Figure 0.1 Artefacts, including a pair of 'blood-stained' glasses, of Jogendra ('Jon') Sen, Dupleix House and Museum, Chandernagore, India.

Introduction: 'Only Connect'
Fragments, Feeling and Form

It was on a chance visit one winter afternoon in 2005 to the quaint Dupleix House and Museum in Chandernagore – a former French colony by the Hoogly river and some 40 kilometres from Kolkata – that I first saw the pair of glasses (Figure 0.1). They lay in a cabinet ringed with dust in a darkened room. At the same time as noticing the glasses, my eyes took in the label 'blood-stained' next to them, though all I could detect was a smudge on the right lens. Delicate, fragile yet intact they lay, with their arms gently curving around the photograph of their master wearing them, as if locked forever in a protective embrace. The label identified the wearer as 'J. N. Sen, M.B., Private, West Yorkshire Regiment, who died in action on the night of 22–23 May in 1916, France. He was the first Bengalee, a citizen of Chandernagore, killed in 1914–1918 War'.[1] The glasses reminded me of the pocket-watch found on the body of the British war poet Edward Thomas, its hands perpetually fixed at 7.36 am as they recorded the time of Thomas's death; both had borne testimony to the final moments of their owners' lives. Next to the glasses was a collection of artefacts: a dog-tag (to identify the injured), a razor, a photograph of a young European woman, a 'Book of Friendship' possibly given by this lady (signed as 'Cis') and a small leather wallet. The fragility of the objects, combined with their stubborn persistence and the distance from the scene of action, made them seem uncanny. But more was to come. Several years after my discovery, I was speaking at the University of Leeds and, as I showed an image of Sen's artefacts, I was stopped

[1] J. N. Sen, Artefacts at the Dupleix Museum, Chandernagore, West Bengal. The story of the glasses led to a surge of interest in Sen and, in 2015, BBC Yorkshire commissioned a short *Inside Out* documentary on him. Some of his objects and photographs can be seen at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-leeds-31761904. An enthusiastic team at the University of Leeds did a community project on him in 2015 and there is now a webpage (www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/3670/the_unlikeliest_of_pals_an_indian_soldier_alone_among_yorkshiremen).

mid-sentence by an excited English gentleman: 'Jon' Sen, he burst out, was a student at the university, and his name appeared at the university's war memorial. More research followed. Jogendra ('Jon') Sen, having just gained a degree in engineering from the University of Leeds, had volunteered in the opening months of the conflict in the Leeds Pals Battalion and was the only non-white member of the West Yorkshire regiment. He was a much-loved member. Arthur Dalby, a comrade, remembered him as 'the best educated in the battalion and he spoke about seven languages but he was never allowed to be even a lance-corporal because in those days they would never let a coloured fellow be over a white man'. Yet, after his death, the *Yorkshire Evening Post* published an obituary on 2 June 1916, with the heading 'Leeds "Pals" Lose an Indian Comrade'.[2]

It was two years later, in 2007, in a cabinet-filled room in the Humboldt Sound Archive in Berlin that I felt the same shiver as in Chandernagore. I was listening to a tremulous yet incantatory voice speaking largely in Punjabi (with a few Hindi words), interrupted by awkward silences and sharp intakes of breath:

Line	Transcription	Translation
1	Ek ādmi si … je makhan khāndā si Hindustān mein	There was a man who would have butter back in India
2	Do ser dūdh, pīndā sī	He would also have two sers of milk
3	Usne Angrejān kī naukrī kī	He served for the British
4	O ādmī Europe ki ladāī'ch āgayā	He joined the European War
5	Us ādmī nū Germany ne qaid kar leyā	He was captured by the Germans
6	Us nu India jānā chāhtā hai	He wants to go back to India
7	Je oh Hindustān jaūgā to usnu oh khānā milegā	If he goes back to India then he will get that same food
8	Oh ādmī nu tīn baras ho gaye hain	Three years have already passed
9	Khabar nahin kab sulah hovegā	There's no news as to when there will be peace
10	Je Hindustān mein oh ādmī jāyegā usko khānā oh milūgā	Only if he goes back to India will he get that food
11	Je do sāl oh ādmī etthe hor reh gayā tā oh ādmī mar jaūgā	If he stays here for two more years then he will die
12	Mahārāj kripā kare tā eh chheti sulah kar lein te assi chale jāiye	By God's grace, if they declare peace then we'll go back

[2] Interview with Arthur Dalby, 1988; *Yorkshire Evening Post*, 2 June 1916. Both can now be found at www.leeds.ac.uk/news/article/3670/the_unlikeliest_of_pals_an_indian_soldier_alone_among_yorkshiremen.

Figure 0.2 Voice-recording of a POW in progress at the POW camp at Wünsdorf, Germany. Papers of Heinrich Lüders, Archiv der Berlin-Brandenburgischen Akademie der Wissenschaften.

This is the story of Mall Singh, a Punjabi prisoner of war in the 'Halfmoon Camp' at Wünsdorf outside Berlin.[3] The recording was made on 11 December 1916. He was made to stand in front of a phonograph machine held before him by his German captors and instructed to speak (Figure 0.2). Mall Singh's was among the 2,677 audio recordings made by the Royal Prussian Phonographic Commission between 29 December 1915 and 19 December 1918, using the prisoners of war held in Germany.[4] A voice calls out from the phonograph, strains itself in the act of recording: the

[3] Mall Singh, Voice-recording, Humboldt University Sound Archive, PK 619. Mall Singh speaks in a mixed register, starting sentences in Punjabi and finishing them in Hindi and vice versa. Translation by Arshdeep Singh Brar. Over the last ten years, this voice-recording has become known among scholars in the field through the film *Halfmoon Files* by Phillip Scheffner and the efforts of a group of German academics based at Berlin, particularly Heike Liebau and Britta Lange. I am grateful to both of them for facilitating my work at the Humboldt archives. See Das, 'The Singing Subaltern', *Parallax*, 17, 60 (2011), 4–18. Mall Singh's voice-recording can now be heard at www.tribuneindia.com/news/spectrum/society/100-years-later-voices-from-wwi/591837.html

[4] See Heike Liebau, Ravi Ahuja and Franziska Roy (eds.), '*When the War Began, We Heard of Several Kings': South Asian Prisoners in World War I Germany* (Delhi: Social Science Press, 2011).

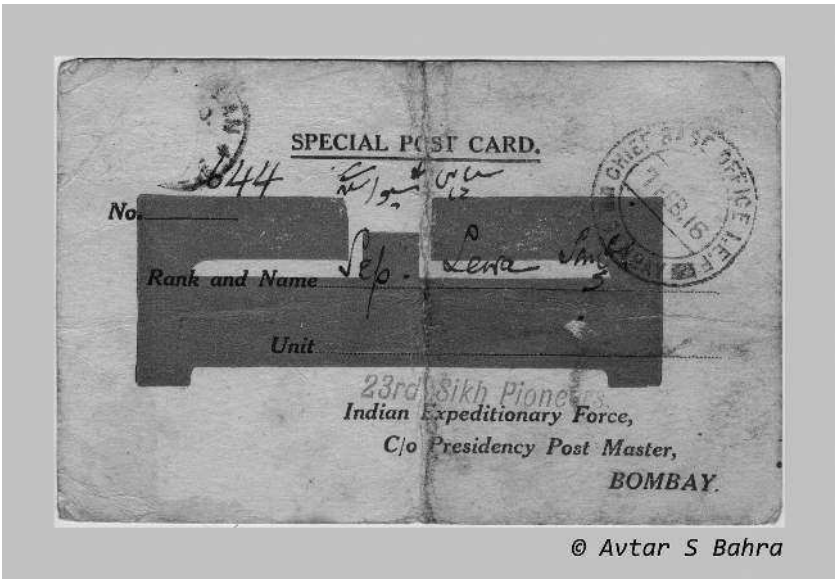
trepidation, the timbre, the laboured enunciation, the slight breathlessness seem to bridge the gap between technological reproduction and lived experience. As I listened to it, the body and emotion of the speaker seemed palpable, filling in, flowing out, lending physicality to an encounter with a disembodied voice from a hundred years ago. In some indefinable way, Mall Singh was *present* in it. But why does he refer to himself as 'ādmi' in the third person ('Ek ādmi si … o ādmi Europe … O ādmi nu teen baras')? Unfamiliar with the genre of testimony but having grown up amidst the robust oral culture of Punjab – recitations of *qissas* and folktales with their third-person voices ('There was a King' or 'There was a parrot') – he falls back upon familiar narrative form and intonation as he tells his life-story. The voice rises and pauses and rises again until it reaches, and stresses, the final words of each line ('khānā oh milūgā/ādmi mar jaūga/chale jāiye'). Desolate, homesick and hungry, he distils all the pain and longing into the images of *makhan* (butter) and the two *sers* (a form of measurement) of milk: home is remembered as taste.

Mall Singh served on the Western Front. However, for me, his story resonates not with the homesick letters of his sepoy-brothers from France and Flanders, but with something altogether more rare. It is a letter written by a young girl called Kishan Devi from Punjab to her father Havildar Sewa Singh, of the 23rd Sikh Pioneers, serving in Egypt (Figure 0.3):

> Dear Father, Ek Onkar Satguru Prasad ['There is One God by the grace of the True Guru'] This is Kishan Devi. I am writing in to inform that I am alright over here. We received your letter … We came to know about you. We were really scared after receiving your letter. Mother says that you can write to us about what goes on in your heart. Father, I shall read all your letters. I do not fight with anyone. My heart is yours. You are everything to me, and I worry about you. I am like living dead without you … Dear father please take leave and come to meet us. Please do come. We repeat again and again. My mother bows her head to you to pay respect. We do not have any more envelopes … I am sending this letter on the 22nd day of Magh and the English date is 5th. Father, please write to us … Father, please take leave and come and meet us. Please do come. Please do reply to our letter … Reply to our letter soon.[5]

A child's scrawl in Gurmukhi script fills in all available space on the postcard; the words are joined together. In asking her 'bapuji' to pour out his 'heart' ('jo tere dil de vich hai'), Kishan Devi touches on, as we will see, a

[5] I would like thank its owner Avtar Singh Bahra, and Dominic Rai. Translated by Arshdeep Singh Brar.



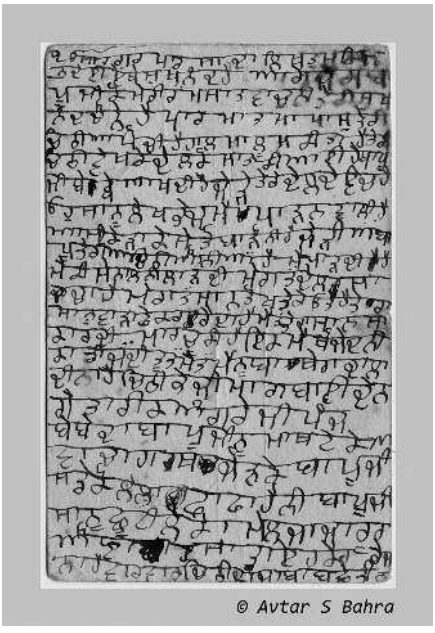


Figure 0.3 Postcard of Kishan Devi to her father Havildar Sewa Singh, serving in Egypt, (a) front and (b) back. Private Collection of Avtar Singh Bahra, London.

central chord in the sepoy writing of the First World War: the tumultuous world of feeling. The distance between the war-front in Sinai and a village in Punjab suddenly narrows. If letters arriving from the front would usually be taken to the postal clerk to be read aloud to the non-literate family members, here Kishan Devi circumvents that by learning how to read and write. War serves as a catalyst for female literacy. But above all, we have here two people, caught in the maelstrom of war, each trying to reach out: the timbre of the voice finds its counterpart in the uneven scrawl of the hand. We do not know whether it reached the father. A daughter's heart-breaking appeal ('jāroor āyin' – 'please come'), like Mall Singh's desolate plea for butter, 'repeats again and again' in the chamber of First World War memories.

Quite early on during my research, in 2006, I had my first significant 'archival' find. While rummaging through the catalogue in the National Archives in Delhi, I glimpsed an entry saying 'Trench-note of Mir Mast'.[6] For anyone working on India and the First World War, Mir Mast is a remarkable if shadowy figure. On the rainy night of 2/3 March 1915, Jemadar Mir Mast, serving in the 58th Vaughan's Rifles (Bareilly Brigade) at Neuve Chapelle, deserted his camp and quietly crossed over to the German side with a group of fellow Pathans. He was an enterprising man. He became part of a Turko-German *jihad* mission and travelled via Constantinople to Kabul from where he fled to his homeland.[7] There, he trained fellow deserters and tried to foment an anti-colonial uprising; Anglo-Indian myth has it that the Kaiser decorated him with the Iron Cross. To make the story even more curious, his brother Mir Dast obtained a Victoria Cross for his performance in the Second Battle of Ypres in 1915. As I sat ruminating, a sealed envelope marked 'His Majesty's Office' was delivered to my desk and I was given permission to tear open the envelope. A thrill went through me. I thought I was about to touch the heart of the rebel sepoy: I expected words nothing short of 'jihad' and 'Hindustan' and 'dissent'. A hand-drawn trench map slipped out as my fingers pulled a small tatty notebook out of the envelope: did Mir Mast use it to navigate his way to the German trenches? What I found in his trench notebook was curiouser. Along with some casual jottings and numbers, it contained

[6] 'Jemadar Mir Mast's diary', National Archives of India, Delhi, Foreign and Political, War B (Secret), February 1916, 32–34.

[7] In the Political Archive of the Foreign Office in Berlin, a document mentions 'Mirmastshah Sipahi' among the Afridi deserters and includes 'Mirmast Sipahi' among the list of people who went to Constantinople (Politisches Archiv des Auswärtigen Amtes, Berlin, April, 1915, R 21082-1, 13, f. 6). For more details, see my entry on the Mir brothers at the *CEGC Sourcebook* (http://sourcebook.cegcproject.eu).

a long list of words, first in Urdu and then in English. The words range from the functional ('haversack', 'blanket', 'please') to the warmly human ('hungry', 'nephew', 'honeymoon') to a rather unusual list: 'turnip, carrot, parsnip, potatoes, prick, penus [*sic*], testacles [*sic*], harsole [*sic*], cunt, brests [*sic*], fuck, flour' (Figure 0.4)'. What had so distracted the Jemadar? The list was a good reality-check for the subaltern scholar and possibly an insight into what these young soldiers actually talked about in the trenches; or, maybe, it is a basic fact of language learning that we are always interested in concealed body-parts. Yet, amidst the carnage of the Western Front, it is also poignant testimony to a young man's appetite for life in its incorrigible plurality, the need for nourishment as well as for bodies to come together. Like Mall Singh's 'makhan', he had only the sound of words.

These moments have stayed with me and have shaped the book. Why do they matter so much? Jogen Sen's glasses, Mall Singh's voice, Kishan Devi's letter and Mir Mast's diary are not just fresh and tantalising sources but open up new ways of 'reading' – and writing – life, and particularly colonial lives, in times of war. At an immediate level, they confront us with the role of the sensuous, the material and the contingent: they force us to weave together a narrative of fugitive fragments, the flotsam, jetsam and lagan of life wrecked by war; they point to the importance of relicts as zones of contact between warm life and historical violence. They not only congeal time but also conceal processes of care: the fragility of the glasses, the wavering of the voice, the childish scrawl across the page, the crinkliness of the postcard are in many ways the hand-prints and face-prints of war in the act of writing its own violent life – its peculiar mode of communication – as it impacts human lives and reduces them to piecemeal narratives; they are the archives of touch and intimacy. Moreover, at a historical level, they acquire an altogether new level of importance as source-material the moment we step outside the Western world. If there has been a powerful material turn within cultural studies in recent years, some of its greatest yields have been in the field of colonial history; increasing use is made of ephemera, from calendar art to songs, in South Asian history, while Africanists have emphasised the importance of oral archives.[8] These materials present us with what the anthropologist Elizabeth Edwards has called 'raw histories'.[9] In a context where most of the colonial soldiers were

[8] See for example Christopher Pinney, *The Coming of Photography to India* (London: British Museum, 2001) and Tapati Guha Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); among new work, see Priyasha Mukhopadhyay, 'On Not Reading the Soldier's Pocket-Book for Field Service', *Journal of Victorian Culture*, 22, 1 (2017), 40–56. Also see Joe Lunn, *Memoirs of a Maelstrom: A Senegalese Oral History of the First World War* (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1999).

[9] Elizabeth Edwards, *Raw Histories: Photographs, Anthropology and Museums* (Oxford: Berg, 2001).

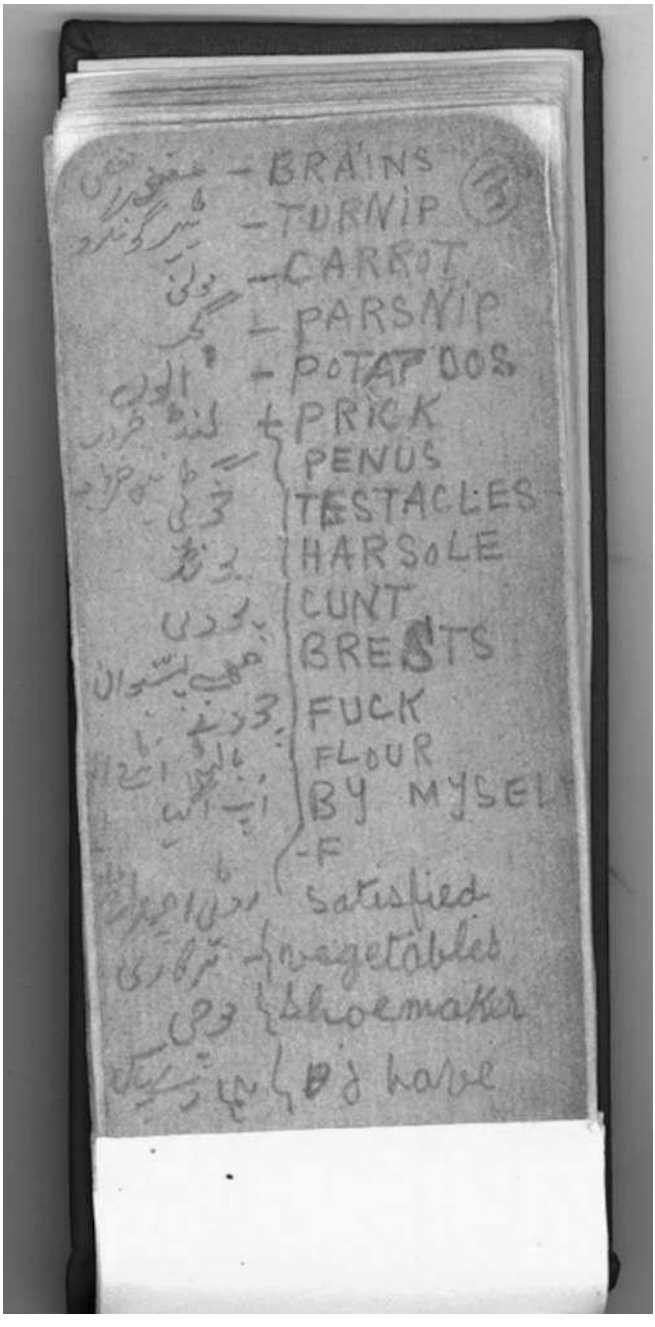


Figure 0.4 A page from the trench notebook of Jemadar Mir Mast, National Archives of India, Delhi. Foreign and Political War B (Secret), February 1916, 32–34.

non-literate and did not leave behind the abundance of diaries, journals, poems or memoirs that build up European war memory, it is necessary, I argue, to go beyond the solely textual to these other kinds of evidence – material, visual, oral – and establish a dialogue between them. Each has its ineluctable form to which we must attend; moreover, one fragment may change its meaning when considered alongside another. It is their cumulative power as well as their poignancy and serendipitous survival that help us recreate the texture of the past.

India, Empire, and First World War Culture: Writings, Images, and Songs examines the experiences of people from undivided India (comprising present-day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Myanmar (formerly Burma)) – both soldiers and civilians, men and women, sepoys, labourers, lascars, orderlies, doctors, politicians and intellectuals – in the First World War and the way such experiences were represented in a variety of forms: testimonial, political, visual, aural and literary.[10] It is a combination of extensive digging-and-delving and close investigative engagement with the material. Between August 1914 and December 1919, India recruited for purposes of war 877,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants, making a total of 1,440,437; in addition, there were an estimated 239,561 (Indian) men in the British Indian army at the outbreak of the war. Of them, 1,096,013 Indians, by conservative estimates, served overseas, including 621,224 combatants and 474,789 non-combatants, in places as diverse as France and Flanders, Mesopotamia, East Africa, Gallipoli, Egypt and Palestine, Salonika, Aden, Persia and Central Asia (see Table 0.1).[11] Between 50,000 and 70,000 of these men were killed.[12] 'The state of things is indescribable. There is conflagration all around, and you must imagine it to be like a dry forest in a high wind in the hot

[10] 'India' and 'Indian' at all points in this book refer respectively to the undivided India under British rule and its people, and not the present-day state of India. After agonising, long and hard, about whether to use 'South Asia' or 'India', I decided to go for the latter as the more historically sympathetic term for the pre-Partition history it excavates. The men discussed often refer to 'India' and saw themselves as 'Indian', though, in today's terms, they would be regarded as 'South Asians'. The British Indian army also included a substantial number of Gurkha soldiers, some resident in India and some from the independent kingdom of Nepal, as well as some trans-frontier Pashtuns.

[11] The above figures are from *Statistics of the Military Effort of the British Empire during the Great War, 1914–1920* (London: HM Stationery Office, 1920), 777 and reproduced in *India's Contribution to the Great War* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing 1923), 79. These figures are still subject to revision and are therefore not set in stone.

[12] *India's Contribution* lists the figures of Indian casualties as 'Dead from all causes – 53,486; Wounded – 64,350; missing and POWs – 3762, as on 31 December 1919. Repatriated prisoners are not shown (176).