

# BRITISH IMPERIAL COLLAPSE IN ASIA

Bayly, Christopher and Tim Harper. 2005. *Forgotten Armies: The Fall of British Asia, 1941-45*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press. 616 pages, ISBN 0 6740 2219 X

Bali Sahota

In all but mainstream and military forms of modern historiography, the world wars of the 20th century often simply mark the end of one period or, like the capital letter of a sentence, establish the syntax for the following one. Political pressures of an era come to a head; the pieces, afterwards, fall in newly determined patterns. In *Forgotten Armies*, a masterful reconstruction of the collapse of British Asia during the war years, Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper reveal at once the mundane and sublime qualities of all-out modern warfare.

Considering issues such as mass casualties, genocide and the dropping of the atomic bomb, the representational constraints of the historical discipline are made apparent. More modernist genres arguably have greater flexibility for dealing with events of this intensity. In any case, only an Olympian calm of distanced irony could convert the terrifying spectacle and chaos of modern warfare into something historically explorable. How, then, can the exceptional conditions of world war, the totality of the event and its violence be referenced in a representational mode that must reduce everything to normality in order to narrate it? In rethinking the oblivion of the second world war's eastern front, *Forgotten Armies* answers this question using archival fragments in most telling ways.

The sublimity of the event surfaces unexpectedly in *Forgotten Armies*. It is the uncanny moment or the absurd

juxtaposition captured, for example, by descriptions of 'ever-present gorgeous butterflies' that would settle 'on people near to death in the green hell of mud, human excrement and chaos' of the Hukawng valley in 1942: (pp.183, 185) or of the 'glorious ochre sunsets' produced by the smoke of fires set by arsonists in Rangoon after the Japanese invasion (p.62). Sublimity surfaces as well in brutal ironies. In the year after the great artificial famine of Bengal in 1943, agricultural production broke previous records, but because of the famine, not enough labouring hands were still alive to harvest it. Juxtapositions evoke the vast disturbance of war. The explosion of the atomic bomb in Hiroshima

produces in the words of Matsushige Yoshio 'a brilliant flash of immaculate white' (p.456). Destiny as black humour and aesthetic recompense for human horror: in *Forgotten Armies* these are the themes that bring into scope the unrepresentable enormity of the second world war. It is as if all the evil and terror come of nothing other than the stupidity of human designs for power and domination, as if the world is one vast board game upon which human folly and the struggle against fate is the source of delight for ancient gods.

*Forgotten Armies*'s return to narrative history in the grand tradition seems to return the reader to a chronotope of the ancient world itself. Each of the chapters of *Forgotten Armies* chronicles a year of the war, revealing the precipitous breakdown of British rule. All kinds of contingencies and circumstances slowly bring into focus a new order and geographical imaginary.

It was perhaps inevitable that Japanese imperial ambitions, known benignly as the 'Greater East Asian Co-prosperity Sphere', would target the great crescent stretching from Bengal to Sumatra. As the powers of the late imperial age were well aware, the region was rich in resources, the seat of weakly protected cosmopolitan metropolises such as Singapore, and the base of modernizing urban and peasant labour forces. At the moment when Japanese imperialists were strategizing, the idea of national liberation and politics based on ascriptive affinities had already spread with severe consequences. Between the struggles of Japanese and western imperial powers emerge the forgotten armies. Their fleeting appearance and the telling of their histories serve the purpose of the book: to get beyond the micro-specialisations of contemporary historiography and to rethink the fragmented nature of public memory surrounding the great events of the second world war, 'to reassemble and reunite the different, often unfamiliar but connected narratives of these epic events and to put the stories of the great men and the great battles of the period into the context of the histories of ordinary Asian men and women' (p.xxxiii).

## The forgotten ones

The diversity of the forgotten armies reveals the inter-twined nature of the great crescent: its kaleidoscopic societies are not only tied to one another, but also to broad national and imperial formations around the world. The men of the Indian diaspora, who joined the Indian National Army to escape Japanese labour camps, appear here, as do

the members of the Singapore Overseas Chinese Volunteer Army under the leadership of the business tycoon Tan Kah Lee. Likewise, different tribal groups such as the Nagas of Assam, essential to Allied victory, make their appearance, as do the Orang Asli who helped to establish the ephemeral communist hegemony in Malay.

Yet, Bayly and Harper capture with their heuristic category some rather unexpected units of oblivion's armies, including the huge 'silent armies' of officially commissioned Japanese 'comfort women'. These sex slaves were dispatched with colonising missions at the ratio of one for every 40 soldiers, along with over 32.1 million condoms. We also have the abandoned lepers of Sungei Buloh who established 'a centre of support for guerrilla resistance to the Japanese' (p.125). Most surprising, the 70,000 or so Japanese soldiers who withered away in the valleys around Assam after the legendary battles of Imphal and Kohima are mentioned briefly as one of the forgotten armies. They, too, despite being the invaders, are among the forgotten figures buried in the soil of the great crescent, abandoned as the lost subjects of an increasingly improbable empire. One gets a sense in instances such as these of how much *Forgotten Armies* departs from more conventional nationalist or ethnically motivated accounts of the region's history. The complex detritus embedded in the very land surely make problematic the claims of the region's nationalist – or fascist – ideologies concerning the purities of

blood and soil. Such claims continue to hold sway in the official histories of the region.

The mosaic that accordingly emerges of the war years through the device of the 'forgotten armies' is one that is radically de-centring. It produces the right juxtapositions for making the age come across as quintessentially modern and global. This is accomplished primarily by the sources Bayly and Harper bring to their disposal. Gleanings from the numerous archives of several nation-states, the major newspapers of the region, photographs and the personal accounts of all kinds of people make for a strikingly authentic account. Building almost exclusively on primary sources, the account gives a sense of the age as it was considered by its contemporaries. These were the days when the Malayan Planning Unit was concocting elaborate war strategies 'in almost complete ignorance of the situation on the ground', when Lord Mountbatten was dreaming up fantastic invasion schemes called 'Dracula' or 'Zipper' and officials such as the exiled Governor General Reginald Dorman-Smith were engaged in debates where the basic premise was that 'the British Empire in Asia would be rebuilt as surely as day followed night' (pp.420, 241). The manner in which local figures were strategically engaging with the blindness of British ideology was essential. The shadowy figure 'Lai Teck', the best-known alias of the man who climbed the ranks to become secretary general of the Malayan Communist Party and erstwhile spy for the British, only makes

# NALINI BY DAY, NANCY BY NIGHT

Sonali Gulati, writer, director, producer. 2005. *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night*. India/US, Hindi/English, 27 min documentary film.

Maya Kulkarni

*Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night*, the award-winning documentary film by Sonali Gulati, was screened at the 29th Annual Margaret Mead Film Festival at the American Natural History Museum in November 2005. The Margaret Mead Film Festival is the longest-running showcase for international documentaries in the US and is known for its outstanding selection of titles on challenging subjects. In January 2006, the documentary won a Director's Choice Award from the Black Maria Film and Video Festival. It will be touring nationally in the US this year.

*Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* is a documentary film on the outsourcing of American jobs to India. Told from the perspective of an Indian living in the US, the film offers a unique point of view as it journeys into India's call centers. Gulati, who teaches 16mm film production and experimental filmmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University, has developed a new language and style within the genre of documentary filmmaking, breaking conventions of editing by including footage one would normally leave out. It is a clever technique that makes the process transparent, showing us that while this a documentary we're watching, the characters are really performing for the camera, thereby raising questions of the 'document' itself. Gulati refers to this as showing the 'manufacturing' as opposed to the 'manufactured'. She uses a personal narrative in the form of a diary/travelogue to delve into the larger socio-cultural landscape of globalization and identity politics.

How did it all begin? Gulati: 'This was three years ago when one didn't know as much about outsourcing of telemarketing jobs. I found myself *wanting* to talk to Harry' (a telemarketer calling her from New Delhi, the city where she grew up). She was surprised that he got her name right and was calling her from across the Atlantic, from New Delhi in particular. The phone call by 'Harry' intrigued Gulati so much that she decided to take a trip back home in 2003 to 'enter the world of call centers and language institutes where telemarketers acquire American names and accents to service the telephone-support industry of the US.' Says Gulati, 'It was an eye-opening experience for me and made me question my preconceptions. I really thought I was going to experience walking into a sweatshop-like environment.' It was, however, not just a phone call from a telemarketer named Harry that made her pack her bags; it was her relationship with her subjects that made her pick up the camera. She sums it up beautifully in the film when she says, 'Here I was, an Indian living in America with an Indian name and accent, seeing other Indians living in India with American names and accents. Ironically, we were all living as per Eastern Standard Time'.

Gulati is a talented filmmaker and the acceptance of her film to a sold-out audience at the Margaret Mead Film Festival vouches for that. *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* has a well-crafted and cleverly structured narrative using ingredients of cinema vérité, archival footage, animation, and text. Her weaving together of these ingredients results in a cohesive patchwork design where the stitching is invisible. The cinema vérité footage serves as a peek inside call centers during a typical work schedule that

# TO THE PROFESSIONAL ASSASSIN

*It is possible to throw down  
A mountain, to erase a river  
From its source; how many times  
Have I whispered, real talent  
Is needed for murder;  
It is not easy at all  
To commit a neat murder  
The dead can jump out of graves  
On rare mornings  
Some light is needed;  
As human sight is not powerful  
Like the eyes of a cat.*

from Saker Amin, *What my name is!*  
Translated by Razia Khan and M. Harunir Rashid  
Dhaka: DROUPODI, 2002

techniques for expressing domination also seem to be of a strangely pre-modern sort. The Japanese probably incited the most hatred and spurred anti-imperial struggle with their notorious habit of face-slapping. The newly re-colonized subjects of Burma and Malay found this to be the most intolerable aspect of their subjection.

The fruit of long and arduous archival labour, *Forgotten Armies* is an achievement that helps one rethink broad subjects such as modernity and modern warfare. It is also a great example of the theory of nationalism and regionalism that Bayly has previously published. According to him, geo-political formations in modern times are born through the crucible of war. The vast transformation that was the second world war can be seen to have produced the region we understand today as Southeast Asia. The very term 'Southeast Asia' was coined only after 'the whole area from the borders of Bengal and Assam almost as far as the Australian Sea was united by the Allies for the first and only time in a single, interconnected administration' (p.xxxii). The seeds of a new order were being planted amidst the mayhem. Thus the vast cosmopolitan perspective that they bring to their narrative reveals 'the terrifying spectacle of change which destroys everything and creates it anew, and destroys again', which was central to Friedrich von Schiller's notion of the historical sublime.<sup>2</sup>

Destruction can thus be productive. The exceptional circumstances of modern warfare can potentially help bring into focus the seething struggles, unsettled

sense 'in the context of the fluidity of the social world he inhabited, a world where most people were strangers' (p.55). Such characters abound in the scenarios of *Forgotten Armies*, where the minor and ghostly presence of the commoner reveals itself to be just as significant as that of a British official, where reversals of power are quite regular. The book's excellent organization, including several maps, a list of key characters and an extensive index, help the reader sort through any difficulties in keeping track of them.

The book's unusual picture of the modern experience can be considered the result of its shifting the narrative of the second world war from the western to the eastern front and from the sphere of officialdom to the translocal worlds of the forgotten armies. Combinations of the most discrepant phenomena seem to have characterized the era, and in bringing them to light Bayly and Harper verge on the fantastic in their depictions. The non-western world of the mid-20th century is one of bizarre *bricolage*. We see animal-based armies alongside state-of-the-art war machines and we witness how the 'most advanced scientific techniques of killing were deployed alongside almost medieval patterns of bravery and brutality' (p.393). The notion of a 'triumph of the will' was strong among many fighting forces and Emperor Hirohito 'still believed that the Allies could be denied victory if his samurai were brave enough' (p.393). The most technologically advanced instruments of destruction were employed by the likes of kamikaze bombers who espoused quasi-ancient ideologies of sacrifice. The

disputes and unresolved contests over power that endure quietly under normal conditions. The aftermath of explosions across a vast terrain leave the possibility for realignments of geo-political boundaries, the invention of nations and the formation of new regional blocs. Underneath the scorched remains, the ramshackle re-adjustment to normality and the refurbishing of historical trajectory lie the memories of vastly discrepant, yet interconnected, experiences. Such remains can be unearthed to reveal profound moments pregnant with possibility. Bayly and Harper are like archaeologists digging into the historical record to bring scraps back from oblivion and reassemble them in ways that may shed light on and enhance the meaning of our present. One issue that certainly comes to light is the potential discrepancy between the way the past is officially commemorated and the different ways it can be recollected in regions as diversely populated – in the past and in the present – in what we today call 'Southeast Asia'. ◀

#### Notes

1. White, Hayden. 1987. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
2. As quoted in 'The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation'. *Ibid.*, p.69.

**Bali Sahota** is a research associate at the Department of Asian Languages and Literatures at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities.  
sahota@umn.edu

starts late at night and runs to early morning. Gulati's unique style of storytelling simultaneously uses and defies documentary conventions – the film incorporates 'traditional' style interviews but the camera keeps rolling even when a phone call interrupts the session and the interviewee lets us know that Gulati's next subject is waiting in the room next door.

The film paints a complex picture with snippets of history that date back to the first telephone call made via satellite, subtly hinting at the threat technological advancements make to all jobs, not just call center jobs. It serves as a gentle reminder to the changes we accept around us every day – from automatic toll collection machines on highways to self-check-in airline counters to self-check-out grocery cashier stations. It also reminds us that we are too quick to point fingers at cheaper labour in developing countries taking away American jobs. The film also poses more questions than it answers; half way through the film, Gulati asks a former call center employee: Who benefits? A question she says she learned to ask as a Critical Social Thought major, a question that highlights the politics behind the film and prods at the larger sociological issue of the distribution of power.

The theme of globalization is apparent in the film, but the subtlety with which Gulati approaches the issue of identity intrigues. At one point, she drops in at a call center job interview where the interviewee is asked to describe the last movie he saw. He begins to narrate the plot of a major Hollywood blockbuster titled *Face Off*. 'In that film, there are two main characters, Nicolas Cage and John Travolta...they change their faces and no one knows which is the real one.' The resonance of his response with the subject of identity (Indian call center employees posing as Americans) seems too uncanny.

*Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* starts and ends with animation using a black and white palette that resonates with the archival footage in the film. It forms a nice balance between the humorous and satirical animation and serious and factual archival imagery. The film is a refreshing concoction of documentary and fiction that has 'text' starring as its own character. The 'fictitious' re-enacted phone calls from telemarketers in the opening animation might be scripted but is based on 'real life' accounts that the filmmaker has experienced.

Sonali Gulati continues to be interested in the subject of identity. Her first film *Sum Total* addresses gender and sexuality while *Barefeet* addresses diasporic and transnational identity. Before starting a film, Gulati always asks herself two questions: Why *this* film? And why am I making it? Clearly, the responses to these questions create close ties between the film and the filmmaker. For someone who believes that the personal is political, such critical introspection comes as no surprise.

Gulati's latest film *Nalini by Day, Nancy by Night* is a documentary worth watching. The film is witty and humorous with a serious heart on a subject of global importance that will keep you laughing all the way home and thinking thereafter. If you see this film, you'll know why Gulati is a filmmaker to watch out for. ◀

**Maya Kulkarni**  
South Asian Women's NETWORK  
maiakulkarni@yahoo.com