**War II: Film Final Paper**

***Movie Plot***

The movie follows the story of Thakar Singh, a young Kshatriya Hindu who volunteers to fight as part of the British Indian Army in the First World War. Thakar descends from a military family, with his male relatives all serving in the military dating back several generations. The movie opens on the eve of his 18th birthday in 1913. There is a massive family celebration, and Thakar excitedly volunteers to join the Indian Army, at the time part of the Imperial Strategic Reserve, expecting only to be called upon to protect against incursions on the North West Frontier. As family members congratulate him and ask about his plans, a few critical details about Thakar's life become clear. He has never ventured far out of his village and as a result, has very limited interactions with members of lower castes, as well as limited interactions with Muslim and Sikh families. He feels a sense of duty to his family and his country and believes that military service is an honorable profession. He dislikes British colonial rule, but only passively. The idea of Indian self-governance appeals to him, but he makes no active effort to advocate for Indian independence. Mostly though, it is clear that on the precipice of the Great War, Thakar is blissfully unaware of how dramatically his life is about to change.

Fast Forward to August 1914. It is Thakar's last night home before he is set to leave for Bombay, the first step in a long journey to the Western Front. Thakar sits with his family for dinner, his mom cooking his favorite meal. The family is mostly in high spirits with Thakar's father exuding a sense of pride, often commenting about the great service his son is soon to partake in. Thakar's younger brother talks about how he wishes he could go to war too and Thakar, while uncertain about what exactly the future will entail, is eager to serve and prove that he is worthy of his family's legacy. It is only his mother who remains quiet throughout the dinner, nodding along, but reluctant to engage in conversation. After dinner, she begins making chai and waits until it is only her and Thakar in the kitchen to speak up. She pleads with Thakar not to go to the war. She tells him that there is no shame in staying home to guard the North West Frontier and that there is no sense in leaving to fight Britain's war. An early proponent of Indian independence, she concludes by questioning what honor there is in serving a subjugating force. Thakar is rattled, but still resolved in his decision, and tells his mom that she is wrong, this is what he must do.

The next morning Thakar leaves for Bombay. As part of the 2nd Indian Cavalry Division, he embarks on an eight-week journey to France, passing through the Suez Canal before landing in Marseilles. As with most units in the Indian Army at the time, Thakar was part of a segregated unit made up of only Hindu Kshatriyas. However, during the journey, the various units often had to interact with one another. Interacting with members of other castes is a very new experience for Thakar, and as such, he defaults to learned prejudices, retreating into the safety of his individual unit. Along with his fellow Kshatriyas, he regularly mocks or plainly ignores fellow soldiers from lower castes, refusing to dignify their existence. Worse even is the tensions on the ship between various religious groups. With Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh units all traveling together and in constant proximity, minor fights often break out, and slurs are exchanged on a daily basis. For all his mother's talk about the need for Hindus and Muslims to come together in reunification efforts, Thakar inherited a deeply instilled sense of distrust towards Muslims from his father.

Eventually, the journey comes to an end when the division lands in Marseilles, heading on to the Ypres Salient. Thakar's division is incorporated into a new British Expeditionary Force Calvary division, serving alongside British and Canadian troops. The Indian forces are instructed to take a defensive role, and accordingly Thakar and the rest of his unit are quickly thrown into the trenches at the First Battle of the Ypres. His first day in battle is chaotic, confusing, and traumatic with several members of his unit sustaining injuries. He witnesses as his closest friend from the journey over gets killed by heavy artillery shelling and is rushed along without pause to process what is happening all around him. He wakes up early the next morning disoriented by the sound of shelling and frantic shouts from the Lieutenant demanding that people get moving. There are incoming reports that neighboring units have been hit with some type of poisonous gas. It is at this moment that Thakar starts to remember his mother's words, thinking "I don't want to be here. I'm not supposed to be here. This isn't my fight."

The next few weeks pass in a predictably appalling haze. Even though Thakar's division was meant to serve a defensive role, it sustains high casualties. Thakar and his fellow Indian soldiers had been trained for mountain warfare and find themselves ill equipped for the industrial conflict they have been tossed into. The new tools of modern warfare are bewildering with heavy artillery, machine guns, and poison gas standing in stark contrast to the weapons of their father's wars. Moreover, none of them are prepared for the cold of a European winter, with significant shortages of appropriately warm clothing for Indian soldiers. To make things even worse, as people leave the front they are replaced with new soldiers who have no affiliation with the units they are joining. Morale is very low among all members in the division, and it is in these final weeks of 1914 that Thakar's unit gets a new replacement--a Muslim from Punjab named Shahamad Khan.

Shahamad and Thakar are initially skeptical of one another but are forced to spend countless hours together over the following months and subsequent battles. The movie follows their slowly budding friendship, tracing as shared trauma brings them together. The two work side by side in the trenches watching as the meat grinder of war erases all their carefully constructed social distinctions. It doesn't matter who's a Hindu or who's a Muslim when the other side starts dropping heavy artillery on your unit, the difference between life and death is as arbitrary as the identifiers they had labeled themselves with. Instead, the two find they actually have a lot in common. They share similar family histories, interests in the same novels; both enjoy card games and both long for their moms' unparalleled cooking. They spend hours discussing the future of India, imagining a day when they wouldn't have to risk their lives for a war that wasn't their own. As other Indian divisions leave the Western Front for Mesopotamia, their relationship with each other and their entire unit strengthens, with everyone depending on one another regardless of the sneers they may have exchanged on the journey to Europe a year prior.

The movie comes to a climax at the Battle of the Somme. On July 1, 1916, Thakar's division is moved to the Somme, taking a reserve position, preparing to exploit any opening. Things are calm for the division in the first two weeks of the battle, with Thakar and Shahamad carrying about their lives, writing home, and making due as best they can when surrounded by so much death and destruction. Then on July 14 their unit is sent to Montauban and ordered to make an advance as part of the Battle of Delville Wood. Thakar and Shahamad gear up and move into position between High Wood and Delville Wood, side by side the entire time. Suddenly they come under intense machine gun fire, and Thakar watches as Shahamad is hit. Panicked, he dismounts and tries to save his friend, but it is too late. Shahamad dies in the woods as Thakar weeps over him.

In the aftermath of this scene, Thakar is shown serving out the remainder of the war in flashes, participating in the Battle of Cambrai and getting sent off to other locations before ultimately returning home to India. The film concludes on the eve of Thakar's first night back home. After a long welcome back dinner with praise from relatives for the decorations he received during the war, Thakar and his mom sit down for a quiet cup of chai. She tells him how much she missed him while he was away. Thakar smiles, looks up at his mom, and tells her that she was *almost* right. Indian men did not deserve to die fighting Britain's war, and there was no honor in the indiscriminate killings of modern weaponry. However, there is honor in discovering a higher purpose beyond oneself and pledging a life to that ideal. In Shahamad's memory, Thakar vows to fight for the day that India will belong to no master and serve only itself. And with that, a new leader in the Indian Independence movement is born.

***Thematic and Contextual Analysis***

The film is a fictional account of the experience of Indian soldiers during the First World War. For the most part, it is historically accurate, with some creative licensing. During the war, over one million troops served overseas in the Indian Army during WWI, with the majority fighting against the Ottoman Empire in the Mesopotamian campaign.[[1]](#footnote-1) The forces played a critical role in the war, and for their part, several thousand members received medals or other awards, including 18 Victoria Crosses.[[2]](#footnote-2) In total, over 70,000 troops died, and an additional 60,000 were injured.[[3]](#footnote-3) With this film, I wanted to explore a few key themes and concepts behind the war. First, I wanted to analyze notions of identity and the ability of war to break down social barriers. Next, I was interested in the technological advancements during WWI and how these reshaped the essence of warfare and notions of honor. Finally, I sought to highlight the role of colonialism and the idea that every resource in India could be exploited for use by the British, including physical manpower. This point is then meant to tie into the broader tensions in WWI between, the younger soldiers and the older "armchair" leaders sending them to their deaths.

*Identity*

The film details the personal development of Thakar from a sheltered and prejudiced young man to someone capable of seeing beyond arbitrary social distinctions, ultimately seeking to bridge these gaps in service of a larger goal for his country. Admittedly, this may be an exaggerated portrayal of the power of war to break down social barriers and open minds, but it is undoubtedly grounded in truth. Scholar Eric Leed elucidates this phenomenon in his work *Class and Disillusionment in World War I*. The article focuses on understanding the different ways that WWI reshaped civil identities. Leed describes the experience of community and comradeship in the trenches. The relentless and all-consuming nature of the war facilitated a particular “disillusionment” Leed argues, whereby upper-class soldiers disabused themselves of their “unique virtues” and learned to identify with the “common man.”[[4]](#footnote-4) He states powerfully that “it was equality under compulsion of authority and material realities.”[[5]](#footnote-5) In this manner, the environment of war allowed relationships between soldiers to transcend beyond social class and other distinctions. Leed contends that these experiences were not necessarily universal, with a minority of groups instead feeling a heightened sense of class distinctions as a result of the war. He posits that this disconnect led to the competing ideological perspectives in the years following.[[6]](#footnote-6) However, Leed affirms that regardless of the resulting perspective, the war did change social attitudes on an individual level, leading to social change after its end.

Such a breakdown of barriers was especially the case in the Indian Army since it was a volunteer force. This is important to note because volunteering to serve in the Army was widely viewed by lower castes as an opportunity to earn higher pay and escape their given caste by becoming a warrior, which conferred higher social status.[[7]](#footnote-7) Moreover, the British government subscribed to the theory of a “martial race,” focusing recruiting efforts on those people believed to be “more warlike.”[[8]](#footnote-8) Accordingly, many of the volunteers came from groups of relatively similar social standing to begin with, limiting the incidence of dramatic variances in castes. Further, due to the reserve system organization that allowed for replacements to be assigned without any prior affiliation to the unit, Indian troops of different castes, and sometimes of different religious groups, would often be thrown together.[[9]](#footnote-9) Thus, even though there were initial distinctions between soldiers coming from different castes and religious backgrounds, many of these became blurred or irrelevant over the course of the war.

On a separate note, the movie touches on the concept of war facilitating self-reflection. Philosopher Garry Hagberg discusses this concept in his piece The War Epic as Crisis of Self-Identity. In it, he posits, "the circumstances of war bring into sharp focus what one ultimately stands for, what one is and is not willing to do.”[[10]](#footnote-10) Throughout the film, Thakar struggles with the definition of honor that has been imposed upon him by his family and how incongruous it is with fighting a war that he has no business being in. By way of his friendship with Shahamad and the dissolution of social boundaries, Thakar realizes that what he values most is his country. As such, upon returning home to India, he dedicates himself to fighting for its independence. This evolution of identity from naively buying into a set of externally imposed moral values to embracing and acting on personal principles marks a real transformation through war.

*Technological Advancements*

The second major theme the movie tackles is the impact of technological change in WWI. The new tools and tactics that emerged during the war have come to define the "modern style of warfare."[[11]](#footnote-11) Several historians and military experts argue that the advances made in WWI constitute the most monumental developments in the history of war, with all changes since amounting to merely incremental improvements. Former Major General in the British Army and military historian Jonathan Bailey outlines these changes in his work *The First World War and the Birth of Modern Warfare*. He starts by describing the state of affairs in 1914, when old doctrines were still in play and tactics hadn’t caught up to the new technology. He then follows three key developments over the course of the war.[[12]](#footnote-12) First, there was a transition away from physical encounters and muscle power, pivoting instead to machine power in the form of indirect artillery fire. Next, there was the introduction of the airplane, pushing war into new dimensions. Finally, as a result of various new technologies, the concept of depth was revolutionized with a newfound ability to accurately target and engage the enemy well beyond what had previously been possible. By the time the war drew to a close in 1918, these paradigmatic shifts rendered pre-war conventional wisdom obsolete.[[13]](#footnote-13)

However, as military historian David Zabecki notes, these changes did not “automatically point the way to new tactics, techniques, and procedures.”[[14]](#footnote-14) Rather, as the various militaries worked to adapt to the new realities, strategies were “developed slowly and painfully, by trial and error, costing in the process the lives of hundreds of thousands of troops on all sides.”[[15]](#footnote-15) This speaks more directly to the experiences of soldiers on the ground, as reflected in the film. For average soldiers, WWI was characterized by trenches, novel weapons, and endless carnage.[[16]](#footnote-16) The new weapons such as heavy artillery, machine guns, tanks, planes, and poison gas all inflicted massive casualties, leaving soldiers battling in the same hellish landscape for months on end. This had a severe impact on the psyche of soldiers, with many developing what was then referred to as shell shock.[[17]](#footnote-17)

An interesting side effect of the technological changes during the war was the impact it had on soldiers’ sense of honor and identity. Looking at Erich Remarque’s famous depiction of the war in *All Quiet on the Western Front*, it is clear that the classical heroism previously associated with war died in the face of mass slaughter facilitated by modern technology.[[18]](#footnote-18) War was no longer a gentleman’s game. The new weapons killed indiscriminately, stealing any sense of agency from soldiers. Instead of bravery or honor determining the winners in battle, fate alone seemingly determined who died during mass shelling.[[19]](#footnote-19) This erasure of all sense of causality further contributed to the breakdown of class distinctions as described above and as depicted in the film. When everyone is dying without any regard for class, religion, or creed, then such social differences and the connotations attached to them become far less relevant.

*Colonialism*

The final concept that the movie focuses on is the unique dynamic present in WWI of armies being mobilized to serve the interests of their colonial powers. The Indian Army is an interesting example, but it is worth noting that there were many other colonial dominions called upon to serve. Britain mobilized forces from all over the Commonwealth and France similarly recruited soldiers from its colonies across Africa and Indochina.[[20]](#footnote-20) As a result, the First World War truly was a global war with people from all corners actively participating in the fighting. Of these diverse forces, the Indian Army was the largest group mobilized by a colonial power, making it a particularly interesting case study.

Through diary entries and letters sent home to India from troops on the front, it is clear that the colonial hierarchy permeated every interaction in the war.[[21]](#footnote-21) The British refused to ever let the "native" troops fight on their own, and British officers always outranked their Indian counterparts. There was also an explicit racial component to their treatment, with relatively few Indian troops allowed to serve in mainland Europe fighting against white enemy forces.[[22]](#footnote-22) Instead, the vast majority were sent to fight in the Mesopotamian campaign where they were facing “non-white” forces. These factors all served to undercut any call to honor or duty for soldiers, instead framing their service as almost mercenary in nature.[[23]](#footnote-23) Similar to the raw materials back in India, the British treated Indian forces as just another resource to be exploited in the war effort.

Though it is difficult to tease out a direct tie between the poignant experience of colonialism during the war and the later movement for Indian independence, the war certainly did bring such ideals to the political forefront. In response to calls for autonomy in India during the war, the British announced reforms in 1917 allowing for "the gradual development of self-governing institutions and the progressive realization of responsible government with the proviso that India remained an integral part of the empire."[[24]](#footnote-24) Embolden by Woodrow Wilson's call for self-determination, many returning soldiers sought more than the proposed reforms. They argued in favor of a transition to self-government, citing their valiant service and sacrifice alongside British troops.[[25]](#footnote-25) Unsurprisingly, the British did not heed these requests. In 1919 Mahatma Gandhi began his first India-wide civil disobedience campaign against the British.[[26]](#footnote-26)

While the movie ends before these and following events come to fruition, the role of colonialism is still a dominant driver in the film. It underlines the tension between the young men serving in the trenches—regardless of national origin—and the global leaders who initiated and prolonged the war. Finally, it calls back to the theme of identity and sense of self by demanding an answer to the question of "What are you fighting for?"

***Concluding Thoughts***

Ultimately, the film tells the story of a young man trying to make sense of a seemingly senseless war and figure out where he fits in all of it. It covers a broad range of themes, including minor themes beyond those that are investigated above. More importantly though, at its base, the film brings light to a fascinating but often overlooked chapter of history. After all, Thakar and the Indian Army have earned a moment in the spotlight instead of being relegated to footnotes in the story of Britain's Great War.

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