



Between Erasure and Remembrance: Shreds from the Lives of South Asian Prisoners of War in Stammlagers, Arbeitskommandos, Lazaretts and Graves During World War II (1939-45)¹

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This paper deals with those South Asian captives who chose not to be part of the Azad Hind Fauj or the Indian Legion (I.L.) as it was called in Germany. The I.L. was raised under the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose and trained by the Wehrmacht. Most of the captured South Asian soldiers had to pass through Annaburg, a small garrison town in Saxony, which served as a recruiting ground for the I.L. They were later moved to different locations in Germany. It is the presence of the I.L. soldiers that has been exhaustively researched and written about by German and Indian academics, hobby historians, and erstwhile I.L. officers (Bose 2012; Kuhlmann 2003; Oeseterheld 2002; Weidemann 1970, 1986, 1996; Günther 2003; Hartog 1991; Mangat 1986; Ganphule 1959; Sareen 1996). The memory of these dark skinned soldiers, who were trained by the Wehrmacht, is kept alive at the Annaburg Museum in a separate room dedicated to the Indian Legion soldiers.

Ordinary captives, *jangi qaidis* in German camp parlance, who lived and died in German captivity during the Second World War, but chose either not to join the I.L. or were found unfit, have received little attention so far. Neither those who have dealt with the I.L. nor those who have written about forced workers and captives have paid any attention to them. The 494 page tome of Ulrich Herbert, by far the most authoritative account of the deployment of alien labour during the Second World War, does not have a single reference to South Asian captives. It is largely a Eurocentric account in which coloured colonial captives from either Africa or Asia do not receive any attention. In the staggering statistics of more than 7.6 million aliens from all



over Europe and Africa, which Herbert marshalled, more than 1.9 million captives served in mines, industries, and agriculture as slave labour (Herbert 1985: 271). South Asian captives might be hidden in the category 'others' or subsumed under British soldiers, we do not know.

Other regional and local studies that deal with captive aliens, specifically in the context of illegal fraternisation with German population, and give a human face to the everyday interaction between victors and vanquished, have similarly either overlooked this 'racial' category or not found any instances of interracial contact between coloured captives and Germans in their sources (Kundrus 2002; Stephenson 1992; Zühl 1992; Heusler 1995). Lothar Günther is perhaps the only historian who dedicates a chapter to Indian captives in the context of Annaburg Stalag IVDZ and gives their tally as 3,940 from May 1941 to April 1945 (Günther 2003: 41). Annaburg also had Stalag IV D. IV stood for the (Wehrkries) War Area IV Command Dresden, D for administrative unit Torgau and Z for Zweiglager. Stalag IV D had prisoners from several nationalities. The records of captives in Annaburg were destroyed by the German camp commander after the camp was evacuated. The remaining 500 captives marched to the west, were taken by the Red Cross to England through France and were finally brought back to India (ibid.: 50-1). *Prisoners of War: Armies and Other Land Forces of the British Empire 1939-1945: Alphabetical Nominal Registers* lists the names of Indian officers and POWs along with other soldiers of the British Empire. It also gives information about at least one camp in which they were detained but does not offer qualitative information about their lives and experiences.

My search for these plebeian *jangi qaidis* started with the International Tracing Service Archive (ITS).² It was a chance discovery. I had gone there to trace a few European captives in connection with my research on intimate relations between German women and European captives. Their names and particulars surfaced in the criminal trials against German women in the Special Court of Hanover. Though the captives disappeared from the defendants' dossiers after being interrogated by the Gestapo, they aroused my curiosity. I could trace just a few of them – dead and alive – in Dachau in one case, and some others in graves and hospital records.

The paper trail that I followed after getting my initial lead in connection with South Asian captives at ITS, provided vital clues for



further research, which took me to other national, regional and local archives in Germany and to the International Committee of the Red Cross Archives (ACICR) in Geneva. This essay presents some of my preliminary findings as I continue to work on my primary sources and look for further clues. There is no simple way to ascertain how many South Asian captives were actually stationed in Germany during World War II. However, I would like to briefly present the quantitative evidence for the presence of South Asian captives that I was able to gather so far. At the ITS, the presence, and sometimes final destinations, of more than 978 captives could be traced. Although there are lists of a much smaller number of civilians from Berlin and other big cities dealing with middle class professionals such as doctors, students, professors and journalists, and on some rare occasions, also of dead or injured I.L. soldiers, they have not been included in this tally.

According to ACICR estimates, which are based on their visits of various Stalags, the following can be ascertained. A report on the visit of an ACICR team on 15 May 1943 at Stalag IVDZ at Annaburg/Torgau, which had the largest contingent of South Asian captives, gives their total number as 4,323. Among them 3,777 were ordinary captives.³ In this report South Asian captives have been vertically listed in terms of ranks: officers, non-commissioned officers and ordinary soldiers, and horizontally along religious lines. The effective number of ordinary captives listed was broken down as follows: Sikhs 864, Hindus 2,136, Buddhists 9, Muslims 1,214, and Christians 100. The number of captives actually living in the camp was 1,587 out of whom 946 were Hindus and 641 Muslims. 32 detachments of captives returned to camp after a day's work, while 3 detachments of a total of 2,828 captives went out. The second largest site was Stalag IV E, Annaburg, where 1,160 Hindus, 596 Muslims, 200 Sikhs, and 4 Brahmins were camped.⁴ In Stalag IV A/B, Hohnstein, 49 Indians were camped with Arabs, Egyptians, Turks and captives of several other nationalities.⁵ Besides these, there were 444 Hindus in Stalag IV B, Mühlberg, while Stalag IV B Mühlberg Lazarette, listed 166 sick Indian captives.⁶ This makes a total of 7,834 South Asian captives.

This sum, however, does not necessarily reflect the actual number of captives, as there might be overlaps between the ITS and ACICR sources. This overlap, as far as I could establish, relates mainly to big firms around Annaburg that engaged South Asian captives, and it might be assumed that the captives travelled to these firms from one of the Annaburg Stalags that figure in the ACICR records. On the other hand we might stretch this tally a bit upwards as there were transit



Stalags, which the ACICR team did not visit. Captives moved in and out of these, especially towards the end of World War II. An additional number was transferred to transit Stalags from France in 1944, which is not included in this tally. The records of these captives may have been intentionally or accidentally destroyed. Thus, even the most persistent search may never reveal the actual number of captive South Asians.

Let me now turn to the quality of evidence to reflect on the possibilities and limitations of recreating the *jangi qaidis* 'Kriegsalltag' (everyday life in war). A good starting point at the ITS was the Allied Order of 6 December 1945. It instructed all civil authorities, in Germany, to conduct exhaustive searches for all documents and information about military and civilian persons belonging to the United Kingdom since 1939 and to submit their findings immediately to the command of their respective occupation forces. This started the process of systematically building an alternate archive for British Indians, or Indians, as the South Asians of undivided India were catalogued, in the heart of Germany. This British highway to the final destination of victims and survivors offers rich evidence for the history of institutional remembrance of Indian soldiers under the British Empire.

The collection consists of 382 index cards, an overwhelming proportion of which deals with South Asian captives. Civil authorities who prepared these documents used specific forms for furnishing required information: such as Form III for listing the dead, which were stamped in red by the ITS team as grave registrations, Form II for registration of civilians, Form IV for lists of the dead from cemeteries, Form V for registration of marriage, Form VII/X for employment details, Form IX for health and medical records, Form XI for sickness and so on. This pattern of categorisation also had some regional variations. Thus, the inference is drawn from the actual information on these documents rather than the heading.

Details on these forms were supplied by the staff of graveyards, sick bays, sanatoria, mental asylums, hospitals, erstwhile employers and other civil and municipal authorities like the employment exchange, civil registry office, and so on. On several occasions a single document had several names of captive soldiers. This happened when they lay in mass graves, sick bays or had worked as slave labour in firms. For example, long lists were supplied by a firm called Dr. Otto Säurebau from Bendorf, Katze & Klumpp A.G. from Gernsbach,, A.G. für Grob und Feinkeramik from Sinzig and Emailierwerke Robert Dold from



Offenburg. All these sites belonged to the post-war French Zone. From the post-war Soviet Zone, lists running into several pages were handed over by I.G. Farben, which employed POWs in its power plant at Thalheim, and its aluminium firm in Bitterfeld. Faserwerke Mühlanger similarly submitted long lists.

These records, like most other documents such as the Gestapo and judiciary dossiers relating to persecuted private individuals, do not cover the entire universe of South Asian captivity in the Third Reich. There were various reasons for this, such as large scale destruction of evidence by Nazis themselves towards the end of the war, air raids, official and civil reluctance to part with information relating to the persecuted in the post-war era, and so on.

***Jangi Qaidi* and the Politics of Mortuary**

Despite this, what struck me most about the lists of *jangi qaidis* was their spatial presence during war years; a presence now catalogued as grave certificates in the ITS records. There was no escape from the omnipresent threat of death during World War II. This applied even more so to concentration camp inmates, captives and forced labour, who were far more vulnerable to air raids, extremes of weather, starvation and disease than ordinary Germans. If we take the death records of these *jangi qaidis* as an indicator, their spread is noteworthy. Their corpses could be found in villages and towns such as Ansbach, Füssen, Bad-Neustadt, Bad-Reichenhall, Bischofsgrün, Berchtesgaden, Ölkofen, Garmisch, Regensburg, Limburg, Oberroning, Westertimke, Herborn, Darmstadt, Bremervörde, Nürnberg, Starnberg, Augsburg, Königsbrück, Garmisch-Partenkirchen, Wettering, Lauterhofen, Fulda, Gießen, Wiesbaden, Stuttgart, Westertimke, Darmstadt, Köln and Sonthofen, in isolation, or in mass graves.

Prisoners of war seldom speak, and deceased prisoners of war do not speak at all, but the 'politics of mortuary/knowledge/power' as it was played out over their mortal remains, often left behind clues about 'ownership'. In the death and burial rituals – if they may call them rituals at all – it gradually became clear who owned whom, who was left disowned by both imperial powers, and who controlled their destinies as their corpses lay several feet below the surface, in the land of their captors. The two empires locked horns once again over the corpses of their captives on what became a battle field of memory and memorialisation in order to decide once and for all, who owned the body of the deceased.



There were some corpses whose presence was noted on a shred of paper stamped as a grave certificate. These were very ordinary prisoners of war without unswerving loyalties. Then there were some other corpses that lay buried in military or civilian 'Friedhof' (cemeteries) with grave numbers and other details. These were most likely the Indian Legion soldiers, though they may not necessarily have had their infantry and POW numbers etched in stone or mentioned in their grave certificates. Then there were those corpses that were exhumed by the tracing service team, brought to a war cemetery in Berlin, or transported to a more appropriate location. There they were interred once again, this time with full soldiers' honours. Their martyrdom and memory were etched in stone for posterity. They secured a place in the cultural history of memorialisation. These were the ones who remained loyal to the British till the bitter end. The Commonwealth War Graves Commission has records on 115 named and 21 unnamed burials of Indian soldiers in various cemeteries in Germany.

Memory and Memorialisation

In Thompson's sense, then, this paper seeks to rescue the South Asian *jangi qaidis*, dead or alive, indiscriminately from "the enormous condescension of posterity". Thompson sought to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' handloom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan and the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott (Thompson 1980: 12). He considered it a worthwhile exercise even though their traditions may have been dying, their vision 'backward looking', their communitarian ideals fantastic, and their insurrectionary conspiracies foolhardy, for they lived through the times of acute disturbance, which he did not. Their aspirations, Thompson asserts, were valid in terms of their own experience, and thus, they deserved to be judged in the light of their own times. Thompson's point could not be less valid in the context of those British colonial soldiers who lived and died in German captivity during World War II, a time far more devastating, traumatising, and tumultuous than the times of industrialisation.

It was also a time when the British had exhausted their men and material and become increasingly dependent on its Empire. India raised more than two million men for the British Empire. WWII left as many dead soldiers as distraught survivors. The captives endured hardships and provided slave labour to the Axis Powers, in our case, to German industries, mines, and farms. In attempting to rescue the



South Asian *jangi quadis*, I am not looking for the ideal soldier fighting unto death to rescue his motherland, sacrificing his life for the Empire, or indeed, saving the world from fascists, but men with all their virtues and vices, irrespective of their acts, as twice colonised peasants and workers in uniform, as socially incomprehensible beings, in a hostile and culturally alien land behind the barbed wire.

This chapter is also a feeble attempt, given the limitation of sources, to probe the myth that war work for Indian soldiers was a voluntary exercise. The British in their recruitment drive during World War II called it voluntary, while they lured young men with promises of steady wages, pension, and good life style in the time of the Bengal famine, large scale poverty and hunger. The Indian government in its recent publication, *The Last Post: Indian War Memorials around the World*, proclaims the 2.5 million strong British Indian Army as the largest voluntary force ever in the history of human conflict (Chinna 2014: 6). Their description as 'voluntary' is mirrored in the language of the sources. In the Third Reich, while extracting forced labour from captive South Asians, their employers entered into job contracts which stated that they were performing voluntary work. Much spade work needs to be done to unearth evidence to the contrary in a field that has remained abandoned until now. Certainly an everyday history approach to war can help unveil what war work meant to captives, and the real circumstances under which young men in their teens and twenties went to war.

The task of rescuing these men from 'the enormous condescension of posterity' is as rewarding as it is challenging. It is an acknowledgement of the power of remembrance in pursuit of care for culture and respect for the dead and the surviving. While commemorating the liberation of women's concentration camp at Ravensbrück in April 2007, Jessica Durlacher, a Dutch literary critic and daughter of Gerhard Durlacher, an Auschwitz survivor, said in her speech:

Remembrance is an expression of culture. A proof of the persistent will to record and to preserve, a proof of a different kind of care: that of respect for and towards the deceased. It honours the deceased and thus offers help –however fragile it may be – to the living [...]. Not without reason had the prisoners known how to keep themselves alive by thinking that what they were going through ought to be preserved and told, that they ought to survive (if only) because of this, and maintain their memory and their thinking, so that the culture may continue to exist in the inalienable self of every human being, his or her heart and mind



(Durlacher's speech on the 62nd anniversary of the liberation of the Women's Ravensbrück Camp).

Sources and Discourses

The ITS collection gives us a bird's eye view of the presence of South Asian soldiers in German captivity. However, it has its own limitations, just like any other archive. Inherent in the nature of this knowledge generation for posterity is an element of compulsion 'from above' to report the dead, surviving, or missing persons who were all categorised as persecuted individuals by the allied search committee. The German institutional reluctance to part with such information thus comes across in many instances. One such instance would be the standard declaration from civil authorities at the end of the document, which reads: "I certify to the best of my knowledge and conscience that the required information given above is the correct and complete reproduction of available documents at hand." This is a regular feature of the documentation associated with the denazification drive, as well.

Yet another source, however, of a qualitative nature, are the reports of the 'Sicherheitsdienst' (Security Service), the Third Reich's secret observers, which give very interesting information on Indian captives from Karlsruhe, Koblenz and Freiburg. These locations find no mention in the ITS and ACICR records. The information retrieved, while rich in its geographical coverage, is neither substantial enough to recreate the 'Kriegsalltag' of *jangi qaidis* nor exhaustive enough to ascertain their actual figure. This vital limitation per se denies the historian any possibility of finding subjective experiences of captive soldiers. There are no testimonies, no effects, no last wishes, let alone diaries or other ego documents. There are no stories of human contact, compassion, and empathy from 'the other universe', inhabited by ordinary Germans located not very far from these sites.

What was recorded and preserved willingly or unwillingly in various archives, including the ITS, would leave any historian wishing to write about Kriegsalltag with a void, a sense of hollowness, the loss of the spoken word, non-verbal exchanges, gestures or gaze. Gayatri Spivak cautions "one must write not in expectation that one day those limits will be overcome, but in realisation that systematic search cannot capture what the everyday life shores up" (Gayatri Spivak 1999: 239). While heeding her advice and mourning the loss, do I throw up my hands in despair and ask myself: Is this an exercise in futility? Can I ever capture their Kriegsalltag, when even an alternate archive such as



the ITS, conceals more than it reveals? I go James Scott's way and focus my attention on hidden transcripts.

In his work *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, Scott postulates that the subjective experience of the powerless can be captured in two ways: in a visible, tangible way, which he calls public transcript "the open interaction between subordinates and those who dominate" (Scott 1999: 2). This transcript contains what his master would like to see in him, which is just skin deep. To get beneath the skin, he finds hidden transcripts more dependable. Hidden transcript is "the discourse that takes place 'offstage' beyond direct observation by power holders" (ibid.: 4).

For Scott, there exists a sharp divide between the behaviour, language, and customs that both dominant and dominated groups assume in public and the language, jokes, and criticisms that structure their lives within the back streets and slave quarters of their within-group experience. The powerful, for their part, also develop a hidden transcript representing the practices and claims of their rule, which cannot be openly avowed. A comparison of the hidden transcript of the weak with that of the powerful and of *both* hidden transcripts to the public transcript of power relations offers a substantially new way of understanding resistance to domination (Scott 1990: xii). While it is much easier to read the public transcript in historical records, he believes that the voice of the powerless is audible, if faint, in the historical record.

In our context, the surviving public transcripts, which present 'the stylised public performance' of the captors, can be read against the grain. These are documents such as a job contract prepared by a firm and signed by the captives, hand-outs given by camp commanders to employers with clear instructions on the expected code of behaviour for captives, documents related to the expenses incurred in their upkeep, general instructions for camp inmates, instructions about a ban on writing letters in other regional languages, and so on. We also have official communications between the Ministry of External Affairs (Auswärtiges Amt; Foreign Office) and the Swiss Legation/International Red Cross demonstrating the former's active compliance with the latter's guidelines on captives' basic requirements such as hygiene, sanitation, clothing, postal service, food, books and parcels as well as responses to latter's queries regarding insufficient arrangements or improper behaviour of authorities in specific Stalags. Hidden transcripts would be secret circulars from the Reich's Ministry of



Justice to local and regional courts, the correspondence between Wehrmacht's High Command and 'Arbeitskommandos', prisons' authorities, Gestapo and military courts in connection with those who were tried and punished on disciplinary grounds, documents from the ITS collection on all captives in various places of confinement, and, of course, silent observations of the 'Sicherheitsdienst'.

Commissions, Omissions, and Silences

In the remaining part of the essay, a few of these sources will be evaluated by reading against the grain of public transcripts and interpreting the silences and hidden transcripts. Taking the benefit of hindsight and published sources on persecuted people from other contexts, an attempt is made to recreate the 'Kriegsalltag' of South Asian captives.

As the term 'shreds' in the title denotes, they are snapshots of soldiers' presence rather than pans and zoom-ins into their lived reality. Shreds, as these pieces of evidence might be, they come from an alternate archive that the ITS painstakingly built, thereby revealing what the Nazis wanted to conceal. The first example deals with deceased *jangi qaidis*. In spite of the geographical spread of plebeian *jangi qaidis'* graves, there were signs of omission, willful or otherwise, callousness, and misspelling of particulars like name and place of birth. Some of the civil authorities reported as late as 1947, 1948 or even 1951 on corpses that had lain underground since 1940, 1943 or 1944. Columns such as place of birth or death and reason of death were either left blank or filled in as unknown.⁷ From 1949 onwards renewed searches were conducted, which resulted in Supplementary Lists of Graves. These grave sites were dug up with search teams in attendance, corpses were exhumed – sometimes relocated – and their personal details added to registered deaths subsequently.

One such Supplementary List of Graves reported a mass grave of 10 *jangi qaidis* from Darmstadt, which was submitted in October 1947. The captives had been dead since September 1944 but the certificate left columns such as reason and date of death blank. It later turned out that most of them, except one, died in a single air raid and the remaining one succumbed to his abdominal membrane infection a week after the air raid.⁸ During the second round, these corpses were exhumed and transferred to their native country.⁹ The remark on these certificates stated that it contained additions to and ratifications of the information submitted as a result of an actual check of graves.



The other numerically rich but spatially concentrated category of South Asian captives consists of labour deployed in the war industry around Annaburg/ Torgau, Stalag IVD in the Prussian provinces of Saxony and Rheinland, and parts of Bavaria and Baden. The largest contingent worked in an aluminium firm in Bitterfeld and in a power plant in Thalheim, a total of 314¹⁰ followed by Faserwerke Mühlanger with 230 captives.¹¹ In this serialised listing of payments for January, February and March 1945, the last captive bears the serial number 230, however, the earlier sheets bearing serial number 1 to 172 are missing.¹² Dr. Otto Säurebau, Bendorf listed 62 captives¹³, A.G. für Grob und Feinkeramik in Sinzig gave a list of 54 captives¹⁴, Katze & Klumpp A.G., Gernsbach, engaged 45 helpers¹⁵, and Emaillierwerke Robert Dold kept Offenburg 23 captives.¹⁶ There is another list of 51 Indian captives without any date and duration. Upon further research, it could be established that their 'Arbeitskommando' number 1411 was stationed in Herbolzheim, a part of Emmendingen district in Bavaria.¹⁷ There were, of course, captives employed on farms, gardens and other small places on an individual basis, but unfortunately there are no records available of them.

What did 'Kriegsalltag' mean to *jangi qaidis*? What did it mean to camp commanders and owners of big war related enterprises? What did reporting on attitudes to work and performance of captives mean to the 'Sicherheitsdienst'? My reflections on the 'Kriegsalltag' of *jangi qaidis* amid all these actors of the Nazi state and society are categorised in four domains: the functional domain, the dysfunctional domain, the affective domain and the transgressive domain.

The Functional Domain

This was the physical domain of being judged 'arbeitsfähig' (fit for work). In the captor's records, this would mean that the captive was free of lice and contagion and that his body could bear the regimen of hard work. Certainly, malnutrition, exhaustion and other such physical factors did not count as valid reasons for the inability to work. Their rations were one-third of their guards and two-thirds of the ordinary Germans. The payments were just the opposite of that. If someone complained of being unwell, the camp doctor would measure his body temperature and send him to work, if it was normal. Whether it was a factory, a farm, a bombed site, or a mine, he had to deliver to the satisfaction of his employer and the German state. This was the domain of utmost significance to his captor.



For this domain to function smoothly and for the performance to be good by German standards, the captors devised a language of communication. This was not the language of two way communication but for giving instructions to be followed silently. Instructions were written in Roman script and Hindustani language, a mix of Hindi and Urdu. As far as the power holders were concerned, they said what they had to say in clear and articulate manner in this hybrid language. Its purpose was to assure compliance, discipline, regimentation, routine and above all, good performance. This was the way captives were to conduct themselves. The camp order and work order came from a central location, but if we have to understand how power functioned in its everyday form of domination and subordination we need to go to local sites to observe what Foucault called "the capillary function of power" which was far more dispersed and context specific.

The capillary function of power consisted of persuading the South Asian captives to join the Indian Legion 'voluntarily'. The recruitment was carried out by some 'enthusiastic' Indian Legion officers themselves specially selected for this task. Bose's propagandists, in isolated instances, also practiced violence as a method of mobilisation. The Swiss Legation, during an inspection of the Annaburg camp, noted in its report of 22 September 1942 that the camp mates were mistreated by their own kin because they refused to join the Indian Legion. A later report of 23 July 1943, however, said that even though the propaganda was still going on "the prisoners were no longer ill-treated or subjected to brutality" (Kuhlmann 2003: 240). The I.L.'s interpreter Ernst Bannerth and the doctor Ernst Koch-Grünberg after defecting to the British side accused Abid Hussan and other Indians of having beaten their own kin. One Zain-ud-Din Abi, a victim of these brutalities was said to have joined the legion with the sole purpose of convincing other legionaries to quit. Koch-Grünberg, however, also made it clear that in most of the cases there was no need for force as "most of the 'volunteers' followed blindly like sheep, having no clear idea of what they were doing. They saw their friends already in legion uniforms and were attracted by the sight of fine clothes, pretty girls and the possibility of a free social life" (cit. in Kuhlmann 2003: 240).

Oesterheld opines that it became a custom to make prisoners come to Lacanau, "a conversion camp", to be shown the advantages of a legionary's life and those who would not join were given ill-treatment and then sent to a concentration camp in Epinal (cit. in Oesterheld 2000: 212). The propagandists tried all means. They dangled both carrot and stick before the captives, attributed herd mentality to most



of them and noted with regret a general lack of willingness among captives to go through the grind of training even with all the temptations.

In the domain of war work the ITS records leave some clues. We know from the pay registers of a Faserwerk at Mühlanger, a village near Wittenberg that the *jangi qaidi* was normally paid RM 0.50 per day. ACICR records of Stalag IVE state that the voluntary captives were paid RM 0.40 for a five hour day work.¹⁸ In comparison his British counterpart received RM 1 per day.¹⁹ Another firm delivered a list of 415 Indian captives on 14 sheets to the ITS. Even though the name of the firm surfaces only on a few sheets (I.G. Farben), the format in which the information was supplied was similar, so it may be assumed they all came from I.G. Farben.²⁰ Closer examination, however, reveals that the serial order jumps from 231 to 332 skipping 101 serial numbers. So, the list which has a total of 415, finally, has names of only 314 captives. This callousness, negligence, or indifference goes even further. They rarely mention captives' date or place of birth. All other columns such as where they came from and where they went after February 1945 state 'unknown'. Sometimes dates of employment started from early 1944 and went till February 1945. Those employed in Kraftwerk Thalheim lived in Sandersdorf and Wolfen. It is not mentioned where those who worked in Bitterfeld lived. The only consistency besides names is their prisoner of war number. That is all that mattered to the employer. Such was the reluctance of a big concern that engaged them in two of the most important war industries, power generation, and aluminium production!

While looming silence, incomplete information and blank columns in the submitted forms characterised the mode of reporting on dead and enslaved captives by civil authorities, firms and graveyards, interestingly, one finds a contrast in the observations of the 'Sicherheitsdienst' (SD). *Meldungen aus dem Reich: Die geheimen Lageberichte des Sicherheitsdienstes der SS 1938-1945* are secret reports filed by the SD, which have been compiled in 17 volumes and 6,740 pages by Heinz Boberach (Boberach 1984). These reports are immensely useful as SD functionaries silently recorded the prevailing mood and morale of the population, general cultural and economic trends, and the actions of groups and individuals during war years in great detail.

The SD reporters were, in a sense, state appointed 'mass observers' who constantly had their fingers on the pulse of the ordinary people and officialdom alike, including men from the elite SS. The SD reports



were an early warning system of crisis management. The officials specifically examined reports that reflected disloyalty, disgruntlement, and grumblings among the population so that 'appropriate' measures could be taken for the smooth functioning of the system. Unlike the cold nature of the ITS dossiers, the SD observations are full of vivid details on South Asian captives' deportment, behaviour, and attitudes. They are the most colourful samples of hidden transcripts in which the power holders revealed their attitudes, biases, hopes and fears. The SD report exclusively dedicated to South Asian captives was filed on 20 March 1944. It starts with the following observation:

They are far less in numbers as compared with the other POWs. The experience with them is as negative as with British POWs. They are unsuitable for industrial and professional use and can only be employed either in digging the earth (e.g. for air raid shelters) or assigned on trial basis as helpers in munitions firms. Their performance in digging air raid shelters is so much below the lowest German average that the firms have to turn to the Stalag due to the withdrawal of these Indians. Each labour commando has been assigned a few Indian POWs, who categorically refuse to do any work and invoke the Geneva Convention. Even the request of German employers to their supervisors to exert an educational influence is dismissed with the remark that any punitive measures by German authorities would not have any impact. If one confines them, they have the option of sleeping while in arrest. Depriving them of food similarly brings them no great harm as they are abundantly supplied with Red Cross parcels and food packets from home. This passive attitude of the supervisors extends to the entire contingent. Those engaged in digging air raid shelter in Daimler Benz yield the same results. Half of the contingent just looks on while the other half digs. Rather than keeping themselves warm by working, they prefer to freeze. They keep their hands perpetually in their trousers' pockets and cover their heads with shawls in such a manner that only their eyes and noses are visible. Those who work pick just one-third of soil in their shovel of what an average worker would. (Boberach 1984: 6424-5)

While the SD observations condemn South Asian captives as below average performers, shirkers and ultimately, a financial liability on the Reich, the payment registers of Faserwerk Mühlanger, supplied to the ITS team with payment lists and charts of the South Asian captives tell another story. One payment list including 17 captives shows that they worked on Sunday 11 July 1943 even though they were not supposed to work on Sundays.²¹ Another list of Indian captives starts from serial number 173 and ends at 230, which implies that there were more



captives before this serial order whose details have gone missing. It had payment charts for the month of January, February, and March 1945, but the rest of the charts are not available. The normal working day consisted of eight hours, six days a week for a payment of RM 0.50 per day. But there were variations here. For example, one Kalyan S. worked for ten hours per day for two weeks and ten hours per day for nine days in the rest of the two weeks in Feb. 1945. This made a total of 230 hours in 28 days for which he got paid only RM 34. The average monthly payment for others was RM 22 or 23. Another Karak B. worked ten hours per day – twice even eleven hours – during the entire month of Feb 1945 and received RM 48 for 290 hours of work. Dhan B. worked for up to 12 hrs, five days in a week, 60 hrs per week in the second week of January earning RM 36 for 245 hours of work.

Lothar Günther cites official guidelines from the labour exchange, Torgau, as well as the Labour Commando of Annaburg to the firms, such as Heide Gerbiswissen, which operated through the officers' camp Oflag 54 (IV E). The labour contract, which remained in effect from 1941 to 1944 stated that the work performed was voluntary and was not allowed to exceed five hours including marching to and fro to the work place (Günther 2003: 45). The author also comments that there were no records of complaints and grievances against the working conditions. Sure enough, we have no records of complaints in the ITS collection either. What we see, however, in the payment charts of Faserwerk Mühlanger is a regular working day of eight hours excluding travel time. In some cases it stretched over the weekends and some captives kept working for as long as 12 hours. Why would the captives indulge in such back breaking 'voluntary' work? We know that payments were done in coupons and not in cash and that they could be exchanged for food and provisions inside the camp only. Any exchange in kind or cash with local population was forbidden.

Silence sometime speaks more than words, especially so in these situations. Captives who were deployed in a ceramic factory in Sinzig, where fine dust presented a health hazard, are another example. The ITS records of A.G. für Grob und Feinkeramik at Sinzig, Ahrweiler, contains a list of 54 Indian captives engaged in different departments of tile manufacturing for the war industry.²² The firm offered no other information on the duration or payments, but the lists bore remarks of very tough work and excessive dust. A local archivist Leonhard Janta working on the history of the firm gives us further information about the firm during the twelve years of Nazi Germany. Janta says that at first the firm employed German workers. After they were drafted,



French captives were brought, then the Russians, and finally an Indian contingent of 54 captives arrived in March 1944. The building suffered heavily due to grenade attacks during 1944-45. However, he is not sure what happened to these captives after the autumn of 1944. They may have been transferred to construct bunkers. There is no information on whether they were sent back to their home country. A week had 48 working hours and the captives were camped inside the premises. He also notes that what happened in the firm could not be recreated through contemporary witness accounts as no inhabitant living in the vicinity volunteered any information (Janta 2011: 45-6).

The Dysfunctional Domain

All captives were indispensable labour for the war industry. It was due to their deployment and that of forced civilian workers from the East that women in Nazi Germany could avoid demanding war work in factories or mines at the time of labour scarcity. The loss of forced labour was seen as detrimental to the war effort. If a German was caught helping a captive to escape, he or she faced a rigorous imprisonment. While many such cases could be found in the Gestapo dossiers in connection with European captives, sadly, being a fugitive was not a real option for dark skinned captives who would be apprehended instantly in an ethnically alien surrounding. There was no escape from captivity and not all captives could remain fit for work in the long run. Some chose death, the ultimate liberator, others succumbed to it. In Annaburg, for instance, there were 12 reported deaths between 1942 and 1945 due to lung infection, suicide, heart attack, abdominal diseases, and similar unnatural or unknown reasons.²³ The reported reasons for deaths in isolated cases from locations where South Asian captives were in relatively smaller numbers, were depression, schizophrenia, suicide, exhaustion, nervous breakdown, and mental illness.²⁴ Some of the other deadly killers apart from TB were air raids²⁵ and industrial accidents.²⁶ Seventeen disappeared without a trace.²⁷

The Affective Domain

Though this domain was all encompassing, its traces are more challenging to find due to the nature of available evidence. The rest of this paper uses a combination of imagination and historical-anthropological tools to conjure a picture of the 'Kriegsalltag'. The captives, especially those who were camped together with their countrymen may have had



their lighter moments after work, which they passed with songs, jokes, storytelling, playing pranks, and so on. Members of the I.L. used to indulge in theatre, festivities, and other communal activities. But that is something we can only imagine, as there are no ego documents in the records we possess.

There were sites where the South Asians captives were camped or interned in rare cases. This must have been an isolating experience as the large chunk of captives would have been Europeans of various nationalities for whom possibilities of socialisation with other prisoners and for forging human bonds with others due to similar religious, cultural and ethnic background may have been much better than those of the South Asian captives. Beyond a day's work, their life with bleak possibilities of socialisation must have been full of pessimism, boredom, especially in harsh and dark winters. To come a bit closer to this diversity of experience, attention may be drawn on the memoir of a British soldier, M. Newey.

Newey was taken POW in 1943. He wrote in his memoirs that he spent a few days in Italy and was then transported to Germany first to Stalag VIII B at Lamsdorf in Upper Silesia and then to Blechhammer near a town called Gliwice. The general conditions in Germany of food and housing were much better than in Italy. The prisoners could borrow blue overalls from foreign workers to hide their uniforms and roam freely to do some black-marketing and visit local brothels where thier chocolates and soaps were more welcome than German Marks. He remembered enjoying his Christmas. He worked on a construction site which belonged to I.G. Farben paying a Mark a day to be spent in camp. Bribery swung into action. There were Czech workers who played imaging dart and matches and even went home for weekends. They got flour and eggs which they could cook in the room.

In fact, he gained weight in the camp. In Italy he had become skinny. He joked with his German guards, teased them, but was never ill-treated. They played football, had beer with the guard and received mail from his office. He was treated much better than the Jews who were treated as vermin, dressed in blue and white pyjama suits with a Star of David, starved, humiliated, and then dispatched to gas chambers. They received savage, scientific beating as a reward for possessing as much as saccharin, got crest and crumbs to eat. Most of the camp guards were friendly to him accepting bribe and giving shelter in winter inside the room with a stove which all of them took



turns to use, eating there and making sure to being seen outside at work by taking turns.²⁸

Between the white British soldiers and camp guards and German employers, as the SD observations also confirm, there was a constant war of words raging. They would often play pranks on their captures and pass snide remarks such as that they were neither colonials nor Russians who could be bullied easily into subservience, that very soon the tables would turn, and so on. Such a situation can hardly be imagined in the case of a South Asian captive who had to struggle to communicate his basic needs.

The Transgressive Domain

This fourth domain, which is equally challenging to establish in the case of South Asian POWs, deals with transgressions, grumblings, laziness, sabotage, expressions of defeatism, counter-propaganda, whistle-blowing, impudence, and last but not least, seeking forbidden contact with the natives, especially intimate contact with women. All of these offences were wartime offences even for the Germans, who were tried by the 'Sondergerichtshof' (Special Court), and invited harsh state police measures.

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Acts of transgression could be traced from the camp sites through records of overwork, punishment cells, solitary confinement in camps, transfer to jail or punishment battalions, denial of parcels from the Red Cross and home, suspension of postal facilities, and so on. Traces of such acts on the part of the officialdom are rare to find in captives' records. However, the SD reports dwell into several forms of undesirable conduct, especially in connection with South Asian captives and their frustration at disciplining these 'obstinate' fellows. A contingent of Indian workers was tentatively trained to work for simple industrial work in Freiburg. This is what is reported about their attitude:

Since 21 December 1943 50 Indian POWs were employed in a textile factory. Five of them were non-commissioned officers who immediately invoked the Geneva Convention according to which they did not require to work. At first, it seemed quite strange that all Indians claimed that they neither understood English nor German. As soon as they were led to work it became apparent why they made such a claim. They wanted to use the possibility of non-communicability to avoid all work. They lay on the floor or leaned against the machines without any movement for hours. A few commented 'dead man'. When they were firmly pushed to work, they were physically carried to their barracks by their co-



workers. Communication problem did not come in their way at all while seeking contact with French workers or eastern female workers in the factory. (Boberach 1984: 6425)

A 'wiser' and more experienced firm manager in Karlsruhe reported:

Due to my knowledge of English it is very easy for me to communicate with Indian POWs. After several conversations with them I have come to the following conclusion (which is confirmed by other English speaking Germans), we are dealing with Indians who have been very well briefed by the English. For example, it is very interesting to note that the Indian men of confidence are very well informed about the exact guidelines of the Geneva Convention regarding the terms of deployment of POWs. One gains an absolute impression that the English have been able to command such immense respect through their violent methods of rule over the years as cannot be taken away from this contingent so easily.

The German population considers the Indian POWs as children and does not take them seriously in any way. At first, they were extremely friendly with them. But, due to their below average performance at work their attitude had changed fundamentally.

From Koblenz where Indian POWs have been deployed it has been reported that the people are very perturbed about the many benefits they enjoy.

Unfortunately, German people still show a deplorable attitude towards aliens, especially towards the POWs. It was observed in Koblenz that two Indians and an old German man were to transport a hand cart. Both the Indians were directing the old man while he was laboriously pulling the cart by himself. But, it did not strike the Indians to help him in the slightest way. Another example from Koblenz shows how challenging their behaviour was:

In a Sekt factory in Koblenz, a group of Indian prisoners have been employed. They were assigned a prayer room for their religious requirements along with other privileges. The Indians were watched by two army guards and locked up in the night in their rooms. As there was no toilette in that room they were given a bucket for that purpose. They refused to empty it out, apparently, as their religious prescriptions did not allow them to do so. Even during their deployment they completely refused to carry out any function that was apparently forbidden in their religion such as washing the bottles. Besides this, they constantly reminded us that they were British soldiers and therefore were not required to work at all. (Boberach 1984: 6425-26)

The SD reports allude to the cunning of the South Asian captives and their unique ways of shunning work. Acts such as laying 'dead' on the



machines, being dragged to their barracks after their refusal to work, forging an instant bond with captives of other nationalities, all what seemed so weird and incomprehensible to the captors, seems typical of the South Asian contemporary political culture of offering resistance to power holders. During World War II, the Indian National Movement was at its peak and by then ordinary people had had enough exposure in their everyday lives to non-violent methods of non-cooperation from a range of freedom fighters such as Gandhi, Ambedkar and martyr Bhagat Singh.

Bhagat Singh had gone on an indefinite hunger strike inside the Lahore prison to demand a special status of political prisoners as he and his comrades were treated by the British as ordinary criminals. He was already a people's hero in Punjab due to his revolutionary activities. This hunger strike won him popularity with large parts of the population of British India and the British had to finally yield to some extent to his demands – although he and his comrades were never given the status of political prisoners they achieved some relief regarding the prison regime. Kuhlmann's accounts of military indiscipline, similarly, shows instances of hunger strikes and acts of disobedience by Indian Legion soldiers. Their disregard of German discipline and work ethics runs like a red thread through the German officialdom's encounter with colonial captives across the spectrum. If one reads against the grain of official expectations, the moments when the hidden transcript of the subordinated burst forth, start becoming visible.

The SD observers deplored the superior leadership abilities of their British counterparts just as they noted the failure of their propaganda politics with regard to these soldiers. The report noted that the captives pretended not to be aware of Subhas Chandra Bose – who initiated the formation of the Indian Legion – which the observers rationalised as a genuine fear of their families being affected, were they to show their disloyalty to the English.

In the SD observations one constantly notices an oblique or direct comparison between the disciplinary ability of the British – viewed with awe – and their dismay at their own failure to extract optimum labour or services from the South Asian captives. They refer to the captives' weird demeanour such as covering their faces awkwardly with their shawls or putting their hands inside their trouser pockets "instead of warming up their bodies through work" and their childlike obstinacy in their refusal to learn and perform by 'German standards'. Simultane-



ously, they trace the cunning of the shirkers back to their ex-masters in acts such as evoking the Geneva Convention at the slightest pretext. To their utter dismay these alien captives could not be taught as they had already learnt their lessons from their previous 'captors' and, in fact, were teaching lessons to their new captors on the Geneva Convention. The German people and employers are projected in a positive light as benevolent and kind-hearted people to the extent of being helplessly sacrificing – the old German man pushing the cart with all his might while the young Indian captives just looked on – and patronising towards these childish workers.

In Lieu of Conclusion

For my final reflection I would like to draw on the case of a French POW Germain C. who was repeatedly threatened by his camp guard with harsh sanctions if he did not mend his ways. His misdemeanour was his repeated attempts to meet a German girl. It was rumoured that he was involved with her and had fathered her child. Not many among those captives who indulged in romantic relations with German women were cheeky enough to boldly state their intent and purpose, provoke the camp guard, get reported and risk getting transferred to a punishment battalion or face a court-martial as C. did. From the time I first read his dossier, the four words that he uttered before the guard, who had been warning him for a while, resonate in my ears. These words were: "Gefangen so oder so", which in English renders 'this way or that, I remain a captive'.²⁹

This is one of those Scottian moments of political electricity at which the French captive blurted out the hidden transcript directly in the teeth of power (Scott 1990: xiii). He was a young prisoner, full of life, passion and indeed, sexual desires, that only those had the right to fulfil who belonged to the racially and sexually privileged creed in Nazi Germany. Many a captive may have liked to blurt out such retorts when reprimanded but were unable to do so. The German state routinely punished both German women and the POWs, irrespective of their racial origins, if they were found to be intimately involved. Poles and Russians were publically hanged in the initial years to create terror in the public, while for the rest it meant being transferred to a punishment company or a concentration camp. And yet, this was a mass crime reported by the prosecuting authorities as well as the SD, in the war years.



However, the utterance 'gefangen so oder so' has a much wider and deeper resonance in the universe of captivity and could be applied universally to all acts of transgressions. The sentiment behind this utterance and the psyche of the captive reflect that there was an awareness of 'a wrongdoing' which would invite harsher sanction, but the fear of punishment was gone. 'Gefangen so oder so' becomes emblematic of all hidden transcripts that have gone missing from historical records either due to the speechlessness stemming from cultural and linguistic barriers, as would be the case with South Asians, or due to the loss of gestures, gaze and body language. This provoked utterance becomes an example of Bakhtinian heteroglossia, which was laden with multiple meanings in the universe behind the barbed wire. It so poignantly captures the dispassionate, undifferentiated almost philosophical spirit in which most instructions coming from above might have been flouted by a few spirited inhabitants of Stalags and prisons.

At a literal level however, 'gefangen so oder so' applied to all South Asian captives irrespective of whether they were on the British or the German side. After the war, their erstwhile British masters sat in judgement on their destinies. Their rehabilitation depended on whether their character certificates carried the grey, black, or white mark. The wheel of history turned once again but their status remained the same: that of captives who may have collaborated with the enemy or fought against the British crown. In decolonised India, Subhash Chandra Bose, for obvious reasons, was not considered a subject good enough by the Ministry of Education for a project on memory and memorialisation. How would the plebeian captive stand a chance.

Endnotes

¹ This paper was originally presented at the *MIDA* workshop in January 2015 and is my first attempt to write the history of South Asian POWs in German captivity during the Second World War. I am thankful to Alex Braisz at ITS who brought them to my attention.

² A brief history of the making of the ITS should be in order here. As early as 1943 the Allied Forces and the British Red Cross realised the importance of tracing missing persons during the Second World War. They transformed the Department of International Affairs into a Tracing Bureau in London. The new service began with the task of tracing and registering missing persons. The location of the bureau moved along with the front, from London to Versailles, and then to Frankfurt am Main and finally to Bad-Arolsen in January 1946. Bad Arolsen was chosen because of its central location between the four occupation zones and because its infrastructure was still intact after war. The ITS had two missions: The first mission is humanitarian. It was aimed at helping all war and genocide affected people and their dear ones to trace each other as soon as possible. The second mission was to serve as a storehouse for posterity. This involved the



production and preservation of documents related to all types of sufferings and killings that non-Germans experienced on grounds of race, religion, politics, nationality, and sexual or moral deviance. The ITS thus gathered a Himalayan mass of approximately 30 million documents on the persecuted individuals who were incarcerated as POWs, Jews and other minorities in concentration camps, ghettos, prisons, Stalags, Lazarets and later DP camps.

³ ACICR, C SC, Stalag IVD Zweiglager, 15 May 1943.

⁴ ACICR, C SC, Stalag IV E, 27 June 1941.

⁵ ACICR, C SC, Stalag IV A/B, 23 June 1943.

⁶ ACICR, C SC, Stalag IV B, 21 August 1942 and Stalag IV B Lazarette, 13 November 1943.

⁷ Grave Certificates, 1948, 2.1.1.1/70311783, 1951, 2.1.1.1/70154734, 1948, 2.1.1.1/69848602, 1948, 2.1.1.1/69811796, 1948, 2.1.1.1/69811797, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

⁸ Air Raid, 1947, 2.1.1.2/87795926, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

⁹ Supplementary Grave, 1949, 2.1.1.2/70497245 and 2.1.1.2/87795928, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen. Several others followed this pattern Supplementary Grave, 1950, 2.1.1.2/70541476, 1947, 2.1.1.2/704972, 1949, 2.1.1.1/70305332, 1951, 2.1.1.2/70565215, 1950, 2.1.1.2/70566186, 1946, 2.1.1.2/70566187, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁰ Indian POWs in Bitterfeld and Thalheim, 2.1.4.2/70971035-70971048, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹¹ Indian POWs in Bitterfeld and Thalheim, 2.1.4.2/71044344-71044394, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹² Indian POWs in Mühlanger 2.1.4.2/71044385-7104412, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹³ Indian POWs in Bendorf 2.1.3.1/70808395-6, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁴ Indian POWs in Sinzig 2.1.3.1/70797042-3, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁵ Indian POWs in Gernsbach 2.1.3.2/70820818-9, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁶ Indian POWs in Offenburg, 2.1.3.1/70819166, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁷ Indian POWs in Herblzheim, 2.1.3.1/70803860, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

¹⁸ ACICR, C SC, Stalag IV E, 27 June 1941.

¹⁹ IWM Documents and Sound Section, Private Papers of M Newey, Documents.396 (90/4/1).

²⁰ List of Indian Prisoners of War working in Bitterfeld and Thalheim, 2.1.4.2/70971034 to 70971048/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²¹ Payment Charts of Indian POWs, 2.1.4.2/71044351/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²² List of Indian POWs, 2.1.3.1/70797043-44/ITS/Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²³ Dead Indian Soldiers, Annaburg, 2.1.4.2/70994417, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²⁴ Registered Deaths for Unknown Reasons, 2.1.1.2/70541476, 4 deaths in Heuberg 2.1.1.2/70541476/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²⁵ Air Raid, 1947, 2.1.1.2/704972, T.B. 2.1.1.2/70544559, 1946, 2.1.1.2/70566175/ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²⁶ Industrial Accidents 1949, Sieglar, 2.1.2.1/70739024, Stuttgart, 1946, 2.1.1.2/70557689, Mannheim, 2.1.1.2/70536385, Hannover, 1944, 2.1.2.1/70658602, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.

²⁷ Indian POWs at Wittenberg Licht und Kraftwerke, 2.1.4.2/70988936, 2.1.4.2/70994415, 2.1.1.2/70536384, ITS Digital Archive, Bad Arolsen.



²⁸ IWM Documents and Sound Section, Private Papers of M Newey, Documents.396 (90/4/1).

²⁹ Nds Hann. 171a Hann. Acc 107/83 Nr. 506.

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