



India's Dual Contribution: Military Strength and Economic Support

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Abstract

India's involvement in the Second World War was marked by its dual contribution of military manpower and economic resources, which played a decisive role in sustaining the Allied war effort. On the military front, India provided the largest volunteer army in history, comprising more than 2.5 million soldiers who fought bravely in key campaigns across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Their participation in battles such as El Alamein, the Italian front, and the Burma campaign underscored India's strategic significance and highlighted the global dimension of the conflict. Alongside military service, India also became a vital logistical and operational hub, supporting Allied communications, training, and supply routes across Asia.

Equally important was India's economic support, which transformed the subcontinent into a crucial source of raw materials, food grains, textiles, and industrial goods. The colonial administration financed Britain's war through heavy taxation, war loans, and sterling balances, while Indian industries were redirected toward wartime production. This extraction, however, placed immense strain on the population, contributing to inflation, poverty, and the catastrophic Bengal Famine of 1943. Despite these hardships, wartime industrial expansion laid foundations for India's post-independence economic growth. Thus, India's dual contributions not only ensured Allied success but also reshaped its own political consciousness, fueling the nationalist movement and accelerating the path toward independence.

Keywords: Military contribution, Economic support, World War II, Indian independence

Introduction

India's role during the Second World War (1939–1945) has often been overshadowed in mainstream global narratives, yet its dual contribution—both military and economic—proved indispensable to the Allied war effort. As one of the largest colonies under British rule, India became a strategic hub for manpower, resources, and logistics at a time when the global conflict



demanded unprecedented mobilization. Militarily, India supplied the Allies with the largest volunteer army in history, consisting of more than 2.5 million men, who fought courageously across theaters in North Africa, Europe, and Southeast Asia. Indian soldiers displayed extraordinary valor in campaigns such as El Alamein, Burma, and Italy, often serving in harsh conditions and against well-trained Axis forces. Their participation not only reinforced the Allies at critical junctures but also symbolized the global scale of the war, where colonial troops were central to the fight against fascism and militarism. Beyond manpower, India also served as a geographical bridge for Allied operations in Asia, with bases established for training, supply, and communication. The sacrifices of Indian soldiers were immense, with tens of thousands laying down their lives in battles far from home, while countless others endured injuries, imprisonment, or displacement. Despite being under colonial subjugation, the soldiers fought with a sense of duty, resilience, and pride, leaving behind a legacy of bravery that shaped both India's wartime history and its evolving national consciousness.

Parallel to its military involvement, India's economic contributions to the Allied war machine were equally crucial, making the subcontinent not merely a reservoir of soldiers but also a backbone of wartime production and finance. The British government transformed India into a vast supplier of essential goods, ranging from food grains, raw cotton, coal, and iron ore to manufactured items like textiles, uniforms, and armaments. Indian industries, though underdeveloped by Western standards, were pushed into rapid wartime production, with cities like Bombay (Mumbai), Calcutta (Kolkata), and Kanpur turning into centers of industrial activity. Agriculture too was reoriented to meet wartime demands, often at the expense of local needs, leading to devastating shortages and contributing to tragedies like the Bengal Famine of 1943. Economically, India financed the war through massive monetary contributions, including the provision of "war loans" and sterling balances that supported Britain's fragile finances. The colonial administration extracted resources through heavy taxation, inflationary policies, and forced procurement, placing an enormous burden on ordinary Indians, who simultaneously endured rising poverty and hunger. Yet, paradoxically, this period also accelerated industrial growth and infrastructure development, laying some of the foundations for India's post-independence economy. Thus, India's dual contribution—military strength and economic support—was central to the Allied victory, but it came at great human and material cost. The contradiction of Indians fighting for democratic freedom abroad while being denied self-rule



at home deepened nationalist fervor, fueling the demand for independence. In this way, India's wartime experiences became intertwined with its political destiny, making World War II not just a global conflict but also a decisive chapter in India's march toward freedom.

Significance of dual contributions—military and economic.

India's dual contributions during the Second World War were of immense significance, both in strengthening the Allied war effort and in shaping the trajectory of India's own political future. On the military front, India provided the largest volunteer army in history, numbering more than 2.5 million soldiers, who fought bravely across Europe, Africa, and Asia. Their role was crucial in decisive campaigns such as El Alamein in North Africa, the Italian campaign, and the defense of Burma against Japanese advances. The strategic location of India also made it a vital hub for Allied logistics, training, and communication, allowing the British to maintain supply routes across Asia. Indian soldiers not only reinforced the manpower of the Allied forces but also demonstrated remarkable valor and resilience, with many receiving international recognition and honors. This military participation highlighted the global dimension of the war, showcasing India as a crucial player rather than a passive colony. The experience of serving abroad also had profound implications for the soldiers themselves, many of whom returned with heightened awareness of global democratic ideals and the contradictions of fighting for freedom overseas while their own homeland remained under colonial rule. This contradiction planted deeper seeds of nationalist consciousness, intensifying India's demand for self-determination.

Equally important were India's economic contributions, which sustained the Allied war machine in multiple ways. The subcontinent became a vital supplier of raw materials, food grains, textiles, and manufactured goods, ensuring that the Allies remained adequately equipped and nourished. Indian industries, though previously underdeveloped, were expanded and reoriented toward wartime production, turning cities like Bombay, Calcutta, and Kanpur into industrial powerhouses. Financially, India bore a staggering burden, as the colonial administration extracted war loans, taxes, and sterling balances to finance Britain's war needs, placing immense strain on its own economy. This economic exploitation led to hardships for ordinary Indians, culminating in devastating crises such as the Bengal Famine of 1943, which claimed millions of lives. Yet, paradoxically, the wartime industrial expansion laid foundations for India's post-independence economic growth. The dual contributions of military service and



economic support thus had a double-edged significance: they not only underpinned Allied success in World War II but also reshaped India's political consciousness and economic landscape. Ultimately, these sacrifices highlighted the cost of colonial subjugation while simultaneously empowering India with the resources, confidence, and momentum that fueled its final push toward independence.

Indian Army's Role in North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe

During World War II, the Indian Army played a pivotal and far-reaching role across several major global theatres, including North Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, making significant contributions to the Allied war effort. As part of the British Empire, India was called upon to supply not only manpower but also military expertise, and the Indian Army quickly became indispensable in fighting Axis forces across continents. In North Africa, Indian divisions were at the forefront of the British Eighth Army's operations against the formidable German Afrika Korps led by Erwin Rommel. Indian soldiers participated in critical battles such as El Alamein (1942), which marked a decisive turning point in the North African campaign. Units such as the 4th, 5th, and 8th Indian Divisions distinguished themselves through their resilience and discipline in the harsh desert conditions. The desert warfare demanded extraordinary adaptability, and Indian troops earned admiration for their logistical ingenuity, engineering support, and frontline courage. In the Middle East, the Indian Army was actively engaged in securing vital oil fields, communication lines, and British imperial interests. Indian soldiers were deployed in Iraq, Iran, Palestine, Syria, and Egypt, where they undertook both defensive and offensive operations. Notably, they played a role in the Anglo-Iraqi War (1941) and helped suppress a pro-Axis coup in Iraq, safeguarding the region's strategic oil supplies. In Iran, Indian forces were part of the joint Anglo-Soviet invasion in 1941, aimed at securing the Persian corridor for Allied supply routes to the Soviet Union. Indian engineers and transport units played an essential role in maintaining these critical supply lines under difficult terrain and political sensitivities.

Acts of Valor and Awarded Honors: Indian Heroes of World War II

Throughout World War II, Indian soldiers exhibited extraordinary courage and unwavering commitment in battlefields across Europe, North Africa, the Middle East, and Southeast Asia. Their acts of valor were not only pivotal to many Allied victories but also earned international recognition, with several being conferred the Victoria Cross (VC)—the highest military



decoration awarded for gallantry in the face of the enemy in the British Empire. The Indian Army, which became the largest volunteer force in the world with over 2.5 million soldiers, produced a number of heroic figures whose battlefield bravery symbolized not just personal sacrifice but also the emerging spirit of national identity. Among the most celebrated was Naik Yeshwant Ghadge of the 5th Mahratta Light Infantry, who was posthumously awarded the Victoria Cross for single-handedly attacking enemy machine-gun posts during the Italian Campaign in 1944. Despite being wounded, Ghadge fearlessly advanced and neutralized multiple enemy positions before being fatally struck, exemplifying selflessness and battlefield leadership. Another legendary figure was Rifleman Sher Shah of the Frontier Force Regiment, who received the Victoria Cross for his actions in Burma in 1945. Despite sustaining serious injuries, he continued to command his section and launched an aggressive assault that pushed back the Japanese, ultimately sacrificing his life. His indomitable spirit became a symbol of valor for the Indian forces fighting in the Far East. Similarly, Company Havildar Major Chhelu Ram of the 6th Rajputana Rifles was recognized for his gallantry in Tunisia during the North African Campaign. Leading a bayonet charge against heavily fortified enemy positions, Chhelu Ram inspired his men through personal example, rallying them to victory before falling in combat. The heroics of Subedar Richhpal Ram, who received the Victoria Cross posthumously for his leadership in Eritrea in 1941, further highlighted the critical role of Indian troops in African theatres. He led multiple attacks under fire and refused evacuation despite severe wounds, ultimately dying in battle while protecting his platoon. These individual stories were representative of a broader culture of discipline and valor within the Indian Army. Apart from the Victoria Cross, Indian soldiers also received numerous other awards, including the Military Cross, Distinguished Service Order (DSO), George Cross, and Order of the British Empire (OBE). The acknowledgment of Indian gallantry also extended to medical and logistical services. Figures like Nursing Matron Kalyani Sen of the Military Nursing Service, who served with distinction under harsh wartime conditions, exemplified the contribution of non-combatant personnel.



Indian officers like Lieutenant Premindra Singh Bhagat, the first Indian to win the Victoria Cross in WWII, were praised for acts such as clearing enemy minefields under fire in East Africa. These decorated soldiers became icons not only within the armed forces but also in their home villages and towns, where they were often welcomed with immense pride and respect. However, despite such honors, the broader imperial structure still subjected Indian soldiers to racial discrimination, lower pay, and limited promotion opportunities. Yet their bravery forced the British command to reconsider longstanding biases, accelerating the Indianization of the officer corps in the latter years of the war. The legacy of these brave individuals continues to resonate in India's military tradition, and their awards remain a testament to the courage and sacrifices made by Indian soldiers in one of history's most devastating conflicts. Their recognition by the British Crown, though symbolic, also served to unite diverse Indian communities under a shared banner of heroism, contributing indirectly to the nationalist momentum that would culminate in independence shortly after the war's end.

Challenges Faced by Indian Troops in Foreign Terrains

Indian soldiers who served in World War II encountered some of the most hostile and unfamiliar environments in modern warfare, spanning deserts, jungles, mountains, and freezing European winters—terrains vastly different from their native homelands. These geographical and climatic extremes imposed intense physical and psychological burdens on troops who had been recruited from across India's plains, plateaus, and hill regions, and trained largely in subcontinental conditions. In North Africa, Indian divisions deployed to battle the Axis forces under searing heat had to endure the arid expanse of the Sahara and Libyan deserts. The



blowing sandstorms, lack of water, extreme temperature fluctuations between day and night, and unfamiliar rations made even daily survival a test of endurance. The Indian soldiers, clad in khaki and bearing standard-issue gear, struggled with sunburn, dehydration, and dysentery. Camels and mules, often relied upon for supply transport, frequently succumbed to the heat, isolating frontline troops from essential logistics. In the Middle Eastern campaigns, especially in Iraq and Iran, the challenge included rugged mountains, treacherous river crossings, and limited infrastructure—requiring both physical resilience and engineering innovation to sustain movements. Indian engineering corps had to build roads and bridges from scratch, often under enemy threat, while medical teams faced outbreaks of diseases such as malaria, typhoid, and cholera. Equally challenging was the Italian Campaign, where Indian divisions like the 4th and 8th had to fight in snow-covered mountains and rain-soaked valleys of central and northern Italy. Many soldiers, having never experienced snow before, struggled with frostbite, trench foot, and hypothermia.

Casualties and Psychological Effects of Global Deployment

The global deployment of Indian troops during World War II resulted in profound physical losses and left deep psychological scars on those who served in diverse and unfamiliar battlefronts. With over 2.5 million Indian soldiers participating in the war—the largest volunteer army in history—casualties were inevitable and widespread. Estimates suggest that more than 87,000 Indian soldiers lost their lives, while tens of thousands more were wounded, maimed, or declared missing in action. The deaths occurred across distant theatres such as North Africa, Italy, Burma, and the Middle East, often in conditions where recovery of bodies or proper burials was not possible. Families back home frequently received minimal information, or none at all, about the fate of their loved ones, leading to prolonged grief and uncertainty. Soldiers endured constant exposure to brutal warfare—artillery bombardments, trench warfare, ambushes, and air raids—all of which inflicted severe psychological trauma, a phenomenon now recognized as combat stress reaction or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). However, at the time, mental health was poorly understood, and soldiers suffering from depression, anxiety, or hallucinations were often dismissed as weak or cowardly. The sheer cultural and geographical dislocation experienced by Indian soldiers—many of whom had never before left their villages—intensified the sense of alienation and fear. Fighting in the snow-covered Alps, the sweltering deserts of Libya, or the disease-infested jungles of Burma



meant living in constant survival mode, far removed from any emotional or spiritual support system. The absence of adequate psychological counseling, coupled with limited rest and long deployments, resulted in chronic stress disorders, often manifesting in nightmares, substance abuse, or even desertion in extreme cases. Letters sent home were censored or delayed, worsening the soldiers' emotional disconnect from their families. The psychological strain was further aggravated by racial discrimination within the Allied command, where Indian soldiers were often given more dangerous tasks, received lower pay, and had fewer recreational or welfare facilities compared to their British counterparts. Witnessing death on a daily basis—of comrades, civilians, and even enemies—left many soldiers emotionally numb. Moreover, survivors returning home faced significant challenges reintegrating into civilian life. There was little state support in terms of pensions, psychological rehabilitation, or public recognition, especially for lower-ranked troops. Some found it difficult to relate to families and communities who could not understand their wartime experiences, leading to social withdrawal or stigmatization. Others, especially those who had served in Europe, returned with a new political consciousness, having witnessed ideas of liberty and self-rule in other nations—fueling nationalist sentiments back in India. War diaries and oral testimonies collected decades later revealed the haunting memories many veterans carried well into old age. In sum, while Indian soldiers earned admiration for their bravery and professionalism, the human cost of their global deployment was immense—physically, emotionally, and socially. The scars of war, though not always visible, had a lasting impact on both the individual veterans and the post-war Indian society, shaping future military policies, veterans' welfare demands, and collective memory in the years leading to independence.

Emergence of Nationalist Sentiments within the Army

By the closing years of World War II, the cumulative impact of racial discrimination, limited authority, and the contradiction between colonial service and nationalist aspiration had given rise to a powerful surge of nationalist sentiment within the Indian armed forces. This transformation was not sudden, but rather a gradual political awakening, driven by a combination of battlefield experience, exposure to international ideas, and personal grievances. Soldiers who had once taken pride in serving the British Empire now began to question the very legitimacy of that Empire, especially as stories of INA courage spread among the ranks and nationalistic propaganda seeped into barracks and military camps across the country. The



INA trials of 1945–46 were a catalyst for this new mood. When the British colonial government decided to try three prominent INA officers—Shah Nawaz Khan, Prem Kumar Sahgal, and Gurbaksh Singh Dhillon—at the Red Fort in Delhi, a wave of sympathy swept across India, including among serving military personnel. For the first time, nationalist slogans like “Jai Hind” and “Netaji Amar Rahe” were heard not just in villages and streets, but within the ranks of the British Indian Army itself. Mutinies, although isolated and swiftly suppressed, began to appear—most notably the Royal Indian Navy (RIN) mutiny of 1946, which involved thousands of sailors across Bombay, Karachi, Madras, and Calcutta. Though not formally connected to the INA, the uprising was infused with nationalist fervor, and it demonstrated that colonial control over the military had become increasingly tenuous. This nationalist awakening within the armed forces was not confined to enlisted soldiers; even among junior officers and administrative staff, the desire for an independent, Indian-controlled military became a defining political demand. In many units, informal discussions centered around post-war futures, with veterans expressing their intent to support or even join independence movements. The very idea of a colonial military institution had become unsustainable, and British authorities knew it. In fact, many historians argue that this shift in the loyalties of the armed forces—who had been the backbone of colonial enforcement for nearly two centuries—was a decisive factor in Britain’s eventual decision to grant India independence in 1947. What began as subtle discontent had matured into a shared nationalist consciousness among India’s soldiers, transforming the military from an instrument of empire into a potential engine of national liberation.

Military Training Infrastructure and Camps

World War II necessitated an unprecedented overhaul of India’s military preparedness, leading to the rapid establishment of new training bases across India, which played a central role in transforming the country into a critical Allied stronghold. With over 2.5 million troops enlisted during the war, India required a vast network of training infrastructure to efficiently prepare recruits drawn from diverse geographical, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. Camps sprang up across the subcontinent, stretching from Punjab and Uttar Pradesh to Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Bengal, and Assam. Major cities such as Lucknow, Jabalpur, Secunderabad, and Bangalore became hubs for infantry training, while specialist facilities were developed in Ambala, Deolali, Poona (Pune), and Madras for artillery, signals, ordnance, and medical corps.



These training centers included drill squares, firing ranges, assault courses, hospitals, transport depots, and mock combat zones. What began as modest cantonments quickly evolved into expansive institutions capable of housing tens of thousands of soldiers. The infrastructure was not just about combat readiness but also about imposing colonial order through discipline, tightly monitored schedules, hierarchical routines, and strict segregation of roles and ranks. The British made substantial investments in officer training schools, with institutions such as the Indian Military Academy (IMA) in Dehradun and Officers' Training School in Poona receiving direct financial and technical input. These centers were tasked with the urgent goal of producing Indian officers (King's Commissioned Indian Officers – KCIOs) to lead native troops amid rising demands for military manpower. Although British officers remained dominant in higher command positions, the war compelled the Empire to accelerate Indianization of military leadership, albeit under strict supervision. These training schools borrowed heavily from British military tradition—emphasizing parade-ground excellence, theoretical warfare, and imperial loyalty. British and Anglo-Indian instructors enforced high standards of performance and conduct, filtering out candidates suspected of political disloyalty. Selected cadets underwent months of intensive drills, war games, map-reading, and leadership assessments, all designed to replicate Sandhurst standards but customized for the Indian colonial framework. While these programs gave rise to a new class of educated Indian officers, they were also limited by a racialized ceiling—Indian officers rarely ascended beyond battalion command or received autonomous authority.

Conclusion

India's dual contribution of military strength and economic support during the Second World War stands as one of the most defining yet often underappreciated chapters of both global and national history. On the battlefield, India's volunteer army of over 2.5 million soldiers played a decisive role in safeguarding Allied positions across multiple continents, from North Africa and Europe to Southeast Asia. Their courage, resilience, and sacrifices not only fortified the Allied cause but also revealed the depth of India's strategic importance in a global conflict. Equally, the economic dimension of India's involvement—its supply of raw materials, agricultural produce, manufactured goods, and financial backing through loans and sterling reserves—ensured that the Allies were sustained at critical moments of the war. However, these



contributions came at an immense cost to the Indian populace, who bore the brunt of inflation, taxation, and famine, particularly during the Bengal tragedy of 1943.

The significance of these dual contributions extends far beyond wartime achievements. They laid bare the contradictions of colonial rule, where Indians were asked to fight for democracy abroad while being denied self-rule at home. This paradox heightened nationalist fervor and strengthened the demand for independence. Moreover, the industrial and infrastructural expansion that accompanied wartime mobilization inadvertently prepared the ground for India's economic modernization after independence. Thus, India's dual contribution was not only central to the Allied victory but also instrumental in shaping its own path toward sovereignty and self-reliance.

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