ANNU PALAKUNNATHU MATTHEW

THE UNREMEMBERED

Indian Soldiers of World War II

Memory . . . is the diary that we all carry about with us.

—Oscar Wilde¹

Here are snippets of the stories that I heard: a soldier fell into the ocean and was there so long his nails fell off; a young groom left his wife of six weeks to fight on another continent; five prisoners of war (POWs) escaped and were hidden in caves during a bitter winter in Italy; a soldier came home to find his wife remarried, thinking he was dead. These stories are from some of the 2.5 million Indians who fought in World War II (WWII; fig. 1).

Why are the contributions of those from South Asia barely mentioned as we mark the seventy-fifth anniversary of WWII? By 1945, two and a half million Indians had stepped forward and “volunteered” to take up arms for their British colonial rulers in support of the Allies. They fought in the mountains of Burma, the hills of Italy, and the deserts of North Africa. They transported artillery, repaired jeeps, and, under enemy fire, carried the wounded from the battlefield to safety. Thirty of them won Victoria Crosses, England’s highest military honor, and more than eighty-seven thousand died.

When I stumbled onto this underappreciated history, I was astounded by the number of people who sacrificed and died, and the fact that this is not part of our history books in India, South Asia, or globally. This is especially astonishing because WWII was truly global, with pivotal conflicts outside the European and Pacific theaters, and critical battles in British India and across Asia. I’ve slowly discovered that the story of these soldiers has left us with a complex and incomplete narrative of what happened as we gained independence from British colonial rule.

For some context, millions of South Asian veterans of WWII returned home just as the subcontinent was preparing to split into the independent countries of India and Pakistan after being under British colonial rule for nearly two hundred years. All experienced the upheaval of the 1947 Partition of British India and its brutal ramifications, which created more than twelve million refugees and left a million dead in just three months.

As I ponder this history, I would argue that South Asia’s independence was brought about by the confluence of three factors. The first was the Quit India Movement launched by Mohandas Gandhi (1869–1948) in 1942, which was the final push for independence after nearly a century of trying to end British rule in India. The movement practiced nonviolent resistance against British rule. The second was the Indian National Army (INA), led by Subhas Chandra

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FIGURE 1. Major General Nanavati (1918–1963) and his wife, Sharda Nanavati, 1962. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Saneev and Aparna Nanavati

Bose (1897–1945). The INA soldiers’ logic was “My enemy’s enemy is my friend,” with the British colonizer being their enemy. The INA fought with the Japanese and against the Allies in Kohima, a critical battle. Ironically, the fallout from the INA Red Fort trials (November 1945–May 1946), in which three officers of the INA stood on trial for “waging war against the King-Emperor,” played a critical role in independence. The trials evoked sympathy and ramped up passion for independence, proving to be the nail in the coffin of the British rule of India. The Bombay mutiny of 1946 by the Royal Indian Navy, ultimately involving more than twenty thousand sailors, was an example of such passion. As a result, Field Marshal Sir Claude Auchinleck (1884–1981) was forced to commute the sentences of the three officers. The third factor, I would argue, was the contributions of the Indians who fought in WWII and without whom the Allies may never have won. The efforts of these returning veterans were ignored as people rallied and fought for independence from the British. Many were disdained as supporters of the British colonizers. This confluence of events has left a complex and incomplete narrative of South Asia’s independence.

Partition’s trauma, still largely an open wound across South Asia, has continued to scar the subcontinent even after seventy years. Interestingly, I heard stories from Professor Arun Swaminathan and Wing Commander Kojak that after the Partition of British India in August 1947, their fathers, who were once colleagues with their Pakistani counterparts, had to fight on opposite sides in the Indo-Pakistani war of 1947. At night, however, they would gather as friends.

I came across this underappreciated history while doing work, for nearly a decade, on the stories of the children of the Partition of British India. This work was created by collaborating with Indian, Pakistani, and Bangladeshi families.² *Open Wound—Stories of Partition—India—Kohli* comprises ephemeral photo animations built from old family photographs combined with recent photographs of two or more generations of the same family. The project also includes excerpts of interviews narrating the families’ experience. The one-minute animations weave in and out of time, allowing the viewer to simultaneously ponder South Asia’s history and its impact on contemporary India.

FIGURE 2. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew (b. 1964), *Open Wound—Stories of Partition—India—Kohli*, 2014. Photo animation, 1 minute. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

This story is about the Kohli family (fig. 2).

I went from being wealthy to a penniless refugee.

My father went back after 2 years to his home at Lakshmi Mansions, Flat #39

The person living there had a British mother and a Muslim father.

The man asked if he would like a cup of tea.

My father said, "When I was served in my silver tea service with my monogram on it, I realized that I was homeless."

Since learning about the 2.5 million Indians who fought in WWII, I have focused my visual artwork on this erasure of history for the last four years. The question that I hope my work can address is, can all three of the factors mentioned above be acknowledged? Can we consider the human stories and contributions of the Indians who fought in WWII? Unfortunately, we do have a colonial past, which we can't erase.

My initial research on the Italian Campaign led to a commission from the 2018 Kochi-Muziris Biennale (an international exhibition of global contemporary art held in the city of Kochi in India's Kerala state, and the most significant contemporary art festival in Asia) focusing on this Campaign (fig. 3). For this commission, I projected edited archival footage (from England's Imperial War Museum) of the Indian soldiers in the Italian Campaign onto the South Asian gravestones and memorial in Italy's Cassino and Forlì War Cemeteries at dawn and dusk. I then edited these recordings to create a haunting video installation that pulls back the veil on this forgotten history and leverages visual media to bring forward an underrepresented narrative to add to the historical landscape. The work builds on the idea that military cemeteries memorialize the dead while simultaneously reminding the living of their possible complicity in the same soldiers' deaths. These spaces, embedded with multiple overlapping layers of narrative, encourage contemplation and reflection. As art critic Nancy Brokaw recently wrote in an e-mail, "the flickering images of long-dead soldiers haunt their own gravesites."³ The layering of a contemporary inscription of the wartime past expands the narrative and prompts a reconsideration of the more extensive history of WWII and the understanding of its reverberations of the colonial past.

FIGURE 3. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *UNREMEMBERED: The Indian soldiers of the Italian Campaign of World War II*, 2018. Video installation, 3 minutes, 45 seconds. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

FIGURE 4. Lt. Col. Gopal Chakraborty (1922–1981), ca. 1944. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Monisha Nayar-Akhtar and Yamini Nayar

On the opening day of the Kochi-Muziris Biennale, a friend sent me a photograph of her grandfather, Lt. Col. Gopal Chakraborty, posing casually in front of the Leaning Tower of Pisa in his Army uniform when he was posted in Italy during WWII (fig. 4). The striking photograph provided an immediate face and a visceral connection to one of these two and a half million Indian soldiers. This photograph has led me to crowd-source and collect scans of family photos and stories of these Indian soldiers.

Why is this photograph so poignant and striking? In her book *Unseeing Empire*, Dr. Bakirathi Mani writes that Indians or South Asians were represented in photography mainly through “the mimetic circulation of settler and colonial photographic technologies across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and into our present time.”⁴ While this family photograph contradicts those ethnographic representations, it still carries a colonial burden.

FIGURE 5. Lieutenant D.S. Kalha (1916–2007) and his wife, Sheila. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Avjit Bose

After a six-month Fulbright Fellowship in 2019, I have collected more than two hundred poignant images and the accompanying stories of these unheralded people who volunteered with the British and, by extension, the Allies. These photos and stories come from all quadrants of South Asia. Some are from middle-class families, some from royalty, and some from low-income families. Some of these volunteers were swashbuckling young men who believed in “the cause,” and others joined out of poverty in search of a regular meal and salary, their hunger exacerbated by the famine (created by the British) that started in Bengal and spread to other parts of India.

The next question is, why am I collecting family photographs and not looking in military archives? The archives contain many photographs of the soldiers in action and headshots of these (mainly) men. As someone outside the military community, I do not connect with

FIGURE 6. Fabriani Domenico's family, ca. 1944. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Avjit Bose

these photos. To paraphrase Mr. NMS Nair, whom I met through the project, “they glorify the action” and do not speak of the human toll. They do not move us to want to learn more. To empathize with these people who volunteered for the British, the viewers of my artwork have to connect with them. The universality of these family snapshots, strongly intertwined with stories from the families, creates a kind of intimacy beyond the more formal imagery of the photos found in the military archives. The family photographs reflect the personalities of these volunteers, allowing us a glimpse into their lives, their loves, their families, their personalities, and their passions. Of these two hundred photos that I have collected, only those with stories rise to the top. The inclusion of these narratives is imperative in my final installation as the stories bring these individuals to life.

FIGURE 7. Reverse of figure 6, showing the names of the Italian family members. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Avjit Bose

Two of the stories that I came across were of Indian POWs in Italy who managed to escape and were sheltered by Italian strangers who saved their lives. The two extraordinary stories are testaments to our shared humanity. The Italian families looked beyond ethnicity and language and instead focused on the commonality of what makes us human.

Lieutenant D.S. Kalha, a Sikh, was one such soldier. He had to leave his wife of six weeks to fight in WWII (fig. 5). He was captured at the Siege of Tobruk (Libya) in 1941 and sent to the POW camp in Avezzano, Italy, where he picked up a smattering of Italian. With the help of Dr. Boccaletti, a camp doctor, Kalha escaped with his friend Sandhu. Fabiani Domenico, an Italian carpenter who also worked at the camp, sheltered them until the war was over. Kalha's gratefulness and friendship with the Italian family continued, and

FIGURE 8.
Prisoners of war
(POWs) Chacko,
D'Souza, RG Salvi,
and brothers
Sharafat Ali Rao
and Khilafat Ali
Rao, 1943. Scan
of original family
photo. Courtesy
of Samar Salvi

FIGURE 9.
Lieutenant RG Salvi
(1916–1987), ca.
August 1942. Scan
of original family
photo. Courtesy
of Samar Salvi

they corresponded (in Italian) for decades until Lieutenant General Kalha passed away. The prized possession of Kalha's daughter, Avjit Bose, is a 1940s black-and-white photograph of Domenico's family, the family that saved her father (figs. 6, 7). The clothing and studio background, and the creased black-and-white image, immediately take us back in time. The back of the photo gives us the names of the individuals who risked their lives to save these soldiers.

Another story was about five POWs: Chacko, D'Souza, RG Salvi, and brothers Sharafat Ali Rao and Khilafat Ali Rao (figs. 8, 9). They all escaped from the German POW camp in Avezano, found shelter, and received acts of kindness from residents in the tiny town of Villa San Sebastiano. Their ordeal—often hiding in animal sheds and caves, even in the bitter cold of winter—lasted for more than a year. The Italians smuggled food to them at their own risk. Salvi even climbed up a hot chimney to avoid the threat of being discovered by Germans patrolling the village. The Indians made deep connections and friendships that continued after the war ended. Salvi's grandson, Samar, was captivated by these photos and stories as a young boy and always wanted to visit the village to meet the people who had saved his grandfather's life. Nearly seventy years later, in 2010, he reconnected with the descendants of these families. The Salvi family installed a plaque in Villa San Sebastiano thanking the villagers. It ends with the words, "Without your loving help to Lieutenant RG Salvi, we would not have existed."

Meena Mani told me about her father, Flight Lieutenant Arjan Mirchandani, who received a scholarship and left for England in the 1940s to pursue a PhD in engineering (fig. 10). Mirchandani's thesis was destroyed in London's bombings, and his doctoral program was canceled during the war. He joined the Air Force as his best hope for getting back home to India. While working in the signals brigade in the Air Force, he fought in Europe, Africa, and Burma. Mirchandani was also passionate about the arts and created charcoal murals on the messes' walls (fig. 11). His children said that this was a way to shift his thoughts from the atrocities and hardships of war and retain his humanity. Priceless is the photo of Mirchandani's sister dressed in his uniform (fig. 12)!

As with most of my projects, this archival material goes through an artistic intervention to reinvent itself into a multimedia installation, a striking blend of still and moving imagery. Many of my projects start with images from media that have been disseminated widely, to engage the viewer with something that initially appears to be familiar. Examples include *An Indian from India* and *Bollywood Satirized*. In the former, I explore the question most immigrants are asked, about where I am "really from." I often have to clarify that I am an Indian from India. It seems strange that the confusion surrounding the word "Indian" was created because Christopher

Columbus (1451–1506) thought that he had found India and collectively called the native peoples of the Americas “Indians.” The work also draws on the parallel colonial photographic histories of both continents.

In this portfolio, I look at the other “Indian” (fig. 13). I play on my own “otherness,” using nineteenth- and early twentieth-century photographs of Native Americans from archives like the Smithsonian and the Library of Congress that perpetuated and reinforced stereotypes. I pair these photos with self-portraits. The titles, combined with the images, use humor to confront the colonial archive. In the work, I find similarities between the popular and widely shared archival photographs of Native Americans, portrayed as “the primitive natives,” and the colonial gaze of the nineteenth-century British photographers working in India. This again references “the mimetic circulation of settler and colonial photographic technologies” to which Dr. Bakirathi Mani alluded in her earlier quote.

More recently, I have been using family photographs. Again, because of their universality across cultures, they help to initially engage the viewer. Then my intervention takes the images further to question the viewers’ assumptions. I am drawn to family photographs for what they initially represent and what they often hide. Also, printed family photographs take on a new relevance when, today, we rarely take formal studio images and everything is on our cellphones and social media.

I first started using family photographs in 1998 for a personal project to mark the twentieth anniversary of my father’s death. I created *Fabricated Memories* by combining snapshots from my childhood in England with recently made images photographed in the same areas

FIGURE 10. Flight Lieutenant Arjan Mirchandani (1915–1963), 1945. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Meena Mani

FIGURE 11. Flight Lieutenant Arjan Mirchandani with his mural, 1941–42. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Meena Mani

with my Holga camera. Visiting these familiar places reminds me of my father, who died soon after we moved to India when I was twelve years old. The Holga's cheap plastic lens distorts the focusing to make each image look more like a memory. The final, seamlessly combined images create what look like memories of my childhood and my father, memories that never existed (figs. 14, 15).

With these photos, I created a small handmade accordion book where the images are presented as Polaroid emulsion transfers to emphasize memory's fluid and fragile feeling. Some pages also include text. To reinforce the fact that my father died from the effects of smoking, the book is presented in a cigarette box and the paper cover includes shredded tobacco leaves. This paper has been stained with tobacco juice, giving the viewer the sensory experience of sight, smell, and touch. The book's pages are made from a delicate handmade paper that accentuates the fragility of my memories, twenty years after my father's death. The work indirectly questions whether I would have made the same decisions in my life if my father was still alive. I started using my own family photographs to explore my own story, and now collaborate with other families to tell their stories.

For *The UNREMEMBERED: Indian Soldiers of World War II*, my current project with family photos, the multimedia installation will include a "wall" of 3D laser-cut crystals of the photographs that I have collected. Each photo is clearly visible, and the three-dimensionality brings the images to life, yet they are ghostly and inaccessible (fig. 16). The people who volunteered to serve in the British Armed Forces were soldiers, tailors, cooks, and manual laborers—many of whose families do not have photos. To include them, and to bring into context what the volunteers had to endure, I am editing the archival footage from all three theaters of war to

FIGURE 12. Flight Lieutenant Arjan Mirchandani's sister wearing his uniform, 1944. Scan of original family photo. Courtesy of Meena Mani

project through the crystals. With the video projection, I will include a soundscape with the poignant stories that I have collected.

The work will expand the shared narrative of South Asia's complicated history—deeply rooted in colonial history—that has been in upheaval for more than seventy years. The installation will make this history accessible to a larger audience, to pique their curiosity and spark the viewers' interest in the sacrifices of these volunteers. The work also will beg the question of who else is not acknowledged. We are at a moment in which memorials and histories are being re-evaluated and reconsidered in significant ways. Art can play a crucial role in shaping the politics of remembrance, "To understand the past to live a better future."⁵

FIGURE 13. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *An Indian from India—Red/Brown*, 2001. Archival digital print; left: 19th-century photo by Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952) from The Library of Congress, Washington, DC. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

FIGURE 14. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Fabricated Memories, Palace*, 1998. Polaroid transfers on paper in an accordion-style book in metal cigarette box. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

FIGURE 15. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, *Fabricated Memories, Dad & I in car*, 1998. Polaroid transfers on paper in an accordion-style book in metal cigarette box. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

FIGURE 16. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew, crystal experimentation for *The UNREMEMBERED*, 2020. Courtesy of the artist and sepiaEYE, New York

By pulling back the veil on forgotten histories, my objective is to leverage widely shared visual media like archival photography and film in order to elevate the narrative of these Indian soldiers and integrate it into its historical and cultural legacy, challenging how we have internalized the stories of WWII.

Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is Professor of Art at the University of Rhode Island (URI). She was also the Director of the URI Center for the Humanities from 2013 to 2019 and held the Silvia-Chandley Professorship for Nonviolence and Peace Studies from 2015 to 2017. Matthew's photo-based artwork is a striking blend of still and moving imagery. Her larger body of work draws on archival photographs to confront the colonial archive in a re-examination of the history of its narrative legacies in both the United States and South Asia. Matthew's recent solo exhibitions include the Royal Ontario Museum, Canada; Nuit Blanche, Toronto; sepiaEYE, New York; and the Newport Art Museum. Annu Palakunnathu Matthew is represented by sepiaEYE, New York. www.annumatthew.com; e-mail: 18percent@uri.edu

Notes

- 1 Oscar Wilde, *The Importance of Being Earnest* (New York: Avon Books, 1965), Act 2, 57.
- 2 East Pakistan became Bangladesh in 1971.
- 3 Nancy Brokaw, e-mail to the artist, February 18, 2021.
- 4 Bakirathi Mani, *Unseeing Empire: Photography, Representation, South Asian America* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2020), 78.
- 5 Dr. Daina Ramey Berry, PBS Newshour, February 5, 2021, <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/a-historians-brief-but-spectacular-take-on-understanding-the-past-to-live-a-better-future> (last accessed March 25, 2021).