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The transnational mission of an Indian war correspondent:

P. R. S. Mani in Southeast Asia, 1944 – 1946

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Abstract: This article, based on new archival materials, reconstructs the experiences and observations of an Indian war correspondent as, from 1944 to 1946, he covered the advance of Indian soldiers of the British-led Indian Army from northeast India, through Burma to Malaya at the war's end, then to their eventual deployment with the South East Asian Command in Java after the Japanese surrender. As it transpired, Captain P. R. S. Mani worked as an enlisted public relations officer of the British-led Indian Army but also sustained his commitment as a patriotic Indian nationalist, who gathered intelligence on the Indian diaspora in Southeast Asia and on the impact of Subhas Chandra Bose's Indian National Army. Relatively little scholarship has focused on Asian war journalism. Mani's tension-ridden role as a self-styled 'Indian Army observer' provides an illuminating insight into the way Britain's lines of communication were appropriated and subverted during wartime and beyond, and into the way his own nationalism was reshaped by his unofficial transnational activities.

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Armies on the move have long generated lines of communication and flows of information that extended across vast distances. By the mid-twentieth century, the traffic in military information took the form of official dispatches, orders, intelligence and requests for supply, civilian propaganda, soldiers' correspondence and war reportage, not to mention rumour. The media through which this information was conveyed ranged from the printed word to the new media of the day, radio and newsreel and even more widely by the old fashioned networks of word of mouth. Scholarly attention has begun to focus on the non-European producers of such information during the twentieth century's global conflicts, especially through the study of the letter-writing habits of Indian troops who fought for the British during World War One.¹ This essay aims to make a further contribution to this literature by focusing on the still relatively neglected subject of the Asian war correspondent. It attempts to do so through adopting a micro-historical perspective which explores the writings of a south Indian journalist, P. R. S. Mani (1915-2011) at first as a military public relations officer then an independent war correspondent as he moved across Southeast Asia at a critical juncture in the region's history.² Certainly Mani's whole earlier life story suggests the roots of many of his attitudes and actions during his time in Indonesia.

¹ See David Omissi, *Indian voices of the Great War: soldiers' letters, 1914-1918*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999 and Santanu Das (ed.), *Race, empire and First World War writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011.

² There is a noticeable lack of research on Asian war correspondents. The few exceptions include contributions by Sheila Miyoshi Jager and Rana Mitter in their edited volume *Ruptured histories: war memory, and the post-Cold War in Asia*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2007; Anne M. Blackburn in *Locations of Buddhism:*

P. R. Subrahmanyam, known subsequently as P. R. S. Mani, or just Mani, was born in 1915 near Madras and attended Madras Christian College before commencing his career as an investigative journalist. On 17 January, 1944, he was commissioned as a Captain in the Indian Army, which, in an India still under British colonial rule, was directly under the command of the British 'Eastern Army'. As a journalist, Mani was assigned to a unit in the Directorate of Public Relations, which covered both 'British and Indian Units'. He was required to report on the experiences and exploits of His Majesty's Indian troops, for circulation among those troops, for broadcast by radio into India and for the information of the British Eastern Army Headquarters. His work producing morale-boosting dispatches while the war was being fought took him through Manipur to Burma, Malaya and Singapore. Following Japan's surrender, Mani travelled with these Indian troops, as part of the British-led South East Asian Command (SEAC), into Java. But Mani did not ever restrict himself to his official duties. Capitalizing on the transnational mobility which the war afforded him, he began to collect and ultimately circulate an alternative knowledge and intelligence directed at undermining British rule.

Exploring a unique resource

Together, Mani's official dispatches, private diaries and published journalism provide an illuminating eye-witness account not only of his own developing views but of the activities and attitudes of Indian troops during the latter part of the war and its immediate aftermath. Just as significantly, these sources reveal how the British need to establish wartime lines of communication which brought news from the Asian front back home to India became appropriated and subverted. Reading Mani's official output as a public relations officer among the Indian troops within the British Eastern Army or, as he consistently called his position, 'Indian Army Observer', alongside his unofficial writings as an Indian nationalist, we gain a valuable insight into how one colonial subject grappled with the tensions in his wartime enlistment. By travelling across the region with the Indian Army, under British command, Mani was able to compile what might be called, following James Scott, a 'hidden transcript', never made explicit in any one dispatch but which, when his many dispatches are read together, offered a narrative about what India could be without British rule.³ Mani's dispatches from the Burma campaign, despite not being included in his book about his time in Indonesia, go a long way to explaining the content of his Indonesian writing once we begin to look for this 'hidden transcript'. Furthermore, his writings overall reveal how his journey both before and after the end of the war gave new meaning to his anticolonial activities, as it became clear to him that India's freedom struggle had become one part of a much wider pan-Asian liberation struggle.

This close focus is not intended to offer an overall history of the conflicts, but rather to bring attention for the first time to the presence of an Indian voice speaking from an embedded position with troops serving under British command during World War 2. It is unusual enough that a contemporary Indian account can be found from within the fighting forces during the war. But it is unprecedented to have the writings of an Indian observer during the two years after the war officially ended. There have been masterful studies of the battles and politics of the British-led South East Asian Command in this period in Indochina and Indonesia, notably that by Christopher Bayly and Tim Harper in their *Forgotten Wars*.⁴

colonialism and modernity in Sri Lanka, Chicago: U of Chicago P, 2010; Emma Rothschild in *The inner life of Empires: an eighteenth century history*, Princeton: Princeton UP, 2011. Through study of individual life-stories, these authors uncover transnational and global historical processes within the 18th and 19th century British Empire.

³ James C. Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance: hidden transcripts*, New Haven: Yale UP, 1990, 1-16.

⁴ See also Peter Dennis, *Troubled days of peace: Mountbatten and South East Asia Command, 1945-46*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1987

But when discussing Indian troops, they and other authors have relied virtually entirely on British sources, albeit occasionally the British officers commanding Indian troops.⁵ There are Indian authors in the work by Omissi⁶ and by Battacharya⁷, but those voices have been filtered through British surveillance. Both Omissi and Battacharya rely on British military censors' readings of Indian troops' letters home, with all the attendant linguistic issues, pointed out very clearly in Bayly's *Empire and Information*.⁸ Santanu Das' reflections on Bengali troop letters focuses, like Omissi's work, on WWI.⁹ A somewhat stronger source for Indian troop views during the SEAC operation in Indonesia is Richard McMillan's 2006 analysis. McMillan interviewed British officers also but included also some comments with Indian troops.¹⁰ Srinath Raghavan's recent *India's War* draws much further on WWII Indian sources as it takes a broad view of the declared hostilities, but this valuable analysis of the whole period cannot focus on the tensions experienced by individuals.¹¹ None of these authors can investigate and compare the public and private communications of any one Indian over a long term.

Although drawing on all these wider studies for contextualization, this article turns instead to a close study of the deliberately public and the private statements of P. R. S. Mani, as the one Indian voice available over a sustained time, from 1944 to 1946 and over the crucial divide between declared war (ending with the Japanese surrender) and the ensuing undeclared conflicts with anti-colonial movements. We have three types of writing by Mani – two are public although for different audiences: his 1944 and 1945 dispatches which were ultimately for an audience of Indian troops but only after review by the British military (and which are often directly addressed to the British HQ), then his 1946 war correspondence journalism for the *Free Press Journal of Bombay*, aimed at both Indian nationalist and British left wing audiences. The third is the private writing which relates only to Indonesia – two bundles of pages from his personal diaries, typed up apparently close to the time the events were occurring in both 1945 and 1946.¹²

The close of the war, bringing the end of the military threat of Fascism in general and of the Japanese invasion of India in particular, changed the situation for Indian nationalists whether in or out of uniform. This article asks how an Indian nationalist journalist, effectively still trapped after the war within the British-controlled Indian Army, responded to the dilemmas which he saw to be posed for Indian troops ordered into battle against the Indonesian Independence struggle. This carries with it a further puzzle: why does

⁵ British voices – even when they are the officers of Indian Army troops – are the sole and authoritative sources in virtually all accounts of the Indian Army, from the early 1951 regimental history by A.J.F. Doulton: *The Fighting Cock: being a history of the 23rd Indian Division, 1942-47* Aldershot [England]: Gale & Polden, 1951, to the recent 2014 work of Daniel Marston: *The Indian Army and the End of the Raj*, (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2014).

⁶ David Omissi: *The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 1994; David Omissi (ed): *Indian Voices of the Great War: Soldiers' Letters, 1914-1918*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, 1999. Omissi's work also focused largely on WWI, clearly a time of great ferment in nationalism as well as in battle experiences, and so relevant to this argument, but nevertheless a significantly different context to that of WWII.

⁷ S. Battacharya: 2000: 'British Military Information Techniques and the South Asian Soldier: Eastern India during the Second World War', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34:2, pp 483-510

⁸ Christopher Bayly: *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000.

⁹ Santanu Das, 2011: 'Indians at home: Mesopotamia and France, 1914-1918, an intimate history', in Das (ed) *Race, Empire and First World War Writing*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011.

¹⁰ R. McMillan, *The British Occupation of Indonesia, 1945-1946: Britain, the Netherlands and the Indonesian Revolution*, Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

¹¹ Srinath Raghavan, *India's War: World War II and the Making of Modern South Asia*, New York: Basic Books, 2016.

¹² After Mani's death in 2011, all papers found by Mani's family were donated to the Blake Library, UTS.

this bundle of documents exist as a resource? The full answer to this puzzle is related to the first question, and will be discussed at the conclusion. The short answer, however, to the puzzle of the resources is that P. R. S. Mani himself selected the documents. He went from being a military officer, to being a war correspondent in 1946 for the *Free Press Journal of Bombay*, to becoming a press attaché to Nehru late in 1947 and then in 1949 moved into the newly established Foreign Service of independent India. He went on to have a distinguished career as a diplomat for his country, serving in Manilla, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Goa, West Germany, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Mauritius then eventually retiring in 1973 from his last position, as Ambassador to Sweden. He was on his retirement the longest serving member of the Indian Foreign Service.¹³ Over all these years, he apparently nursed a desire to write about his experiences during those tumultuous days of the Indonesian Revolution. To give himself sources to do so, Mani selected these papers, gathering some – or perhaps all – of his 1944 and 1945 PR dispatches, his 1946 newspaper articles (which were otherwise anonymous – the *Free Press Journal* editor, S. Savanand, refused to allow any journalist to be identified as author)¹⁴ and a small number of pages he chose to keep from his diaries written during the events in Indonesia before and after his military role.

This is clear evidence of Mani's decisions about selection – although he seems to have been in the habit of keeping a diary, there are no diary pages from his service during the war: he apparently chose not to expose any differences there may have been between his official dispatches and his personal feelings. There are similarly no diary entries from any time during his later career as an Indian diplomat. He has kept only diary entries – and then only some – from the period in Indonesia, first under SEAC command, when he was experiencing growing frustration and then anger with British control, and then from his period as a war correspondent, when he was again experiencing frustration in his dealings with both British and Dutch military commanders. .

Mani must have gone to great trouble to protect this large bundle of papers throughout his peripatetic life as a diplomat, and many of these papers were used almost verbatim in his 1986 book, *Story of Indonesian Revolution*, published by the University of Madras and translated into *Bahasa Indonesia* in 1989 as *Jelak Revolusi 1945*. His family searched after Mani's death in 2011, but found no other traces of his diaries, despatches or articles. The rest must have been destroyed or discarded long before. However, not all of the topics covered in the document package are included in the book. In particular, none of the stories arising from his many 1944 and 1945 dispatches sent during the Burma campaign are discussed at all in the book which concentrates on Mani's life in Indonesia. While he may have had many reasons for excluding this material from the book, there still remains the question to which we will return, of why he had included the Manipur papers in this bundle in the first place, and then carried them around for so long.

Mani and the Indian nation at war

The 'Indian Army' which the British had assembled had seen many changes. After the Indian Uprising in 1957, known to the British as the 'Indian Mutiny', the British assumed state control over the British East India Company holdings and its armed forces. Distrustful of those Indians who had led the Uprising, the colonial army which the British Raj sought to recruit was made up of those Indians regarded as most likely to be loyal, and these were predominantly those from the north western states rather than those from Bengal and the south east whose troops had been prominent in the Uprising. It was the north-western men about whom the British developed a theory of Indian 'martial races' who were argued to be

¹³ Mani's own biographical summary, written after 1977, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 26.

¹⁴ Letters and cables between S. Sadanand (Editor, *FPJB*) to P. R. S. Mani, 1946, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 18.

best constitutionally fitted for combat and discipline.¹⁵ Gajendra Singh has undertaken a careful analysis of the shifting attitudes within this colonial army and among the Punjabi and other north-western peoples who were experiencing foreign travel and residence in the early twentieth century. The Caliphate movement in Turkey, the Ghadar movement in the Canada and the United States and the international experiences of Indian troops during the First World War had radicalised the north-western diasporic populations of all religions, raising dissatisfaction among career soldiers in the Indian army who increasingly looked towards nationalism as an alternative to unquestioned loyalty to the British Empire. In response, as Singh has argued, the recruitment strategies of the British had already begun to alter during the 1930s, with more troops being sought from Bengal and the southern states than in previous decades.¹⁶ This was, however, a slow process. Even in 1942, this ‘colonial army’ had been compliant to British command, with its Indian troops firing on Indians on Indian soil during the Quit India conflict.¹⁷ It was still the case when Mani entered the war effort that the vast majority of the troops serving in the Indian Army had come from the north western states. For his purposes, as we discuss in the following section, Mani had to do a lot of leg work.

Mani’s profession as a journalist was of great interest to the British command of the Eastern Army and there appear to have been a number of Indian journalists – some with newspaper experience and some, like Mani, from radio – who were drawn into the Public Relations Division.¹⁸ The war itself was a fearful spectacle which Indian media were anxious to cover, and so, when Mani was commissioned in January 1944, there had been Indian journalists involved in the war as correspondents for some time. One famous example was T. G. Narayanan, an outstanding journalist from the staff of *The Hindu* who became well known for his articles on the gruelling Bengal famine of 1943 (a catastrophe which directly resulted from wartime conditions) published in 1944 in book form.¹⁹ Narayanan and Mani had much in common and knew each other well. Both had studied at Madras Christian College and spent stints working at All India Radio before becoming war correspondents. The war then set them on common transnational trajectories. Once Narayanan became war correspondent for the *Hindu*, he, like Mani, travelled to Manipur and then Burma, covering the battles with the Japanese and then their retreat down the spine of Burma into Malaya. When Japan

¹⁵ Heather Streets: *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005. Tarak Barkawi (2015) has pointed out with particular reference to Sikh troops, that such Victorian racial categories were firstly fantasies which accorded with both British and Indian mythology but then ‘were *made real* through imperial power and military organisation’ (emphasis in original, p 30), ‘Subaltern Soldiers: Eurocentricism and the Nation-State in the Combat Motivation Debates’, pp 24-45, in Anthony King (ed) *Frontline: Combat and Cohesion in the Twenty-First Century*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015.

¹⁶ Gajendra Singh: 2006: ‘The anatomy of dissent in the military of colonial India during the First and Second World Wars’ *Edinburgh Papers In South Asian Studies*, Number 20; idem, 2014: *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014. See also Kris Manjapra and Sugata Bose (eds) *Cosmopolitan Thought Zones: South Asia and the Global Circulation of Ideas*, London: Palgrave, 2010.

¹⁷ Srinath Raghavan, 2016, *op.cit.* pp 274-5.

¹⁸ Karl Hack: ‘Imperial systems of power, colonial forces and the making of modern Southeast Asia’ in Tobias Rettig and Karl Hack (eds) *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, London and NY: Routledge, 2009, pp 3-38.

¹⁹ T. G. Narayanan: *Famine over Bengal*, Calcutta: Pari Press, 1944. Bengal was not the only place gravely short of food during the war, although it was the most severely affected. See also Zook, Darren C.: ‘Famine in the Landscape: Imagining Hunger in South Asian History, 1860–1990’ in Mahesh Rangarajan and K. Sivaramakrishan (ed) *India’s Environmental History*, Vol 2, New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2011, pp 400-428. Mani became aware that many of the Punjabi and other troops were anxious about the food shortages in their home areas, undermining their morale. Narayanan’s writing as a correspondent in Indonesia in 1946 is discussed in my forthcoming book: *Beyond Borders: Indonesian Independence in the Eyes of the Region*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

surrendered, Narayanan went to Batavia, still reporting for the *Hindu*, to cover the emerging conflict between the Indonesian Republicans, the British-led forces of the South East Asia Command, the Dutch seeking to return and, in some cases, the Japanese whom the British recruited to maintain policing duties.

Mani, however, unlike Narayanan, reported on the war from within the British-controlled Indian Army as a commissioned officer. His decision to take up this role must have involved tensions, as it did for the many Indians who decided to enlist in the British-controlled forces in the middle of the war. For Mani the sources of tension were multiple. In Madras before the war, he had certainly developed an internationalist outlook through his interest in Theosophy, even though the Theosophists opposed non-violence. At the Theosophical Society's international headquarters, just south of the city at Adyar, he met its European visitors during the 1930s. His meetings with Dutch Theosophists would later contribute to his puzzlement that the Dutch colonialists he encountered in Indonesia could be so very different.²⁰ Mani's great passion was for Indian nationalism, as the title page of his personal copy of Jawaharlal Nehru's *Whither India?* made abundantly clear. In a handwritten homage to Nehru's ideas dated 8 March 1939, just six months before the commencement of World War Two, Mani revealed the strength of his anticolonial sentiments:

A very wonderful book giving lucidly in a few pages the case for Socialism in this country and elsewhere. His exposition of capitalism as a vicious circle is highly logical as well as equitable. It is the only remedy for the economic crippling of our Motherland even before the influence of capitalism is felt. Mohammed Ghani could be pardoned but not the British. The former's raid on the Temple of Sarnath was with a religious fervour – the latter raping the Indian Peasantry of their wealth and happiness is highly selfish and typical of the British. Those of our own countrymen who were and are abetting this crime, stand condemned by their own shame which will come upon them when India becomes energetic.

The vision of India is not far off and those of us who can search their hearts can hear the call even now. It is not by convention that this purpose is going to be achieved but through revolution – not a revolution in blood but a non-violent and very dynamic one taught to me by a great leader of men, Mahatma Gandhi.²¹

That Mani, despite holding this commitment to Gandhian civil disobedience and the view that the British had raped the 'Indian Peasantry of their wealth and happiness', should then accept a commission in the British-led Indian Army for three years reflects his grave concerns about the danger which Fascism posed for the world, not just for Europe. By this time too, the Japanese control over South East Asia seemed from the outside to be secure and increasingly threatening as Calcutta was bombed even more severely than before in December 1943.²² The motives of subject peoples enlisting in colonial armies had been

²⁰ Details of Mani's early career are found in his own two biographical outlines held in the P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 20 and Series 26, Blake Library, University of Technology, Sydney (UTS). The first was probably prepared in 1947 for his application for employment to the newly independent India's Foreign Service. The second was compiled after 1977, Mani having already retired in 1973. These details are confirmed by other documents found in the P. R. S. Mani Collection, by his publications (referenced below) and by his obituary (see also <http://www.imorial.com/P. R. S. Mani/> [accessed 26 July, 2015]) Confirmation of Mani's resume has also been provided by his sons, who donated the collection to the Blake Library.

²¹ Mani's signed note on Jawaharlal Nehru's *Whither India*, 4th edition (1937), dated 8th March, 1939, from the P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 1

²² Awareness of the dangers of Fascism to India as well as to Europe were a major factor in the decisions many strongly nationalist Indians to take up arms with the Allies during the war. This was the case with many in M.N. Roy's Radical Democratic Party, formed in 1940, and which opposed the call of the Quit India movement to oppose the Allies until Britain agreed to leave India. Kris Manjapra: *M.N. Roy and Colonial Cosmopolitanism*,

complex at any time in the past. The coming of the Second World War had complicated these motives even further, as Indian nationalists were so often, as was Mani in 1943, very aware of international events.²³

Mani later recalled his personal need to do something to aid the anti-Axis war effort.²⁴ Yet despite this decision, he sustained a sense of his role in the army as serving the coming India, not the British. The Directorate of Public Relations (PR) into which he was commissioned addressed itself to both ‘British and Indian units’, included both European and non-European PR officers and was expected by the British Army and British government to build up the fighting spirit of the Indian troops.²⁵ This morale-building role was spelled out in a text that was included in the cover of the division’s officially issued notebooks, which Mani possessed:

You will never get a chap to fight if he has something on his mind: Today YOU officers, British and Indian, are true trainers and YOURS is the task of taking these ‘somethings’ off the mind of each soldier by understanding, by interest, by sympathy and by explanation.²⁶

Mani, however, did not see his role in such terms. He always signed his dispatches as ‘Mani, Indian Army Observer’ rather than ‘Public Relations’ officer. Writing, as did Narayanan, as a Tamil who originated from a part of India culturally distinct from the states of the west and northwest, from where the majority of Indian troops still came, a recurring theme in his dispatches became the Indian national unity being created on foreign battlefields.

New Delhi: Routledge India, 2010. Mani did not, however, endorse Roy’s Radical Democratic Party, scathingly dismissing its claim to be ‘the only socialist party’ in India as ‘propaganda’ in his diary entry of 12 May 1946, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 8.

²³ Rettig and Hack, *Colonial Armies in Southeast Asia*, See chapters by Hack (1, 2 and 10) and by Robert H. Taylor (8). These mixed motives were to be severely tested – and ultimately frayed – in the conflicts in Indo-China and Indonesia. See also Gajendra Singh: ‘The anatomy of dissent in the military of colonial India during the First and Second World Wars’ *Edinburgh Papers In South Asian Studies*, Number 20, 2006; and *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*, London and New York, Bloomsbury, 2014.

²⁴ P. R. S. Mani, *The Story of Indonesian Revolution 1945-1950*, Monograph 6, Chennai: Centre for South and Southeast Asian Studies, University of Madras, 1986, pp ix-x. Translated into Bahasa Indonesia and published as *Jelak Revolusi* in 1989.

²⁵ Christopher Bayly discussed the cultural challenges faced by early British colonial information management in India in his 2000: *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000. S. Battacharya in ‘British Military Information Management Techniques and the South Asian Soldier’, *Modern Asian Studies*, 34/2 (2000) pp 483-510 and David Omissi: *Indian Voices of the Great War - Soldiers’ Letters, 1914 – 18*, Hammondsworth: Penguin, 2014, have both discussed the use of censors to ascertain the concerns of Indian troops. None of these analysts, however, discuss the operation of public relations officers nor of the independent press and of war correspondents. These issues are considered in Milton Israel: *Communications and Power: Propaganda and the press in the Indian nationalist struggle, 1920-1947*, Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1994; Deep Kanta Lahiri Choudhury: *Telegraphic Imperialism: crisis and panic in the Indian Empire, c. 1830*, Palgrave MacMillan, 2010 and Prue Torney-Parlicki: *Somewhere in Asia: War, Journalism and Australia’s Neighbours* Sydney: UNSW Press, 2000. The use of what was then a very contemporary ‘new media’, radio, is discussed at length in R O’G Benedict Anderson’s *Java in a Time of Revolution*, Jakarta: Equinox Asia, 2005, (without any reference to Indians) and the use of radio as a weapon on both sides of the decolonization dispute in Indonesia – as it had been used during the war itself – becomes very clear in the P. R. S. Mani archive, in particular in Series 8.

²⁶ The passage quoted here was printed on the inside front cover of the Directorate of Public Relations Handbook, containing ‘hints’ written ‘for British and Indian units’. Mani kept only the cover of this Handbook because he used it to protect his own collection of the final copy of the dispatches he cabled to the Directorate. He obscured most of the handbook’s front cover by pasting over it a sheet inscribed with his own handwritten title: ‘Mani: Indian Army Observer (20 May 1944 – 1 Nov 1944), Battle of Manipur Stories.’ See P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 2.

Acting to subvert the British strategy of ‘divide and rule’ aimed at marginalising any unified Indian nationalist sentiment, he sought to inform all Indian troops – as well as the wider Indian public – about the diverse origins and religions of their fellow countrymen in different units. At the same time, in the filing of such reports, Mani fulfilled his official morale-boosting duties. He clearly felt, as he noted in his diary during October 1945, an intense loyalty to the Indian troops who made up a substantial proportion of the British forces which marched across Southeast Asia. He was also aware that the British press and military information machine paid little attention to the Indian soldiers who were fighting so bravely and in so many different parts of the army.²⁷

At what must have been a significant effort, Mani tracked down Indian troops from many origins. The Imperial War Museum (IWM) film footage of the crucial Allied victory at the Battle of Imphal in Manipur in mid-1944 makes for an instructive comparison. Filmed by British cinematographers, the IWM cameras focussed consistently on the British troops, with shots composed so that the troops who were not British (with the occasional exception of Nepali Gurkhas) were placed on the edges of the frame, or too far away to be individually identified. By contrast, each of Mani’s 80-plus dispatches from this battle, collected in a notebook he entitled *The Battle of Manipur*, was a tightly crafted vignette in ‘human interest’ journalistic style, highlighting the actions and personality of a different, named Indian soldier or group of fighting men from different Indian localities, from provinces as far apart as Madras and the Punjab. Furthermore, he sought out women nurses in Chittagong and the refugees, many of them women, who were fleeing from Japanese-controlled areas in Burma into Assam. Many of the troops were Hindu but from a range of different castes, and some were Muslim. Some were subaltern foot soldiers and some officers. Some were tank drivers, some artillerymen and others mule handlers. Mani chose to profile each in turn, introducing, in effect, the diverse soldiers of Britain’s Indian Army to one another – seeking out their many different origins and affiliations, celebrating their achievements, and ensuring that all of them were recognised for their courage, initiative and resilience.²⁸

Mani chose a variety of subjects to profile. Some were young officers, just graduated, including some who were Rajputs from the north western states whom the British had identified as ‘martial’ and whom Mani as well portrayed as courageous fighters. Yet he also celebrated the tenacity of much more humble troops, like the mule handler who had also served in World War 1, whom he carefully identified in his dispatch of 27 June from Imphal as ‘Risaldar Ghulam Mohideen, a Tiwana Punjabi Muslim of Mitha, Tiwana, tehail Khush Ab, district Shahpur and troop commander in an Animal Transport Company’ carrying supplies up gruelling mountains to get them to the troops.²⁹ The terrain around Imphal was so steep that no other transport except mules could be used, and the handlers were crucial to the campaign.³⁰ On the occasion about which Mani wrote, Ghulam Mohideen had had no rest but had not hesitated to manage the difficult movement of another essential load. Although coming under heavy fire, he delivered all the supplies but had had to leave two mules which had slipped down a steep crevasse. On his return journey, he went back to the same crevasse and rescued the animals.

Each of the men was portrayed as demonstrating great valour for their country – not for England, but for a diverse India. In a characteristic extract, his dispatch from Imphal of 13 June 1944 describes a battle on the Tiddim Road. Mani wrote:

²⁷ P. R. S. Mani, Diary entry, 26 October, 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

²⁸ P. R. S. Mani, ‘Mani: Indian Army Observer (20 May 1944 – 1 Nov 1944), Battle of Manipur Stories’, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 2. While celebrating the Indian soldiers, each vignette was written in conventional militaristic style, with the Japanese invariably dehumanised as ‘the Jap’ or a faceless enemy.

²⁹ P. R. S. Mani, dispatch, 27 June, 1944, Imphal, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 2.

³⁰ Raghu Karnad: *Farthest Field: An Indian Story of the Second World War*, New York: WW Norton, 2015

...eight drivers of a GPT company ... coming from different parts of India, saved all their vehicles from the enemy who were close on their heels even though their tyres were flat and their hydraulic brakes refused to work because of the damage due to enemy shelling...remaining cool and calm, they succeeded in rescuing all the vehicles, leaving none behind.³¹

In addition, Mani sought to connect this diverse yet unified Indian army on the move with its homeland. As well as researching and writing his dispatches of the Indian nation at war, he was active in attending to the interests, and therefore the morale, of the Indian troops, ensuring for example, that they had access to entertainment and news from home through radio, the modern electronic medium with which he was so familiar.³²

The patriotic investigator: Mani and the Indian diaspora

As Mani made his transnational trek across Southeast Asia with the British Army, his activities extended beyond merely attending to the Indians who served within it. He continued to see himself as an investigative journalist, so wherever he went, he wanted to understand local conditions and he searched out local contacts through whom he might gain access to such knowledge. In this respect, his Tamil background helped him greatly. As he travelled, he stayed in close touch with T. G. Narayanan and found many other fellow Tamils in Southeast Asia – not only in Manipur but, as the Japanese Army retreated, also in Burma and Malaya. To locate and write about the small number of southern Indians among the Indian troops for his dispatches, Mani had had to be very active in seeking them out. In contrast, war-torn Southeast Asia contained substantial Tamil and Malayali-speaking communities, many of whom had come as indentured agricultural workers for colonial plantations or as labourers on railways or other industrial development. Others had come as traders or professionals like lawyers and doctors.³³ Some had fled the invading Japanese – including the family of Mani's future wife – to eventually arrive in Manipur or move on further into other eastern Indian states. Others, including those who had left India in protest against the rule of the British, refused to leave Burma or Malaya when the Japanese occupied it.³⁴

Many of these southern Indians took up roles in the Indian Independence Leagues (IILs), the civilian organisations which arose across Southeast Asia from early-1942 to articulate the interests of local diasporic Indian communities and express their opposition to the continued British presence in India. Although the relationship between the IILs and the Japanese varied and was often uneasy, the Japanese authorities tolerated these bodies. Many of the IIL members also supported or joined the emerging Indian National Army (INA), following its revival under the charismatic Bengali Indian nationalist Subhas Chandra Bose in 1943.³⁵ A great deal has now been written about the INA, but during the war and the resulting

³¹ P. R. S. Mani, dispatch, 13 June, 1944, Imphal, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 2.

³² Reference to such news and the use of radio can be found throughout the P. R. S. Mani Collection, specifically in the 'Battle of Manipur Stories' (Series 2) and in the scripts for radio broadcasts by Mani from Calcutta on *All India Radio*, 2 September 1944, p5, (Series 3)

³³ P. R. S. Mani, *The Story of Indonesian Revolution, 1945 – 1950.*, pp x, 65-66..

³⁴ One such person was Gouri Sen's father, a Tamil lawyer who had left India to live in Rangoon. Gouri Sen born 1923 in Rangoon, who herself became member of the Rani of Jhansi Unit of INA, was interviewed in 1996 for the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library which holds her interview transcript at Teen Murti, New Delhi, Accession Number 647. She explained that her father told her he would not return to his homeland in India until it was independent of the British.

³⁵ This article focuses on references to the INA which appear in Mani's 1940s writing. As this article explains, Mani attempted to research the INA in Burma with T.G. Narayanan but information was scattered in that period. There is now a large body of relevant secondary analyses on the INA, and to a lesser extent, on the IILs, and it has been drawn on to contextualize Mani's references. In particular, the following have been useful: most

trials of INA members, the British attempted to limit severely the circulation of information about it. As far as Mani knew when he was first commissioned, the INA had been recruited from both Indian troops who had formerly been prisoners of the Japanese, and Indian volunteers from across Southeast Asia – both men and women. Mani understood that Bose, by drawing some support from Britain’s enemies, planned to release India from the British yolk through an attack on her borders which would stoke an internal rebellion led by sympathetic patriots. Just as with the IILs, the Japanese endorsed the INA’s objectives, yet the relationship between both was far from smooth. Ultimately, the INA became itself a rallying-point for diasporic Indians coming from very distinct backgrounds and diverse places of origin. It is known, for example, that around 75 Indian men travelled from the Indian communities across what was then the Netherlands East Indies, to join the INA in Malaya.³⁶

Mani’s attitude to the INA was ambivalent. As an avowed opponent of international fascism, Mani was not sympathetic to Bose nor the military strategies of the INA. He was, nevertheless, interested in the INA’s relationships with local Southeast Asian Indian populations whom he had witnessed to be exploited as indentured plantation labourers (as in Malaya) or as industrial workers (as in Burma). Others who enlisted in the INA or gave it their support came from the ranks of merchants or professionals such as lawyers. For Mani, many of the latter became articulate informants as to the conditions of Indian communities living under both the present Japanese and the earlier British occupations. Their evidence formed part of a detailed report on the INA and local Indian populations, ‘painfully compiled’ over several months as Mani described it, by T.G. Narayanan with Mani’s assistance. The research often required both men to seek contacts in territory beyond the control of the British forces. In Mani’s opinion, Bose and the INA recognised the disadvantaged industrial and civil conditions of the local Indian populations, and so had come to espouse not just a military strategy – which Mani continued to reject - but also a social platform, of which Mani strongly approved.³⁷

Mani also paid close attention, as he explained in his 1986 book, to the relationship between the INA and the Japanese. He came to the conclusion that although the INA under Bose may have been in alliance with the Japanese it was not, in either a political or military sense, dependent on or subservient to Japan. This conclusion proved important in Mani’s subsequent assessment of Indonesian republicans such as Sukarno, who having taken leadership roles under the Japanese and cooperated with their civil structure, still claimed their independence from Japanese control. In Mani’s view, this claim could be validated by the autonomy of action he had witnessed among the INA leadership in their own dealings with the occupying Japanese.³⁸

After the report was completed, Mani carried it back to India to deliver to Nehru in person. He did so at a key time in the history of the Indian freedom struggle, probably in late-1944 or early-1945, when he returned to India in his military PR role to give radio broadcasts

notably Peter Ward Fay: *The Forgotten Army: India's Armed Struggle for Independence, 1942-1945*, (Michigan, Illinois: University of Michigan Press, 1995; C. A. Bayly and T. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the war with Japan*, London: Penguin, 2005; and Joyce C. Lebra: *Women Against the Raj the Rani of Jhansi Regiment*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2009.

³⁶ A. Mani, “Indians in Jakarta”, in *Indian Communities in South East Asia*, K.S. Sandhu, A. Mani, Singapore: ISEAS, 1993, 105.

³⁷ Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, pp x, 33, 65-66. Mani wrote that he delivered the Narayanan report by hand to Nehru, probably late in 1944 when he returned to India to make radio broadcasts. Such contact with Nehru was confirmed during Nehru’s interactions with Mani when the latter covered Nehru’s Malayan tour early in 1946 for the *Free Press Journal of Bombay*. Yet despite the extensive literature now published about the INA, this 1944 report by Narayanan (possibly co-authored by Mani) has not yet been found.

³⁸ Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, p. 33.

about the conditions of the Indian troops in Manipur and Burma.³⁹ At this stage, the British Army was attempting to keep the existence of the INA a secret and hence Mani's dispatches never mention it. However, the INA had begun to broadcast its existence and rationale over short wave radio, news which is understood to have reached some people in eastern India as well as Indians who had remained inside Malaya and Burma.⁴⁰ Mani's delivery of the report was apparently successful, but the document itself has yet to be found among the Nehru Papers held in the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. Nonetheless, its composition reveals much about war's globalizing function in the transmission of information. The lines of communication, the mobility and the access to local intelligence which the conflict opened up for Mani enabled his ultimate subversion of the role of colonial intermediary. That he was able to play such a double game, as both loyal propagandist and anticolonial investigative reporter, is indicative of the difficulties encountered by the British Empire at war in controlling and censoring the transnational communications of its colonial subjects.

Into the cauldron of decolonization: Java after the war

As a passionate nationalist whose international concerns had drawn him into the alliance with the British, Mani found himself in a further dilemma when the Japanese surrendered in August 1945. Once the immediate threat of Japanese invasion had passed, a simmering anger resurfaced within India as a consequence of the British refusal to quit, one that became widely evident in Indian newspapers of which not only Mani himself but Indian troops in general were well aware.⁴¹ Compounding this, there was no change for the Indian troops who served the British in its Eastern Army following the end of hostilities; there was certainly no automatic discharge for Mani himself. Rather, each of their terms of duty continued and the British continued to regard the Indians as reliable troops in its 'colonial army' who could be expected to go on obeying orders. Mani was confronted with the implications of his enlistment – he, like the career soldiers about whom he had been writing, were part of a standing army controlled by the British.

Mani was alarmed to realise that were all now to be moved over into the flashpoint areas of the region, in particular into Indochina and Indonesia, where nationalist movements had already emerged. The British had assumed leadership of the South East Asian Command (SEAC), nominally to accept the Japanese surrender and restore civilian order. In practice, the very existence of SEAC facilitated the restoration of the old European imperial controls. Mani was from the outset very unhappy about this situation but believed, so he later recalled, that he should remain with the troops as he was one of the few who were recording their perspectives.⁴²

Mani therefore remained in his role as an official chronicler of the experiences of Indian troops who fought for the British after the war, loyally submitting his dispatches to the same Directorate of Public Relations which had served the Eastern Army with both British and Indian units. At the same time he continued to embed traces within these official writings of a clearly patriotic message and to compile his hidden transcript as a patriotic investigative journalist. These traces can be seen in, for example, an official dispatch from 29 September 1945, in which he described the pan-Asian hopes and aspirations of the troops as they crossed over to Java:

³⁹ *Ibid*, p.65; transcripts of radio broadcasts in P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 3.

⁴⁰ See, for example, Gouri Sen interviewed in 1996, transcript, NMML; Dr. S. Padmavati, (born in Burma and sister-in-law of P. R. S. Mani) interviewed, January 2014.

⁴¹ *Free Press Journal of Bombay*, September 29, 1945, p. 1; *Hindusthan Standard*, September 29, 1945, p. 1.

⁴² Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, p. 59.

...to [I]ndian troops Java brings back the memories of Indian colonization in the country in the early centuries of its occupation by the ‘pallava’, ‘cholas’ and the ‘gupta’ of Indian history. Though not fully conversant the Indian ‘jaman’ [*sic*] has a vague idea of this ancient connection and [is] extremely anxious to renew and strengthen this centuries old bond of friendship. These views were expressed to me while on board by a [S]ikh soldier from Punjab.⁴³

At the same time, Mani and the Indian troops he travelled with would have been made well aware of the bitterness back home which greeted the British decision to use Indian troops across Southeast Asia, and, in particular, of the popular outrage at their deployment in Indochina, where they had been involved in fighting Vietnamese nationalists.⁴⁴ Some English-born troops in the British Army in Indonesia became likewise uneasy about the role they were being asked to play in this effective recolonization, with one group writing to the Labour Prime Minister in London to protest at the position into which they were being forced, while Indonesians themselves had also heard about the use of British troops against the Indo-Chinese nationalists.⁴⁵ In the official dispatch cited above, Mani displayed a very British talent for strategic understatement when he observed that the ‘local reaction’ to the arrival of Indian troops in Batavia ‘has been a little lukewarm owing to strong nationalist feelings’. His diary reveals that the crowds who greeted them were silent, that anti-British graffiti was displayed across all the buildings and that as the troops were taken into their barracks it was clear they were not at all welcome.⁴⁶

Mani’s official dispatches from Batavia continued to reveal patriotic traces. He reported that the Indian troops there were largely asked to do no more than simple policing duties, and he registered his dissatisfaction with the menial nature of the tasks they were asked to perform for British officers.⁴⁷ In Batavia, he again stayed in close contact with T. G. Narayanan, whose series of thoughtful features for the *Hindu* over the next few months, as events on the ground spiralled out of control, were deeply critical of the British.⁴⁸ Narayanan explained that the chaos in Batavia was caused by the many competing forces in the city and he pointed his readers instead to the situation in Bandung, where the nationalists were largely in control and where order and calm prevailed. It was the Dutch and the British, he argued, who were responsible for Batavia becoming ungovernable.⁴⁹

Meanwhile, Mani himself, while again ensuring the Indian troops he was with had access to recreational radio, strove as an investigative journalist to gain his own critical appraisal of the political situation. Through October, Mani set about meeting and getting to know Batavia’s Indonesian nationalist leadership and became particularly close friends with Sutan Sjahrir, whom Sukarno later appointed Prime Minister in November 1945, and the charismatic leftist Amir Sjarifuddin, who founded the Indonesian Socialist Youth party also in November 1945 and was later also to be Prime Minister in the following year.⁵⁰ At this

⁴³ P. R. S. Mani, dispatch from Batavia, 29 September 1945. The version here has been amended from Mani’s original, which includes no capitalization and the spelling out of all punctuation as was the practice for cable transmissions which would subsequently become written reports. The term ‘jaman’ may have been a typographical error for ‘jawan’, the widely used term for Indian troops. P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁴⁴ *The Hindu*, September 29, 1945 and thereafter; *The Hindusthan Standard*, 29 September, 1945 and thereafter.

⁴⁵ Richard McMillan, *The British occupation of Indonesia 1945 – 1946*, London: Routledge, 2005, pp 143-4.

⁴⁶ P. R. S. Mani, Diary entry, 25 October 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6

⁴⁷ Mani, Dispatch, from Batavia, 18 October 1945, Series 6.

⁴⁸ Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, Introduction, p. x.

⁴⁹ Bylined ‘Our Correspondent’ T.G. Narayanan, *The Hindu*, 18, 22, 24, 27 November, 1945.

⁵⁰ Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, pp 24-31. In writing this book, published in 1986, Mani gathered together his papers from 1945 and seems to have been careful to rely on them. There were, however, some sections of his papers which were not included in the book – like his account of Manipur and Burma – while some vital contextual details for the 1945 documents are included only in the book, rather than in his personal diary and dispatches.

time, October 1945, Mani's British paymasters were scathing about such figures. They described Batavia, where many such nationalist leaders were based, and in which substantial numbers of Dutch were seeking to be restored to power, as confused and disordered. They depicted Sukarno as a quisling because of his earlier collaboration with the Japanese. Sjahrir was preferred, as he had led resistance struggles against the Japanese, but neither he nor the left-leaning Sjarifuddin were trusted by the British.⁵¹

After only a few weeks, the 23rd Indian Division with whom Mani was posted, including Mahratti and Rajput artillerymen, as well as troops from other Indian regions, were sent to Surabaya. The political situation here contrasted markedly with that in Batavia as the city was completely in the hands of Indonesian nationalists, in a series of alliances which drew in all groups. The Surabaya administration was being led by the established elites, the *priyayi*, but they were supported both by the younger revolutionary nationalists, the *pemuda*, and by the broader mass of Surabaya working people, the *arek Surabaya* from the port city's neighbourhoods, the *kampung*s.⁵² The Japanese had surrendered to a small group of impatient Dutch, who were then promptly imprisoned by Indonesian republicans who assumed control of the whole Japanese armoury. Surabaya was, in fact, the only Indonesian city in which nationalists formed the sole civil structure, for even in Bandung some British and Dutch were present. The republican government in the city was clearly effective. By the time the British and Indian troops of SEAC arrived, having been delayed by the logistics of evacuating internees from other cities, civil order had been firmly established for some weeks.

Mani's official dispatches and private observations provide us with an invaluable testimony as to the origins of the violent and tragic events which followed. In an early dispatch from the city, designated 'Press Flash Immediate' and sent to the Public Relations and Divisional HQ in Singapore, he was notably more open in his depiction of the hostility of the crowd at the docks who witnessed the Indian troops' arrival: 'As in Batavia, local reception was cold and unenthusiastic and anti-Dutch slogans greeted us all over the harbour.'⁵³ In the same dispatch of October 25 he recorded that there 'were no incidents', and in a further report on October 26: "The occupation by Indian troops is proceeding peacefully according to plan... so far there has been no hitch...." Yet his hidden transcript, in the form of his personal diary, told a completely different story. His entries for Surabaya from October 25 to 28 revealed that the hostility of the Indonesians to what they saw as another colonial army had taken its toll on the morale of Indian troops.⁵⁴ From their very first sight of the city, their anxiety had increased as the reality of their reception, which Mani only hinted at in his official dispatches, sank in:

The port is 'decorated' with anti-Dutch and anti-imperialist slogans, and for the first time in Java, slogans have also appeared in Hindustani: "Azadi ya Khunrezi!" (Freedom or Bloodshed!) Its effect on Indian troops, especially the Mahrattas and Rajrifs, who compose the Brigade, is remarkable. Reports have reached me that they are already beginning to ask their officers if they have to fight the Indonesians....⁵⁵

The suspicion emanating from the many armed Indonesian troops whom Mani saw on the streets intensified his own doubts about his role, as he continued in this 25th October entry:

⁵¹ See for example the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1945, p. 5.

⁵² W. H. Frederick, *Visions and heat: The making of the Indonesian Revolution*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1989; Howard Dick, 2002, *Surabaya City of Work, a socioeconomic history*, Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2002); R O'G Benedict Anderson, *Java in a Time of Revolution*, Jakarta: Equinox Asia, 2005; C. A. Bayly and T. Harper, *Forgotten Armies: Britain's Asian Empire and the war with Japan*, London: Penguin, \ 2005; idem, *Forgotten wars: the end of Britain's Asian empire*, London: Allen Lane, 2007

⁵³ P. R. S. Mani, Dispatch 25 October, 1945, landing at Surabaya, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁵⁴ See his diary entries for October 25 – 28, discussed below.

⁵⁵ Diary entry, 25 October 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

In the light of incidents in and around Batavia, I think they are beginning to regard us as the vanguard of Dutch Imperialism. The pity is that we are all Indians here, and appreciate like their leaders in Batavia that we have not come to Java of our own volition.

In the same diary entry, Mani observed that the British commander Brigadier Mallaby had handled his first meeting with local Indonesian leaders very poorly. The British had made it clear they were not prepared to accept republican control as 'normalcy' and that they would insist on the start of talks which would facilitate the return of Dutch control of the port. Nevertheless, the initial British negotiation with the republican mayor of the city appeared to commit the British to remaining confined within the port area itself, on the mouth of the river and at the edge of the town. As Mani saw it, Mallaby had been insensitive and rude and had apparently failed completely to appreciate the position of the Indonesian *priyayi* authorities who were trying to allay the anxieties of the various groups of nationalists in the city, that is, the *pemuda* and the *arek Surabaya*.⁵⁶

By the time he made his next diary entry on 26 October – hurriedly typed and closely spaced - he was seriously alarmed. He felt that Mallaby's second conference with the local Surabaya leadership had also gone badly, with the Brigadier appearing to have been contemptuous of Indonesian armed strength. Mani wrote: 'Brig Mall does not appear to gauge the situation here properly and pooh-poohs Indonesian might. Playing for time, usual game.'

Mani continued: "A thousand Regrets I am not a free correspondent to report what I observe. Anyway, duty by troops from my own country and cannot leave them." He went to bed "with a vague suspicion there may be a bloodbath in store for us....."⁵⁷ Worse was to come on 27 October with the dropping by the British of leaflets in Indonesian, which Mani could read with the Malay he had picked up during the Malaya and Burma campaigns. These leaflets demanded that the Indonesian forces give up their arms, which was explicitly contrary to the commitments Mani knew that Mallaby had earlier given. He wrote: 'I feel that the proud Indonesians would not give up their arms until the Dutch menace is removed.'⁵⁸

In his diary entry describing Mallaby's evening press conference, Mani revealed his own deep frustration and anger at the 'arrogance' and distortion occurring:

All serious faces at Brig HQ. Aslam, Chopra, Singh [Indian officers] all look grave. I understand situation serious but Brig does not want us to report so. He wants to vet our copies and most correspondents unwillingly agree. I am furious that truth is being suppressed but can do little and escape by blaming Betty [his superior officer] for letting down PR and taking such orders lying down. More because my copies are unnecessarily delayed by him and the signals. Appears to me brigadier is posing calm exterior though he is very much perturbed..... He tells us that he had emphatically told the locals that he was the ruler of the place and they have to obey him. I consider this sheer arrogance and left the conference sadly disappointed at the ability of our leaders to avert incidents.⁵⁹

The embedded eyewitness: Mani and the Battle for Surabaya

Mani's official and unofficial writings from Surabaya provide us with an embedded eyewitness account of one aspect of the events in Surabaya which have largely been ignored in the current historiography, especially by historians who have not dwelt on the extent to which there were other Indian troops on the ground in the city, in addition to the Gurkhas.⁶⁰ The

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Diary entry, 26 October 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁵⁸ Diary entry, 27 October 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ It has become usual for Indonesian memoirs to refer to all South Asians as Gurkhas, as noted by P. R. S. Mani in *Indonesian Revolution*, pp 9-10, and this practice has been followed by early western analysts, such as R.

history of the Indian 23rd Division, *The Fighting Cock*, by a British officer, Lieutenant-Colonel AJF Doulton, portrays Indian troops in Surabaya as if they were in complete isolation from any local population, other than in engagements with the people it identifies as 'the enemy'.⁶¹ By contrast, Mani had already pointed out in official dispatches from Batavia that some Indian soldiers had been born and raised in the Dutch East Indies, in Medan in one case, and spoke fluent Malay. Now, from Surabaya, he sent further reports, on 27 October, which detailed the contact made between the Indian 23rd and members of Surabaya's local civilian Indian community. In these, Mani described the crucial role played by local Indian merchants in securing the peaceful initial landing of Indian troops. Indonesian nationalist leaders had been in close communication with resident Indian leaders, who had then approached an Indian Major leading troops into the city and successfully persuaded him to camp for the night outside the urban area. Such a recognition of the presence and active role of local Indian populations cannot be found in the British accounts of the day, except in the underlying suspicion with which the British military consistently regarded local Indians.⁶²

Once again, the fraught local situation Mani encountered also triggered his inclinations as an investigative journalist. Having been billeted at Surabaya's Liberty Hotel, in the company of other PR staff and members of the Allied forces' RAPWI (Recovery of Allied Prisoners of War and Internees) mission, and away from most of the Indian troops, he began to make forays into the city to learn more about it, its people, and the predicament in which they found themselves. In this respect, his principal informant was a Sindhi merchant called T. D. Kundan, who was trusted by the Indonesian nationalists and who gave Mani 'plenty of dope on the local situation'. As Mani reviewed what he was seeing as well as this new information, he wrote of his sorrow:

for the Indian troops who are weary of war and are longing to be back home. These famous warriors seem to be forever trapped in the web of destiny to which they so pathetically cling.⁶³

On the morning of October 28, Mani spent more time with Kundan over lunch and returned to the Liberty Hotel around 4pm. Not long afterwards, he heard the first shots ring out as the Battle for Surabaya began in earnest. Earlier, Mallaby had ordered the Indian troops to be deployed across the city far beyond the port area, in what was another contravention of the agreement previously reached with the local authorities. The Brigadier ordered the Indian troops to set up in small units, referred to as 'penny packets', within the *kampungs*, or neighbourhoods of Surabaya. But since these forces were heavily outnumbered, this proved, in the event, no more than a symbolic occupation of the city.⁶⁴

When the battle commenced the Liberty Hotel was soon besieged and all radio communication outwards cut off. Mani, as a Captain, was second in command for the Indian troops posted at the hotel to defend the journalists and RAPWI staff. He moved from position to position to support the soldiers but also tried to monitor the radio. Although he could not get messages out, he could hear the harrowing 'Mayday' calls from the many isolated units of Indian troops which were now all under attack. Then he heard their screams as their posts

O'G. B. Anderson in his *Java in a Time of Revolution*. Anderson used 'Indian' in regiment titles, but used 'Gurkha' as a generic description. See for example, the book's 2006 Equinox edition, p. 159.

⁶¹ A. J. F. Doulton, *The fighting cock: being the history of the 23rd Indian Division, 1942-1947*, Uckfield: The Naval and Military Press, 1950.

⁶² McMillan, *British Occupation*. See ch. 2: 'The Battle of Surabaya', and ch. 6: 'Morale'.

⁶³ P. R. S. Mani, Diary entry, 27 October, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁶⁴ P. R. S. Mani, Diary entry, 28 October, 1945; W. H. Frederick, *Visions and heat: The making of the Indonesian Revolution*, (Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 1989); for invaluable detail on the battle, see Frank Palmos, 'Surabaya 1945: sacred territory, the first days of the Indonesian Republic', unpubl diss. University of Western Australia. 2012.

were overrun and they were killed, one by one. These broadcasts have also been described by a British officer, Major Henstock, who recalled his memories of listening, similarly helpless, from the HQ radio.⁶⁵ Mani did not learn until later that other Indian soldiers had been burned alive when their post in a cinema was set on fire.

Eventually, after a series of failed telephone calls, Kundan was able to make get one through to Mani, who he assumed had radio contact with HQ. In Mani's account, Kundan begged him to get a message to Mallaby to call a truce, but Mani explained that all communications were disrupted and his own troops and RAPWI staff were pinned down. Mani now pleaded with Kundan to use a car to get physically through the city to take his message.⁶⁶ At the time, Mani did not know that he had lucky to have even returned to the hotel at all after his lunch with Kundan. Mani's earlier contact with local Indonesian nationalists appears to have saved his life. Des Alwi, a young nationalist in Surabaya, who later became a prominent journalist and speech writer, recorded in his diary of the battle:

We were secretly preparing a city-wide attack on the British at 5pm on Sunday 28 October, because they had broken both promises to (a) keep within 800 metres of the harbour - they had now occupied the city with 22 outposts - and (b) not to bring in Dutch military personnel - we had proof several had come in as part of the British landing party...

From a distance I felt the truck looked familiar. I had frequently seen it in the British (Command) Headquarters. It seems I was not mistaken. As the truck approached I recognized Jenkins, the *Daily Mail* journalist, and Shri Mani, the public affairs officer for the British forces, and a few other foreign journalists whose name I now cannot recall.

I jumped onto the road shouting, 'Don't shoot! Don't shoot! They're not British, they're journalists!' I kept running hither and thither waving my arms up and down to indicate they should hold their fire. Whew! They held fire. Saved by the bell!

Later that afternoon, at 5pm, 28 October, the first phase of the Battle for Surabaya took place...by the end of three days fighting more than 600 British and British-Indian troops had been killed.⁶⁷

Mani's official dispatch of 6 November covers the rest of that terrifying night of October 28 and its aftermath.⁶⁸ This dispatch was written after Mani had been evacuated to Singapore and it is a sombre document, very different in tone from almost all of the other official dispatches Mani posted either before or after. In it, Mani recounts the increasing pressure which the journalists and troops in the hotel came under. With casualties increasing, and knowing from the radio that the SEAC situation was extreme and no help was coming, they decided to surrender. They were then driven to a jail in an open backed truck, jeered along the way by the crowds lining the way. Once again, however, Mani's connections with Indonesian nationalists proved significant. The following morning, on October 29, Amir Sjarifuddin came to visit Mani and the other prisoners in the cells after he, Sukarno and Mohammed Hatta had flown into the city earlier in the day to try to organise a truce. Sjarifuddin arranged for Mani and the other journalists to be moved into 'protective' internment, where they were kept for four days as Mani's dispatch describes.

While they were in this protective custody, the situation worsened dramatically. The ceasefire held for a short time, but then outbreaks of fighting led to an attempt at negotiation

⁶⁵ Major Henstock, interviewed by Richard McMillan for *The British Occupation of Indonesia*, p.45; P. R. S. Mani, *Indonesian Revolution*, p. 7.

⁶⁶ P. R. S. Mani, Diary entry, 28 October, 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁶⁷ Alwi's diaries of the battle were published in Bahasa Indonesia in 2012. His sections relating to Mani have recently been translated into English by Frank Palmos, for his own extensive work on the Battle for Surabaya. See Frank Palmos, *Surabaya 1945: Sacred Territory, The First Days of the Indonesian Republic*, unpubl diss., (University of Western Australia) 2012; Des Alwi, *Pertempuran Surabaya November 1945 [The Battle for Surabaya, November 1945]* Jakarta: Bhuana Ilmu Populer, 2012, p. 248.

⁶⁸ P. R. S. Mani, Dispatch 6 November, 1945, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

between the local Indonesian leadership and the English late on 30 October. Kundan served as interpreter for the Indonesians. Before he and the others had completed their negotiations, mixed messages from the British led to the eruption of firing again at the Internatio Building. In this melee, Brigadier Mallaby was killed. During this time, the Indonesians holding Mani and his group tried to evacuate them by train from the town, but they were unable to do so safely and so brought them back to the internment site. In the tense days which followed Mallaby's death, the British Indian troops worked together with regular Indonesian army personnel to evacuate the 6,000-odd European internees, whom the British had previously moved into Surabaya, to ships in the port. The British did not evacuate the far greater number of Eurasians and Chinese residents of the city, who had also been interned by the Indonesian republicans.⁶⁹ When Mani and the other journalists with him were finally released, they spent a day or two gathering their belongings before they were evacuated on November 5 to Singapore. Only then did Mani write his long dispatch and post it on November 6. The surviving Indian troops, who had lost more than 500 comrades, had retreated into the port area of Surabaya to regroup. There they were reinforced in large numbers when the British moved in a further two brigades of the Fifth Indian Division.⁷⁰

On November 10, the day Mani returned to Surabaya from Singapore, there was an unmistakable massing of troops around the docks. Many believed that the new British commander, Major-General Mansergh was determined to take revenge for the humiliation meted out to the British forces on October 28 and afterwards. Mansergh issued an ultimatum to the Indonesians, which was clearly too humiliating to accept in its demand that the Indonesians disarm and surrender the city to the British. On November 10, the leaders of all Indonesian groups in the city met and decided to fight to the death rather than surrender. The battle went on for over 100 days of bitter street-to-street fighting, in which many thousands of Indonesians died, as did hundreds of Indians and some British troops.

Several accounts of this conflict now exist written by Indonesian fighters, and by non-Indonesian sources which have drawn on Indonesian memoirs and oral histories. However, none of these published works discuss the Indian perspectives, although most perpetuate the misapprehension (which continues to be held by many people in Indonesia today) that all the South Asian troops were Nepali Gurkhas.⁷¹ As discussed, even those authors such as McMillan and Doulton who write about Indian troops, do so largely if not exclusively from SEAC and British sources.⁷² The details of this bitter fighting from the perspective of Indian troops can, however, be read in documents in the P. R. S. Mani Collection. Mani stayed with them during the whole of the battle for Surabaya, sending dispatches most days which documented the tenacity and courage of the Indian soldiers. In particular, he wrote about the growth among them of pan-Asian solidarity as they discovered, rescued and cared for the many Chinese, Indian and Eurasian internees of the Indonesians whom the British had left behind.⁷³

Yet when Mansergh declared the battle officially 'won' in December, Mani had had enough. 'Much grieved with events in Indonesia', he requested a transfer back to India where he resigned from the army early in 1946.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Frederick, *Visions and Heat*, p. 264.

⁷⁰ McMillan, *British Occupation*, p. 56.

⁷¹ Indonesian Armed Forces (ABRI) History and Traditions Editorial Team, edited, 1998: *Pertempuran Surabaya: The Battle of Surabaya*, published by Jakarta: Balai Pustaka; Alwi, *Perempuran Surabaya November 1945 (The Battle of Surabaya November 1945)*; Benedict Anderson, *Java in a time of Revolution*, Equinox, 1972; Frederick *Visions and Heat*; Bayly and Harper, *Forgotten Armies; Forgotten Wars*.

⁷² McMillan, *British Occupation of Indonesia*; Doulton, *Fighting Cock*.

⁷³ P. R. S. Mani, Dispatches after his return to Surabaya, November 9. P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 6.

⁷⁴ Mani in "Supplement to his Application to the IFS", October 1947, P. R. S. Mani Collection.

Reporting pan-Asianism: the hidden transcript revealed

While a Captain in the Indian Army, Mani did not take the route of publishing his frustrations in the Indian press, although a few journalists in similar positions, still enlisted in Burma, for example, did begin to leak their stories. On arriving in India, however, Mani immediately gained employment with the *Free Press Journal of Bombay* as a Foreign Correspondent. Returning to Indonesia, he found the hostilities were still ongoing, but this time he could negotiate with the British and the Dutch military authorities to gain access or information, rather than remain silent as a serving officer within the British Army. Nonetheless, as his diaries show, Mani still felt trapped by his need to bargain with these authorities about how much he revealed to the readers of the *Free Press Journal*. As he explained in both his application to the newly independent Indian Foreign Service in 1947, as well as in his 1986 book, he felt committed to learning the story of the Independence struggle from the Indonesian side but he was also seeking to maintain his commitment to the Indian troops with whom he had travelled.⁷⁵

This commitment demanded his return to report one part of the Indian troops' story in Indonesia on which previously he had been prevented from commenting. Mani wanted to follow the stories of the Indian soldiers who had decided to act on their sympathies with the Indonesian freedom struggle and cross the lines to join the nationalists. However, in order to try to protect these men from pursuit and prosecution by the British, he agreed to delay indefinitely the writing their stories for his Indian readers.⁷⁶ The timing of Mani's decision to eventually go public with this story brings home to us the accuracy of James Scott's theoretical musings on the strategic moments when power relations between oppressors and the oppressed shift and the hidden transcript of resistance is suddenly revealed.⁷⁷

On 30 October 1946 Mani's article on the Indians fighting for freedom from imperial rule alongside the Indonesians appeared in the *Free Press Journal*. It arrived at a key time in India's own freedom struggle, on the back of the momentous Delhi 'Red Fort' trials of November 1945 to March 1946, the public outcry over which eventually led the British to commute the sentences of the three main INA officers found guilty; as well as the mutiny of the Royal Indian Navy, and of elements of the British Indian Army, in February 1946. Mani's decision to publish was specifically spurred on by another key event: the decision taken by SEAC, under intense pressure from Nehru and the nationalists in India, to withdraw completely all Indian troops from Indonesia. Mani feared that these Indians who had 'deserted' would be left behind.

His article in the *Free Press Journal* was headlined:

*A New Unity Forged Abroad Among Indian Soldiers:
They Fight For Their Country Out There In Indonesia.*⁷⁸

In keeping with the prevailing mood in India, where by October 1946 many had come to regard the INA as nationalist heroes rather than treasonous traitors, Mani opened with the statement: 'Another Indian National Army is writing history in that island fortress of freedom, Java, in defence of the Indonesian Republic.' Having established this patriotic lineage, he then explained that his story could now be told as Nehru had assured parliament that the government of India would not tolerate 'any subterfuge or delay in the withdrawal of Indian troops'. Mani then brought into full and complete view the theme which had threaded together all his diverse dispatches since 1944, as well as appearing in strands through his wartime journalism. His article proceeds by stating that among the 600 'gallant men' of this

⁷⁵ P. R. S. Mani, Handwritten Diary entries, 16 May 1946, 21 May 1946, P. R. S. Mani Collection, Series 8.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 16 May 1946, recording agreement with Brigadier Lander.

⁷⁷ Scott, *Domination and the arts of resistance*, pp. 202-228

⁷⁸ *Free Press Journal of Bombay*, October 30, 1946.

new INA were ‘Punjabis, Madrasedes, Pathans, Mahrattas – Hindus, Muslims and Christians, once again proving that outside British control Indians of all communities tend to unite’. He noted that the soldiers who had refused to wage war on Indonesia had greeted him in Jogjakarta with the INA greeting ‘Azad Hind’ [‘Free India’]. They had also been concerned to emphasise their idealism as freedom-fighting soldiers of conscience, as Mani duly reported:

‘It is true that some were attracted by material things. But the choice between two bigger issues lay in us and we chose the more honourable one. We decided that aspirers of freedom cannot become freedom suppressors’, they said.’

In Mani’s hidden transcript made public, the Indian National Army lived on, fighting another anti-colonial war in Southeast Asia. But it was able to do that only because Indians had not succumbed to the British tactic of dividing and ruling and instead, were in unity in their passionate commitment to an end to colonialism, both in Indonesia from the Dutch and in India from the British.

Finally, Mani related an incident from that terrifying Surabaya night of October 28, when he and his colleagues had been besieged in the Liberty Hotel by Indonesian forces, which he had long kept to himself but now felt able to write about:

In the raging battle of Sourabaya, a ribboned Rajput hero of Burma who lay dying with an Indonesian bullet in his heart exclaimed to me:

"Ham Dutch ke liye kion marna hai, Sab?"
- "Why should we die for the Dutch, sir?"⁷⁹

Mani concluded with this very personal and powerful experience in order to explain the political motivations of the Indian soldiers who had joined the Indonesian Revolution. The man whose death he witnessed had been decorated for valour in battle (‘ribboned’), he continued to respect his officers (he called Captain Mani ‘Saab’ or ‘Sir’), and he belonged to the Rajputs, who had for over a century been favoured by the British as ‘martial’. In this Mani appealed to the very mythology of ‘martial races’ which all of his work had challenged. Yet he needed to make sure this vignette hit home as widely as possible. For Mani, the poignant last words of this loyal Indian soldier, the epitome of the ‘martial’ mythology, dying far away from home in a foreign land, appear to have conveyed a lasting judgement on India’s entire wartime involvement. It was not just the meaning of his own death but the entire defence of colonialism that this Indian ‘hero of Burma’ had come to question with his final breath.

Conclusion

This article has focussed closely on the writings of one individual in order to tease out the tensions between his public and private writing. The first type of Mani’s official writing discussed was that in his role as Army PR officer, with dispatches sent ‘for approval’ to British HQ before they went to Indian troops in 1944 (in Manipur during the war) and 1945 (in Indonesia under the command of SEAC). The second type of his public writing was for a different audience, when he wrote as a war correspondent for the Indian press in 1946. His private writing is found in pages of his personal diaries in 1945 and 1946, both groups written in Indonesia. It is unusual to have such a diverse set of sources and in this case it allows the tensions between public and private – and in this case, between colonial subject and nationalist advocate - to become visible. Moreover, this is the only Indian-authored writing we appear to have which was written deliberately, for public circulation, by an observer

⁷⁹ Ibid.

associated directly with the Indian forces which were utilized under British command in SEAC in Indonesia after the war was over. There are accounts of Indian views which are extracts from the British censors' translations of troop letters home in a range of different theatres of conflict.⁸⁰ The British were eager to learn about the concerns and anxieties of Indian troops, and were even more concerned to hear about rumours which might be and circulating.⁸¹ Nevertheless, as discussed earlier, letters home which have been translated during surveillance censorship must raise both linguistic and interpretive questions about power, including how accurate the translation might have been, both linguistic and cultural, and whether the specific audience to whom it was written might have read something very different in it than did British surveillance officers. The evidential testimonies given by Indian troops and analysed by Gajendra Singh are extremely valuable, but while deliberately public, they too are constrained by being given within the very narrow conventions of adversarial court case evidence.⁸²

In considering the tensions between Mani's various types of writing, it has been useful to draw on James C. Scott's explorations of the forms of resistance available to disempowered subjects.⁸³ Scott's 1985 *Weapons of the Weak* recognises the relational nature of dissent which may appear to be individual, such as ambiguous appearances of compliance or avoidance, which is useful in understanding Mani's modified compliance with the task he was set to 'build Indian troop morale'. His approach to doing so was consistent with his understanding of the underlying unity among Indians, regardless of religion, ethnicity, language or caste, which was a very different approach than that which had been taken by the British Army in its recruiting processes to stereotype Indian populations as 'martial' or otherwise. Imperial strategies of 'divide and rule' into which the 'martial races' narrative had fed, were the target which Mani was seeking to undermine in his apparently innocuous 'human interest' stories about the wide diversity of Indians who in fact made up the Indian Army. Mani had to put in a huge effort to find these diverse troops, given the majority of Indians recruited were still from the north western states, but he went to this trouble in order to build a mosaic which showcased a diverse but united Indian army and – by implication – a diverse and united Indian population.

James' 1990 book, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, has also been useful firstly for its recognition of the performative nature of interactions of power, and the ways in which 'hidden transcripts' operate among the powerful as well as the disempowered. This approach has been further developed by Gajendra Singh, in *Anatomy of Dissent* who points out the shift in British recruiting practices in response to changing troop dissent. James' 1990 argument furthermore seeks to explain the underlying resistance which may precede what are often thought of as 'spontaneous' outbreaks of violence by the powerless.

As discussed in this article, the sustained undercurrent in Mani's work during the war, from the Burma campaign, is the unavoidable, everyday, reality of diversity among Indian troops which nevertheless allowed intense loyalty to each other. This narrative, scattered in his Manipur dispatches as individual vignettes was fuelled by his commitment to national independence which, given his consent in accepting an army role, required this moderation so that while the war was being fought, his view was not explicit in his official writing. Once the war was ended, however, the British decision to use Indian troops in SEAC was much less

⁸⁰ Battacharya, 'British Military Information Management'; Omissi: *The Sepoy and the Raj*; Omissi (ed) *Indian Voices*

⁸¹ Bayly, *Empire and Information*; Battacharya, 'British Military Information Management'; Omissi *Sepoy and Raj*; Omissi (ed) *Indian Voices*.

⁸² Gajendra Singh: *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars*, Bloomsbury: London, 2014

⁸³ Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*.

comfortable for nationalists like Mani. His official dispatches from Indonesia betray only traces of his frustration, but his rising anger was strikingly evident in his diary entries. The use of Scott's (1985 and 1990) and more recently Gajendra Singh's work (2006, 2014) are particularly applicable to understand from Mani's writing his building sense of anger and his reflections on the rising doubts and anxieties of the Indian troops he was accompanying. James and Singh both point to the overall recognition that power relationships generate a variety of 'registers' of address – each with different intended audiences - on all sides. Scott's 1990 work in particular points to the background for what often appear to be 'spontaneous' departures from subservience, and in this case, it is very helpful in understanding Mani's decision in his 'A New Unity is Forged' article to depart from his previously cautious mode of public address.

In this case, Mani burst out into the open in his 'A New Unity Forged...' article with the 'transcript' which had shaped all his earlier work, although never being expressed explicitly, in both Manipur during the war and in Indonesia afterwards. This was Mani's conviction of the underlying unity of all Indians AS Indians, regardless of religion, caste or ethnicity. It was, he argued, only the British who were trying to break apart this unity of purpose. The context of the INA trials had pitted the British against Indian independence, bringing together not only INA supporters but nationalists like Nehru and Gandhi who had opposed the tactic of armed insurgency and whom Mani admired deeply. Fearing the abandonment of the Indian soldiers who had crossed the lines to fight for the Indonesians, Mani was pushed into revealing the 'hidden transcript' with which he had sought covertly to build resistance to British colonialism.

We can finally return here to the question of why Mani chose to include his 'Battle of Manipur' collection in the bundle of papers he kept safe for decades in order to write his book about the intense and challenging experiences he had in Indonesia. It was these dispatches, the 80-odd vignettes about the diversity among all those everyday Indians who fought so courageously for their country during the war, which demonstrated what Mani meant in his October 1946 article. This was the new Indian national army – the diversity of men who had loved the idea of independence so much – for their country as well as for Indonesia - that they had refused to fight any longer for army of colonisers and so they had crossed the lines.