and Nasiriya; we could not imagine that this division would now face defeat.

At 9 p.m. the 6<sup>th</sup> Division and the 30<sup>th</sup> Brigade began to advance for the attack on Ctesiphon. We moved noiselessly. Some twenty thousand men marching and not a sound. Even the horses that were pulling the cannon and mules of the transport carts were quiet. Even they seemed to understand that we were in enemy territory. The earth was soft and dry along the route so our boots, and the hooves of the animals, made no sound. It was almost unnatural – so many men and animals on the move but not the slightest sound. (33)

The march ended at 1 am on November 22<sup>nd</sup>. It was very cold that night: 'We curled ourselves up like dogs and waited for the day to dawn so we could warm ourselves in the sun.' (34)

When dawn came Sisir decided to make some tea and lit a fire. But one of the other volunteers warned him about wasting water – there might be none through the rest of the day.

I said: No water? Are you crazy? This 'jackal fight' will be over in a trice and we will be in Baghdad at around 3 in the afternoon; there'll be no shortage of water then'. Perhaps when I said this the unseen goddess was laughing in secret: I certainly did reach Baghdad but not at 3 that day – after some six months and in completely different circumstances.

(The phrase 'Jackal fight' was thought up by Jacob [another volunteer]. And I can't blame him. I've heard that in the British Parliament Lord Curzon had compared the war in Mesopotamia to a 'river picnic'.)



Ctesiphon, Palace of Khosrau II (Wikimedia Commons)

By this time the fighting had started in earnest: the boom of cannons could be heard continuously. Battalions were advancing one after another, right before us. In front of us were the 66<sup>th</sup> Punjabis; now they moved too. We understood that it our turn was coming.

We began to advance slowly. Now there was no sound

other than the boom of cannonfire and the report of rifles. We began to advance, with the whine of bullets passing over our heads and shells exploding behind us. We had to advance with great care. After every few moves we would have to fall into a 'lie down' position. In the meantime shells and bullets were falling like hail, all around us. Many were killed and wounded.

... The first wound that I bandaged was of a havildar in the 110 Maratha Light Infantry, by the name of Gul Mohammad. He had traveled with us on the P7 steamer from Basra.

As we advanced we gave the wounded 'first aid' and left them all together in dressing stations. There were many such small dressing stations...

No matter where we went, the arch of Ctesiphon was always visible....

Capt Murphy was commanding us now. He was a cool-headed man. At one point when the firing got very heavy, he ordered us to lie down. When we were prone we saw, about three hundred yards ahead of us, the men of the 104<sup>th</sup> battalion retiring at the double. We retreated a hundred yards and lay down again...

The hours slipped by but the 'jackal fight' showed no sign of coming to an end. All this while we were treating the wounded. Around us were innumerable dead

bodies. Everyone started to say that a great number had been killed. Apart from our own brigade, wounded men from other brigades came to us too. Everyone was saying the same thing, that many had been killed and wounded. But we could see that for ourselves.

In the meantime my water bottle had run dry. My chest was splitting in thirst. Then I spotted a mule lying dead, with two containers of water (small tanks of galvanized tin) tied to it. I ran joyfully towards it, hoping to fill my water bottle. When I got there I saw that there wasn't a drop of water in the tanks. The bullet that had killed the mule had also punctured the tanks.

There was a dead sepoy nearby, and his bottle had a little water. I used it to wet my lips and throat.

Soon it was dark. The fighting was still going on but not at the same rate as before... (35-37)

**Later that night the troops began to pull back.**

Those whose legs weren't badly hurt went with us, leaning on our shoulders. We put two British officers whose legs had been badly fractured on stretchers; the slightest shaking would give them unbearable pain. One of them kept saying softly 'Please don't give me more pain than you can help.' Around his neck was a gold chain with a cross; he was holding it in his fist. ... (39)

We left behind those who were badly wounded. They couldn't stand let alone walk. When they saw that we were leaving they began to weep, and who could blame them? They were very vulnerable in that condition. We tried to reassure them by saying that we would send transport for them soon. ...

We didn't have far to go but we had to move very slowly because of the wounded. We were almost walking on tiptoe because of the two British officers with fractures. On top of that there were many dead bodies on the road so we had to move carefully. We tried to not to step on them but it wasn't always possible. There was no space for one's feet. (40)

...

Ctesiphon, the next day and afterwards.

What I saw after I woke up on the morning of the 23<sup>rd</sup> is beyond my powers of description. On all sides, the corpses of men and animals. In some places they seemed to be in each others' arms; in some places men had been pinned under animals and were lying there, groaning. In front of the trenches, along the lines of barbed wire, was where the greatest number of wounded lay. In some places men were hanging from the wires; some were dead (they were the lucky ones) and some were still alive. Here there was a severed hand hanging from the wire; there a foot. One man was hanging on the wires with all his entrails tumbling out. In some trenches four or five men had died with their limbs thrown over each other – Turkish, Hindustani, British, Gurkha, all mixed up together. (42)

One man's limb in another man's stomach, another's in someone's eye, that's how they were lying – and in the midst of this some were still alive – bringing them out was impossibly difficult.

I saw a Sikh sitting with a smile on his face – his white teeth were shining in his black beard. I thought, why are you smiling at a time like this, have you lost your head? When I approached I saw that he had been dead a while. He must have grimaced in pain as he was dying. (43)

...

As the hours went by we became increasingly thirsty. During the night we'd suffered from the cold, now we were suffering from the thirst. The wounded called for water with increasing desperation. The white soldiers said: 'A drop of water for Heaven's sake.' We had to turn our water bottles upside down to show them that we had no water.' (44)

Then the fighting started again. It seemed as if the Turkish trenches that had been seized the day before, were now being fought over again. At around 3 p.m. bullets were raining down on the V.P. [the designated 'Vital Point']. That was exactly where the wounded had been brought. Many of them were killed by

bullets and many sustained new wounds. Those who weren't hit could see others being wounded around them and tried to get away – even though they were unable to move. They were seized by a kind of terror – and who can blame them?

The wounded were then loaded on carts and moved back. But the convoy did not have a large Red Cross flag, so it was mistaken for an ammunition column and was heavily shelled by the Turkish artillery.

Here too many of the wounded were killed and many acquired new wounds. Many mules were killed. Some were panicked by the bullets and ran into the fields, dragging the wounded with them. Then darkness fell and the bombardment ceased so we were ordered to bivouac there.

By that time we were desperate for food and water. Twelve hours before we had been given two chapatis and a bottle of water, after that nothing. Amulya [another BAC volunteer] and I set off to look for food and found a piece of bread in the haversack of a dead white soldier. We divided it between us and were eating it in the dark, when we realized that the bread had a peculiar taste. Then we understood. The bread had soaked up the soldier's blood, hence the taste.

(45)

## 5. The Siege of Kut al-Amara

After its defeat at the battle of Ctesiphon, in November 1915, the British-Indian 6<sup>th</sup> Division, retreated southwards, towards Kut al-Amara. During the retreat the usual order of battle was reversed and the medical staff, like Sisir Sarbadhikari,

found themselves in the thick of the action.



**Dressing Station**

A rearguard action is exceptionally difficult... On the one hand you have to engage the enemy and at the same time you have to keep moving back, and in such a way as to minimize the loss of men and weaponry.... Ambulance staff are at

great risk in a rearguard action. Normally, ambulance staff stay with or to the rear of combatant units. In a rearguard action the order is reversed. The wounded would be left behind while the regiment continued to retreat (59) and either the stretcher bearers or we ourselves would have to move them back. In other words, we were working between two fires... [iv] (60)

Many of the wounded were evacuated on paddle-steamers: Sisir and the other volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps were kept busy, carrying stretchers on to the vessels.

A subedar of the 104<sup>th</sup> Rifles was very fat and as we were lifting him into the steamer, someone said – ‘Baap-re-baap, how heavy!’

Even though he had spoken softly the Subedar sahib heard him and said, in a very sober voice – ‘What do you mean heavy? Just three maunds [about 240 lbs; 108 kg].’ We all laughed. Despite his wounds, he hadn’t lost his sense of humour. (47)

On the 24<sup>th</sup>, the BAC volunteers were loading stretchers on a steamer when the serang called out to them; he was a warrant officer from Chittagong and they had met him before. He said:

‘From your faces it seems you haven’t eaten in days; come aboard and eat some dal and rice.’ We were charmed by his graciousness and couldn’t say no. He couldn’t give us much and it looked as if what he gave us was from his own portion, but that act of generosity was unforgettable. He was Muslim, we were



Fresh water cart

Hindus, but we shared the same language – Bangla, that was why he wanted to help us.

The Turkish forces were in constant pursuit of the retreating 6<sup>th</sup> Division.

At dawn on November 1<sup>st</sup> we saw a dream-like scene. A short distance

away a huge Turkish encampment had arisen, with innumerable tents. It had come up overnight, like Aladdin's city. We didn't need binoculars to see them moving around.... (57)

**But in the midst of all this:**

Our regimental pet was a sheep. Sailen [a BAC volunteer] had bought it in Amara – it was very little then, and we took pity on it. This sheep stayed with us all along. At the battle of Ctesiphon it sat in a tent with Prabodh [a BAC volunteer] ... (because it was with us at Ctesiphon we called it Tessie). It had one fault and that was that if you didn't pull it along with a rope it would come to a standstill. When bullets began to rain down on us we decided that we would untie the rope and let Tessie run for her life. But she wouldn't run; she bleated and stared sadly at our faces. Then Prabodh said let's take her along, whatever is in its future will happen.

Tessie came all the way to Kut with us. During the siege of Kut, when there was nothing to eat but horsemeat, the local Arabs offered us one hundred rupees for Tessie – they would have sold the meat for thirty or forty rupees a seer. (We had bought Tessie for 1 rupee and 5 siccas). Needless to say we didn't accept the Arabs' offer. At the end, when the Turks were almost in Kut we gave her to the officer's mess. (57-8)

...

A Muslim sepoy of the 66<sup>th</sup> Punjabis had put his boots over his shoulder, probably because his feet were badly blistered, and was limping along, saying to himself 'Ya Allah, on to Baghdad?' Meaning by this, you thought you'd grab Baghdad, now chew on this. (61) [vii]

...

**On the night of Dec 1.**

Our feet were in a terrible state. They'd get a little rest during halts, but then they would freeze in the cold. It was December. In that region, in the open, the

temperature would drop below freezing after midnight. We would sit for a while, then lie down and then get up and do double mark time. Or else our blood would have stopped moving in our veins. (61)

...

At dawn we started marching again. On the 2<sup>nd</sup> after marching through the day, General Townshend's hungry and exhausted troops entered Kut al-Amara.

On the way many soldiers had been parted from their regiments and were marching alone. Not all of those who'd been separated made it to Kut; many probably lost their lives to Arabs, on the way.

Some had bandaged heads, some had their arms in slings, and many were limping.

When the victorious 6<sup>th</sup> division was advancing triumphantly then too there had been many bandaged heads and many arms in slings; at that time too there were many who were limping – but those things didn't hurt as much then as they did now. These things weighed on our minds much more during the retreat. When an army is winning its morale is high.

...

Given the circumstances it was normal for our spirits to fall a little. But it was also true that our morale had not dropped to rock bottom. Like the sepoys, we had great faith in the British lion and we believed that victory would come in the end. We thought this was but a temporary setback, that the British would do everything possible to redeem their prestige.

The siege of Kut al-Amara began on December 7, with some 10,000 British and Indian troops being encircled by an Ottoman force that initially consisted of about 11,000 men (it was augmented later).

Along with the rest of the Bengal Ambulance Corps, Sisir was billeted inside a date orchard.

This was a favourite target of the Turks – bullets whistled by without interruption. In this orchard some tents were put up to house the hospital... On the 6<sup>th</sup> the orchard took so much fire that the hospital was moved to the bazaar. But before that some patients were killed by shells. One shell, instead of bursting above, hit a sepoy who was lying in bed, in one of the tents; it took off half his face before burying itself. The man rose to his feet as he was dying and then fell to the ground. His eyes, nose and mouth were all gone, there were only holes in his face, spouting blood. The sight was so ghastly that it created terror amongst the others in the tent. (65-6)

The Turks had a well-choreographed daily routine. Through the whole day they would bombard us; in the evening there would be rifle fire, an incessant whining of bullets. Not that there wasn't any machine-gunning rifle-volleys during the day. One morning I was sitting beside a young fellow called Anthony, of the I.G.H., drinking tea, when a bullet hit Anthony in the forehead. He died right there and his body fell on me.

Another day a sepoy of the 7<sup>th</sup> Rajputs was sitting and chatting with us, when eight bullets hit him in the shoulder, just two or three inches apart. Those were the kinds of wounds a machine gun could inflict. (67)

....

January (1916) went by in hope and despair. It was very cold. We had lost most of our things at Ctesiphon, blankets included. In Kut we were given blankets – one to lie on and one for cover – they didn't keep the cold out. It was raining heavily and the roads and lanes were filled with mud and water. (73)

February 1916.

With the start of the month all kinds of rumours began to circulate. Some said that a relieving force would arrive in the second week of this month, some said on the 25<sup>th</sup>... At one point it was said that the 6<sup>th</sup> Division would fight its way out of Kut and join up with the Relieving Force. But this plan had to be abandoned. There were some forty thousand Turkish soldiers in the trenches that

surrounded us; not only were we outnumbered, but they were in trenches whereas we would be in the open. (75)

8<sup>th</sup> ... News – the 13<sup>th</sup> British Division was coming to relieve us, from Egypt. This raised everyone's hopes. There were two Indian divisions in the Relieving Force; now there would be a British Division as well. Our deliverance was certain.

9<sup>th</sup>. Today our ration of firewood was suspended – and why just firewood, much else too – and instead of that we were issued a cigarette-tin of crude oil, for eighteen of us. (75)

22<sup>nd</sup>. From the morning onwards there was a great uproar. Everyone was told to be ready. The Relieving Force might arrive at any moment; we would have to meet up with them and bring them into Kut. Everybody was very hopeful. (78)

23<sup>rd</sup>. No sign of the Relieving Force. All our hopes dashed.

29<sup>th</sup>. We hear that the Russians have taken Kermanshah. A plane dropped our post.

The Times of India of January 13 says that an approver in the Lahore Conspiracy case has testified that many guns had been sent there from Germany.

February went by. Food was short, and on top of that, because of the shortage of clothing, we had to wear just one set of clothes. We couldn't change; nor could we bathe. Everybody was covered with lice. They would swarm all over us, under our clothes. The torment was indescribable. For lack of meat or fresh vegetables, scurvy broke out. (78)



Civil Hospital, Kut al-Amara

A bombardment started on the morning of March 1. Enemy airplanes dropped bombs several times. We had no planes in Kut, and even if we had I doubt they'd have been able to take off; with so many enemy soldiers close by, they'd have been shot down

before they could get into the air... At about two in the afternoon, I had just come off duty from the hospital and was standing in front of my billet when a plane circled above and dropped a bomb. I was standing right below, and the plane had come very close. It slowed down a bit, and then let go the bomb – we stood there as if hypnotized. I could hear the whistle of the bomb, and I could see it coming towards us, like an arrow: at first it was like a dot, then a football; and when it was right above me it was like a kolshi. [viii] There were a couple of people in the billet; it seemed to me that all of us who were there would be finished in a moment. But that didn't happen; if it had then this account would not have been written, nor would you have to put up with reading it. The bomb fell but didn't go off. There was the sound of something heavy hitting the earth. Only then did I call out to those who were sitting inside the billet. (79-80)

It was only a few days since we had returned to the date orchard. There was a Gurkha encampment near us. We were walking around when a plane appeared and dropped a bomb. A Gurkha was standing outside his tent, smoking, and the bomb fell near him. For a while there was only smoke and dust. When it cleared we saw only chunks of flesh and bone; the earth around there had turned into blood-soaked mud.

I remember the scene to this day. (80)

## 6. Surrender at Kut al-Amara

After the first week of November 1915, some 10,000 British and Indian troops were pinned down in the town of Kut al-Amara in Iraq, by an Ottoman force of some 11,000 men. The British made several attempts to relieve the town, but the attacks were all repelled.



British Red Cross Depot, Kut (Capt. C.H.Weaver  
[www.mespot.net](http://www.mespot.net)) [vi]

At the start of the siege General Townshend, the commander of the British-Indian force, had estimated that the garrison at Kut had enough food to last one month. But these stocks had to sustain not only the troops but also the townspeople of

whom there were some 6,500. As the weeks went by, food ran critically short.

In the meantime, Sisir Sarbadhikari and his fellow volunteers of the Bengal Ambulance Corps clung to the hope that a Relieving Force would soon break through.

March 4<sup>th</sup>. It's rumoured that a Relieving Force will arrive on the 14<sup>th</sup> or 15<sup>th</sup>. Some think the Russians will save us. I don't have much faith in that, not many do. (80) [iv]

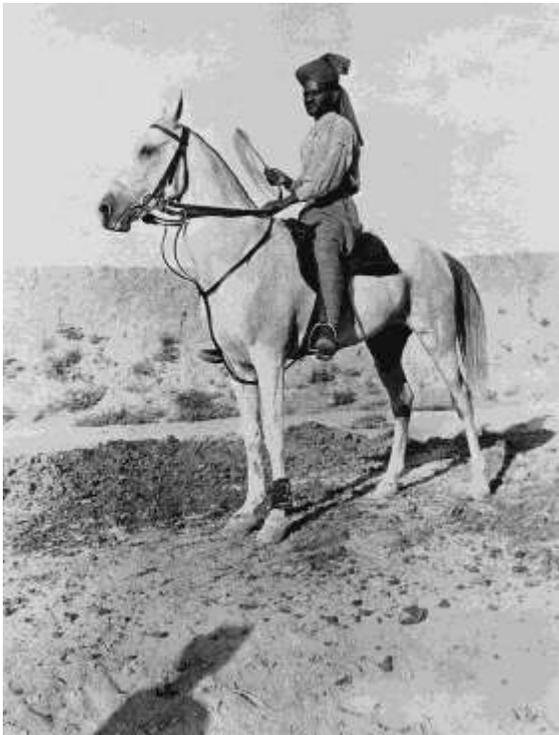


Civil Hospital, Kut al-Amara

We're hungry all day long.

There's a rumour that the Turkish general has sent a proposal to our general saying there's no point in wasting any more lives and we should come to an understanding. Our general didn't agree to it.

10<sup>th</sup>. Our rations are being cut daily since the Relieving Force retired. Arab houses are being searched to see if they've hidden away any food. Food has been



Indian Cavalryman

found in many houses. They'd buried it in the earth. (82)

16<sup>th</sup>. Some Muslim sepoy have fled from Kut and run over to the Turks – in other words they've deserted.

In wartime other than mutiny, there is no greater crime than desertion. If caught, the punishment is also extreme – death.

In Kut desertions happened from time to time, because of hunger. Firstly there was the suffering of hunger; on top of that these sepoy were being made to fight those of their own faith;

these were the reasons why Muslims deserted. Looking back, I have to say that desertions were few; what is surprising is that there weren't more.

One day a young fellow of the 119<sup>th</sup> Regiment was caught trying to escape. Some Sikhs were on their way back from the trenches when they saw the chokra, walking past the trenches. This made the Sikh Subedar suspicious and he brought the fellow to the O.C. of the 119<sup>th</sup>. The chokra was unable to provide a satisfactory account of his behaviour. There was a summary court-martial –



**Grinding Indian spices**

sentence, death! The firing party was picked from his own company – perhaps it included men from his own village? Or perhaps even a relative? He was blindfolded and his chest was laid bare by the medical officer of the 119<sup>th</sup> who turned him to face the firing party; the Adjutant looked on. After it was over, the medical officer, Capt. Ubhaya, examined him to make sure he was dead. (83)

March went by too. For food all we had was a little horsemeat and some flour mixed with dust. We'd eat the flour after mixing it with water. We'd cook the horsemeat on some embers of coal-dust mixed with crude oil, and eat it half-cooked. Even now many sepoy cannot bring themselves to eat horsemeat. Their condition is beyond description... (85)



**Indian Camp Followers**

At this awful time Ranada [ix] did something that helped a lot of people.

He went out into No-Man's Land where there was a constant storm of

gunfire; heedless of the danger, he brought back grass, leaves, herbs and things like that. A lot of greenery had sprouted after the rains. We'd boil and eat these. When there was enough we'd give some to the I.G.H.. This saved many of us from scurvy. Ranada didn't know fear. He was always smiling and cheerful.

Despite everything, the eighteen of us would drum up a noise and have fun. Every evening we would sing. Our billet became a small club. ... An artillery driver called Malaband used to come often. (86) He was a God-fearing man; but in the end he lost his mind and killed himself. Several others killed themselves in Kut. Firstly there was the hunger and all the other physical torments; on top of that no news from home. There's nothing strange about losing your mind in those circumstances.

Whoever came to our billet was charmed by the behaviour of our havildar, Champati. If Champati had not been our havildar we would not have earned quite as much of a good reputation as we did. He was a man of rare patience and humility. He was the right havildar for our Bengali temperament. We were not quite accustomed to military discipline, so instead of being harsh he would get us to work either with kind words and pats on the back, or with gentle scoldings. (87)

In April the British made some ineffectual attempts to supply the town by plane (this is said to have been the first air supply operation in history) [ix].

April 1916... Every day we hear the cannon of the Relieving Force; from the 5<sup>th</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> we could not only hear them but we could also see the flashes of the shells and the smoke. The Relieving Force had taken some trenches and attacked Saniyat. Everyone's hopes rose.



**Family Group**

Over the last few days the rations have been cut daily.

We were certainly short of food ourselves but the people of Kut suffered much more. The rations they were given amounted to nothing.

They now concluded that the English would not be able to relieve Kut, so many groups tried to leave.

The Turks sent word that any Arabs who tried to leave Kut would be shot. The local Arabs were an additional burden on us so the Turks didn't want them to leave. But even after this was made clear to the Arabs, some would try to escape every night. Very few were able to escape, most were shot by the Turks. (88)

...

Rumours are flying that the Relieving Force will arrive tomorrow – if not then there's no hope. (89)

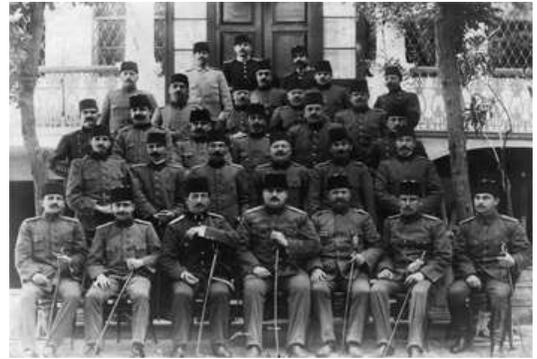
We thought the Relieving Force had arrived. In the morning things became clearer. Climbing up on the roof we saw that a steamer was stuck in the river, some distance away.

We learnt later that the steamer was called 'Julnar' and it was on its way to Kut with 48 days' rations.

Unbeknownst to us the Turks had cut off the river, so it could be said that they had closed the door to Kut. (90)

After this we all concluded that there was no further hope of relief. After spending so many days in hope none of us had imagined, even in our dreams, that this was how the curtain would fall on the siege of Kut... It was the thought of rescue that had seen us through the worst moments of suffering. Amongst our physical torments the most terrible was hunger; that was with us 24 hours of the day. The agony of it is something that nobody can understand without experiencing it. (91)

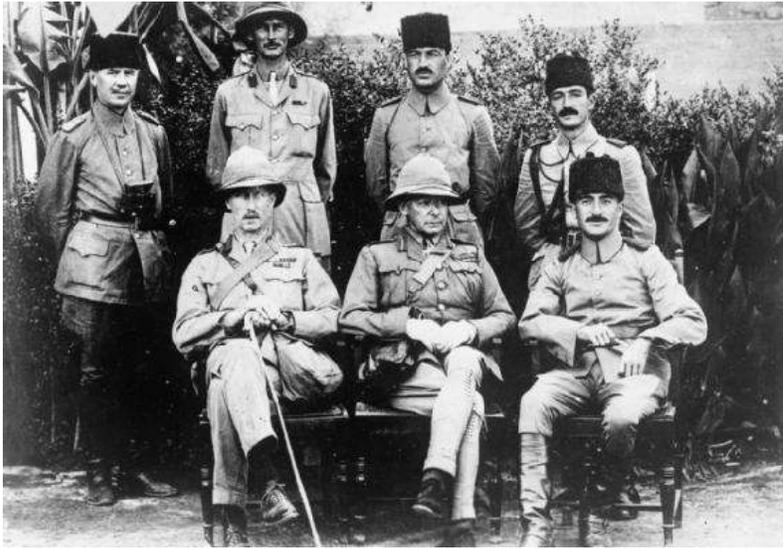
27<sup>th</sup>. From today there is a three-day Armistice. We hear that Townshend is holding discussions with Khalil Pasha regarding our surrender. Some say that



**Ottoman 6th Army Campaign Staff (wikimedia commons)**

we will all be paroled and sent back to India; some say that only the medical units will be released.

28<sup>th</sup>. There's not a grain left of our rations.



Halil Pasha with his staff officers ([www.turkeywar.com](http://www.turkeywar.com))

29<sup>th</sup>. This is a day not to be forgotten. Orders were published that the Turks did not want to release us on parole or any other grounds; we would have to surrender unconditionally. We were ordered to destroy all our weapons. There were some forty cannon in

Kut – they were all spiked. Thousands of rifles were broken and burnt. Boxes of ammunition were thrown into the depths of the Tigris. In this way all our armaments and ammunition was destroyed. (We heard later that the Turks had retrieved some of the ammunition from the river.) (92)

No rations again today.

Townshend sent out his last communiqué. Along with that he published a copy of his letter to Khalil Pasha.

Parts of this letter are below:

**Kut-el Amarah**

**29<sup>th</sup> April 1916.**

**The G.O.C. has sent the following letter to the Turkish Commander-in-Chief:**

Your Excellency

Hunger forces me to lay down our arms and I am ready to surrender to you my brave soldiers who have done their duty as you have affirmed when you said 'your gallant troops will be our most sincere and precious guests.' Be generous then; they have done their duty; you have seen them in the Battle of Ctesiphon; you have seen them during the retirement; and you have seen them during the siege of Kut for the last five months. You have seen how they have done their duty and I am certain that the military history of this war will affirm this in a decisive manner.

I am ready to put Kut into your hands at once; but I pray you to expedite the arrival of food.

Sd. Charles Townshend, Maj. General.

This was how the curtain fell on the historic siege of Kut. (93)

The surrender at Kut was viewed, at the time, as the greatest defeat the British had ever suffered in Asia. According to the website [www.firstworldwar.com](http://www.firstworldwar.com) 'It was the greatest humiliation to have befallen the British army in its history. For the Turks – and for Germany – it proved a significant morale booster, and undoubtedly weakened British influence in the Middle East.'

## 7. The Road to Captivity



Military personnel, Mesopotamia (Capt. C.H.Weaver [www.mespot.net](http://www.mespot.net)) [vi]

General Charles Townshend, the commander of the British-Indian force at Kut al-Amara, surrendered to the Ottoman commander, Khalil Pasha,

on the 29th of April 1916. The force had been under siege since early December, 1915, and their stocks of food were completely exhausted.

This is Sisir Sarbadhikari's description of what happened next. [iv]

April 29

Turkish troops entered Kut after 1 p.m. When we first entered Kut as a victorious force in in September 1915 the Arabs had greeted us with ululations, dancing and applause; all that was acted out again now. Those who wanted to take it further kissed the uniforms of the Turkish officers; but many earned blows and kicks for their efforts. The



General Townshend goes into captivity  
([www.turkeyswar.com](http://www.turkeyswar.com))



Turkish POWs before the fall of Kut

Turkish officers said, 'none of this is sincere, it's just a staged act', they understood that very well; if the British had come instead of the Turks it would have been the same... (94)

It was hard to know when the Turkish troops had been issued their uniforms. Their clothes were in a ragged state; many didn't have boots. Roughly speaking their uniforms were like this – a coat of a khaki-ish colour, pants of the same colour, with puttees.

Most of them did not have shoes – those who had them were wearing either German shoes, or our old boots. They had knapsacks on their backs, with greatcoats rolled up on top. On their heads they wore a kind of topi, made of cloth. A small water-bottle; on their belts two big cartridge pouches on either side; in their hands a Mauser of the German pattern. Some had a big bundle tied to the top of their knapsack – five or six of them would eat from those. Their faces had been burnt to a coppery sheen by the sun; it was clear at a glance that they were a hardy lot.

No matter what their clothes, they were very good soldiers.

The officers' uniforms were quite good. Boots with leather gaiters. (94-5)



**Turkish soldiers and officers**

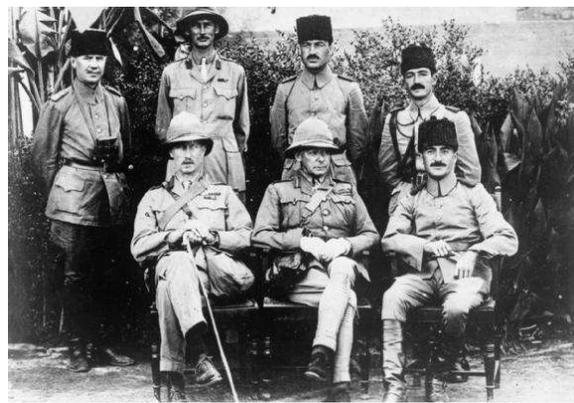
outrages were few. Considering the poverty of the Turkish soldiers, what is surprising is that there wasn't more looting. The looters were few. And when their officers were informed they gave the soldiers hell and made them return the goods...

We heard a Turkish soldier shouting 'Postal, postal' near our billet and ran to give him our letters – we had heard that they would make arrangements to send our letters to India so we had kept them ready. He explained to us that he wanted our boots and was willing to pay.

Among the Turkish soldiers there were some who snatched our things.

One entered the hospital and pulled off Captain Kane's boots; another grabbed Phani Datta's watch from his arm.

But those who committed these



**General Charles Townshend with Khalil Pasha and staff shortly after the surrender of Kut**



Lascars (Capt. C.H.Weaver [www.mespot.net](http://www.mespot.net))

We didn't know then that 'postal' was the word for shoes. Anyway none of us sold our boots. Who would sell their boots then? For one thing there was no hope of getting more; and on top of that we heard that we would have to march six or seven hundred miles, and that too mainly through

the desert, to get to our POW camps in Turkey.

May 1, 1916. From today our regiments began to leave Kut, one by one. For now to Camp Shamran, from there to Baghdad, where we would go from there nobody could say. Everybody would have to march. After five months of hunger, our physical state was such that it was difficult to march even a single mile – and now who knew how many miles we would have to walk?

May 2<sup>nd</sup>. The Turks took an interpreter from the Officer's Hospital, right next to us. The man did not want to go but they forced him. All day there was the sound of firing in the serai – we heard that those inhabitants of Kut who were considered traitors – that is those who had collaborated with the English – were being shot. Did the interpreter go that way too?

...

Today down by the riverbank we saw an awful sight. In Calcutta we'd seen tripods made of bamboo in front of coal-shops, to serve as hoists. Seven such triangles had been erected – a man had been hung from each one; the bodies were still strung up. (95-7)

...

Among the seven were Kut's shaikh, his nephew, his son-in-law, and a Jewish man, Sassoon. Their crime was to help the English.

They had tried to escape but had got caught. Later we heard that were whipped before they were hanged, so badly that the flesh of their backs was all torn up; Sassoon could not bear it and jumped off the roof of the sarai.

On the way back to the billet we saw a woman who was tearing out her hair and wandering about like a madwoman. Some said she was the shaikh's wife, some said the daughter.



**Women, Amarah (Capt. C.H.Weaver  
www.mespot.net)**

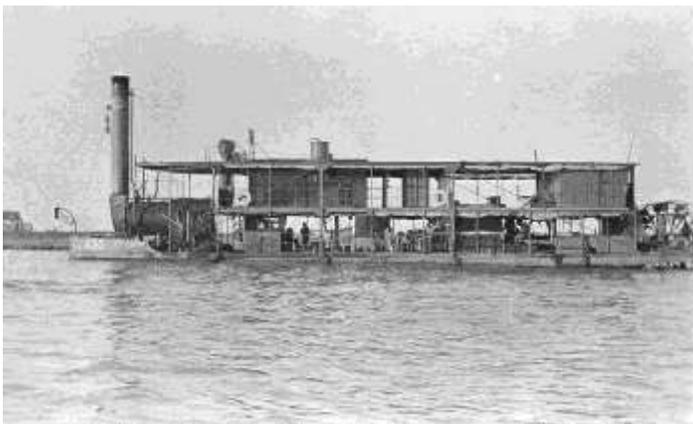
Their tragedy was a hundred times worse than ours. (98).

After this there were rumours once again that the Indian medical staff would be

paroled and sent back to India.

8<sup>th</sup>. We ate what little we had and at about one p.m. we went to the riverbank. Our names were called out one by one and we were searched. What luck that they didn't make me take off my boots! Otherwise I don't know if this story would have been written. My diary was hidden in my boots

A Turkish officer got off the steamer 'Julnar'. We thought that now they would



**Paddle Steamer**

let us get on the steamer. But that didn't happen. The officer had brought orders countermanding the instructions for sending us to India; we would be imprisoned in Turkey. What our state of mind was then, it's not in my power to describe. We all returned to

our billet with our blankets and haversacks. (101)

On the 12<sup>th</sup> the prisoners embarked on steamers, to be taken to Baghdad.

The white or British soldiers are behaving very badly with the black or Indian sepoys; they're even beating them! They say that it is because of the Indians that they lost at Kut! It's unimaginably vile. The astonishing thing is that even when complaints are taken to the British officers, they do nothing.

The whites are sitting in comfort in the lower deck, every one of them has space to sleep. We're on the upper deck – there's no roof over our heads, and we scarcely have enough space to sit.

On the 13<sup>th</sup> the arch of Ctesiphon came into view.



**Ruins of Ctesiphon**

Remembered the battle of Ctesiphon six months earlier.

Remembered many things one by one – the night march, how Saïlen used to walk as though he was fast asleep... things like that.

On the evening of the 17<sup>th</sup> Baghdad. The innumerable minarets

of Baghdad came into view from a long way off. The steamer dropped anchor and we disembarked. (102-3)

Sisir Sarbadhikari spent the rest of the war in prison camps, in Turkey and the Levant. He survived the war and returned to India in January 1919.



The Golden Domes of Kasamain'

Sarbadhikari's account of his captivity is, in many ways, even more compelling than his account of the campaign. Some day, if time permits, perhaps I will write about it. But here my intention was only to provide a sense of the

extraordinary vividness and drama of his narrative. These excerpts will, I hope, give readers some idea of why I believe this to be one of the finest of all First World War memoirs.

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[i] Bengalis, like most Indians, were not classified as a 'martial race' hence were not eligible for recruitment into the armed services; they were thus shut out of one of the country's most lucrative job markets.

[ii] 'Author's Introduction'.

[iii] [As I was writing this I discovered, to my astonishment, that I have a personal connection with Sisir Sarbadhikari, of the 'six-degrees-of-separation' kind. I happened to google 'Bengal Ambulance Corps, and the first name to come up was that of Ranadaprasad Saha, a Bangladeshi philanthropist and industrialist. He and his family were friends of my parents and I remember visiting his house in Narayanganj many times as a child. I was very young then and had no idea that he had served in Mesopotamia. But I do remember how shocked we were to learn that he had been seized by the Pakistani Army during the 1971 war. He was never seen again.]

[iv] The page references are to *Abhi Le Baghdad* ['On To Baghdad' by Sisir Sarbadhikari (Calcutta, 1958)]. The passages in colour are my own translations of excerpts from this text.]

[v] *Kalyan Pradeep: Captain Kalyan Kumar Mukhopadhaya, I.M.S.-er Jiboni*, by Mokkhoda Debi (1928) ['Kalyan Pradeep: The Life of Captain Kalyan Kumar Mukherji, I.M.S.']; pp 324-5.

[vi] These amazing photographs were taken by Capt. Charles Henry Weaver, who was with the Red Cross in Mesopotamia during the First World War. They are posted on the website <http://www.mespot.net/>

[vii] Sarbadhikari took the title of his book from this episode.

[viii] Kolshi – ghara; earthen water pot

[ix] The reference here is to Ranada Prasad Saha, who would go on to make a fortune in what is now Bangladesh. He would also become a legendary philanthropist. It so happens that he and his family were friends of my parents, and I visited his house several times as a child. He and his son were taken away by the Pakistani army during the 1971 war of liberation. They were never seen again.

[x] [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege\\_of\\_Kut](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Kut)