



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## A BIOGRAPHY OF A BRITISH INDIAN SOLDIER IN WORLD WAR-II K.A.R. DEVAN:1924-2004

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### ABSTRACT

Indigenised military administration of the British Raj has been structured so well that remnants of it could still be traced. Epitome of their contribution could be best witnessed in the episodes of First and Second World Wars on both the war theatres. However, the efforts of these unsung heroes often go unrecognised. This research report delves deeper into personal life of one such soldier and philanthrope, K.A.R. Devan who held the rank of Jamedar and his service in the Second World War, his life after his resignation months before the Indian Independence and its impact has been discussed. The research has been based on personal interviews from his daughters and associates.

Key Words: Second World War, K.A.R.Devan, Jamedar, R.I.A.S.C, Burmese War, INA, Patriotism, Cantonments, Philanthropy, Photo gallery, Lucknow Regiment

### INTRODUCTION

History of India would be incomplete without the chapter of colonial era, rule of the British Raj as its impact in India's society and culture reverberates even now especially in the military structure. In 1600, they started out as a trading company where factories were established by a company named English East India Company across India for purpose of business. Having ousted their European trading competitors in India, the English East India Company asserted dominating power over its Indian colony in all matters including administration and capturing territories through various expansionist policies like policy of paramountcy, subsidiary alliance and Doctrine of Lapse. After 1857 revolt, the administration of India came directly under the Crown lasting till 1947. Such long span of rule would not have been possible without an organised strong

British army in India. Indian soldiers were trained in European ways and helped British in every battle. This could be better comprehended with the contribution of Indian soldiers in the two world wars alongside the British army in the both the war theatres. A widely believed conception in second world war is that it wasn't Britain who won the war, but the British Empire as a whole with its colonial contribution<sup>1</sup>. However, the truth is that the contribution of the Indian soldiers in the British Indian Army often goes unrecognised. This report delves deeper into personal life and career of one such Indian soldier Mr. K.A.R. Devan (1924-2004), a Jamedar who fought alongside British forces and what nationalism meant through his eyes. Understanding this report is quite crucial as it also presents the societal and cultural changes in the twentieth century. The research has been completely based on personal interviews from K.A.R.Devan's daughters and family members.

### **EARLY LIFE OF Mr.K.A.R. DEVAN (JAMEDAR)**

Mr. Kalingarayanpalayam.A. Ramasamy Devar was born in the year 1924 to Annamalai Thevar and Karuppayiammal in Erode district Tamil Nadu. The people of this region had the pride custom of adding the name of their locality as their first name. He had born into a family of two brothers and three sisters. His father Annamalai Thevar had worked as a peon in Sub-Registrar Office at Nambiyur. Coming from an economically weaker section and as an Indian working under the British government, his father had seen many discriminations and hardships. Despite it, he insisted on his children getting better education and proceed in their career. K.A.R. Devan, after having finished SSLC (Bhavani High School, Erode) in the year 1942-43, he enrolled for higher studies in the same school. Other than studies, keen interest was shown in sports as he won championship medal in school for two consecutive years in football. It was under the guidance and advice of his physical trainer that he joined the army in the same year 1943.

### **CAREER AS A MILITARY SOLDIER IN SECOND WORLD WAR**

The world was again at war in the year 1939 after 1918. The Great Britain, after having declared war against Germany announced publicly that its colonies would also be by their side fighting against the axis power in the war. As an Allied power's colony, India was dragged into the war without the consent of the natives. The nationalists and the Indian National Congress leaders protested against the government's decision as there were other pertaining issues like continuous famine, tax burden, widespread poverty and the national movement was at its peak. Despite the protests, British Raj began to recruit personnel for the army and called out for the help of the citizens. The government promised promotion to the already existing soldiers and first

preference in civil government employment if the soldiers wanted to resign the post after the war. The British Raj Viceroys and Governors had the special pride back in England during the war time for having contributed by sending one of the largest volunteer forces in history<sup>2</sup>. It was from the end of Second World War that the British Indian Army began to get Indianized as a reward of its contribution in the war<sup>3</sup>. Large-scale participation of both men and women from India in Britain's war effort and her allies often remains a marginalized story of the Second World War. Indian soldiers provided manpower, equipment and auxiliary support in theatres of war throughout the world. Their contribution was vital to keep the supply lines to Britain open and to defend her borders at home and in the empire. Initially, the Military Recruitment Committee was established in Sandhurst to train the soldiers<sup>4</sup>. However, from 1940s, Recruitment Committees were set up in each district to mobilise the army. In each Province, Presidency Governor was the head of Provincial Recruitment Committee and were demanded to recruit and train one full division of army<sup>5</sup>. University Training centres at Annamalai and Andhra University were established to train the soldiers. The personnel intending to join, after medical examination, was declared either fit or unfit for the category of post for which he had applied. After recording physical measurement, educational and general qualifications enrolment of the candidate was made. Along with the documents, he was escorted by the Assistant Recruitment Officers. The candidate after being subjected to a second medical examination by the District Medical Officers was marked as "Graded Recruit". Thereafter the candidate had to live in the barracks and attend parades. He was placed on the "Station Strength Register" until the opportunity arose for active service<sup>6</sup>.

At the age of 18, in 1943 K.A.R. Devan got selected in the Army from Erode District recruitment office without the knowledge of his family. As per his military release certificate records, he got enrolled in Lucknow regiment and served from 28 May 1943 to 2 September 1945 in India batch number Indian officer<sup>7</sup> 49369. He belonged to Royal Indian Service Cadet Corps which was one of the oldest established by the English East India Company. It started out as a commissariat service and evolved later on. During the second world war, the Royal Indian Army Service Corps was more than a commissariat and were in charge of supply of fuel, platoon, animal transport units...etc. He worked in the Mechanical Transport vehicle<sup>8</sup> unit during the war. The nature of the job included transporting war amenities, base repairs, train their junior soldiers. The contribution of the unit in the war especially in the Arakan Campaign 1944 fought between Japan, Indian National Army and British Raj, United States is noteworthy. After a year of stalemate, in 1944 campaign, British managed to push back the Japanese forces as the opponents ran out of supplies in which Rangoon was

recaptured by the British forces. He also served in Penang and Singapore for a few years. It is also to note that in the British Army, he got recruited in the Viceroy's Commissioned Office and was qualified in Sonar Course, Motor Cycle Course and was also a trained sniper. Among the commissioned and non-commissioned units, the Viceroy's Commissioned Office were senior in rank, comprised of Indian or native soldiers whose authority was only over the Indian troops and were subordinate to KCO-King's Commissioned Officers<sup>9</sup>. The RIASC was the non-combatant force in VCO in which he held Jamedar rank which was equivalent to Second Lieutenant and Platoon Commander. Usually, it takes about ten years for a sepoy to become a Jamedar and promotion was only on merit<sup>10</sup>. He was honoured with war medal for his participation in the second world war where any soldier who had fought for more than 28 days in warfront was honoured with it. A shield of honour was also preserved by his family with silver badges which are almost faded now.

### **CAREER AFTER RESIGNMENT**

On 10 May 1947, he resigned army in consequence of reduction of the IA- Indian Army demobilization also because during partition, many military ranks were being depromoted. He got married after his resignation at the age of 23 and worked as a Forest Officer in Hollegal for a few years. He then worked as an Upper Division Clerk, Class II and III Magistrate and Revenue Inspector before he became a Tehsildar. Till the time of his retirement, he has worked in various districts of Tamil Nadu namely Dharapuram, Coimbatore, T.N. Palayam, Erode and Perundurai. Since he was a proficient officer, he had influence across the state. For instance, he was often invited by the District Collector of Coimbatore to attend meetings and receive special guests. He well versed in English, Hindi, Bengali, Marathi, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada. In the year 1982, he retired as a Tehsildar.

His soldier like attitude did not stop with army resignation but he lived like one by always helping, protecting and serving others who are not just his family members. Honesty, discipline, punctuality, good manners, etiquette became part of his life which he picked up from his military days. His family members take special pride in emphasising that he never took and supported bribery. Even if it was one morsel of food, it should have been earned honestly. He adhered to his principles and brought up his seven daughters in the same way<sup>11</sup>. Like his father, he made sure that his daughters must be well educated and all his seven daughters were government employees at different sectors. As a disciplined army personnel, he always spoke of his days in army to his children. He emphasised on personal hygiene and spoke of how vital it was in the war time as diseases spread like wildfire in barracks and trenches.

K.A.R. Devan's philanthropical activities are very significant. In the year 1978, he worked as special deputy Tehsildar of Gobi and was given special credits by the then Revenue Division Officer of Gobichettipalayam Mr. Shanmugarajeshwaram for his flood relief work in Bhavani River. Similarly in the year 1974, he got credits for supporting and organising volunteers at Gobi Kottam Palaikarai Ayakat for the first paddy cultivation. He had also been the head of Thevar Peravai (Erode division) and was one of the organising members of Thirumurai Kazhagam which is being held every year in Sangameswarar Temple, Kooduthurai. He also renovated Anna Kamatchi Amman Temple at Vengarai. At many occasions he met Thiru. Kribananda Wariyar and was one of his close associates. As a religious person, he has read a lot of books related to it and even learnt astrology with his self-interest.

Though he didn't have strong political leanings, he followed Gandhian principles throughout his life. In the years before enrolling in British Indian Army, he used to attend all meetings at his locality organised by the freedom fighters. Ideologies of various leaders like Vivekananda, Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Karl Marx inspired him a lot in his life. He admired and supported Subash Chandra Bose's INA activities, philanthropical works of Muthu Ramalinga Thevar and was a staunch follower of Indian National Congress. His personal library had a copy of Vivekananda's Chicago speech and its analysis, Gandhiji's Autobiography, books authored by Nehru, Das Kapital and copies of "Soviet" magazine. Never till his last breath did he miss out on his daily routine of following a healthy lifestyle, helping others get better and jobs with his good reputation in every department, reading newspaper among which "Dinamani" was most preferred one and most importantly maintaining a daily journal. Pollachi Mahalingam, Dharapuram Zamindar were few of his close associates.

## CONCLUSION

In the year 2004, soldier K.A.R. Devan breathed his last. He had always been keen on passing on his legacy to the next generation and its reflection could be traced in his vast collection of photo gallery. There were photos with descriptions like "met and parted at Bellary" with his fellow soldiers; "after Christmas drinks.13.M.T.T.C Bareilly"; other dated in the year "1947" with his regiment officers; pictures of him training his soldiers to ride motor cycle; photos with his close associates; with Kribananda Wariyar; pictures taken in Calcutta; his days as a Tehsildar. Over the years, due to lack of maintenance, the description of the photo has been erased and his journal was eaten up by termites. However, his daughters live their father's

dream by still serving others. Stories of such unsung heroes often goes unnoticed and must be brought to light.

Not only did they participate in a particular event, but they lived their life according to their principles.

## ABBREVIATIONS

D.M.O.-District Medical Officers

E.E.I.C -English East India Company

I.O-Indian Officer

I.N.A- Indian National Army

I.N.C-Indian National Congress

K.C.O-King's Commissioned Office

M.T- Mechanical Training

R.I.A.S.C-Royal Indian Service Cadet Corps

V.C.O- Viceroy's Commissioned Office

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