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| Institution: University of Oxford | | |
| Unit of Assessment: 28 – History | | |
| Title of case study: Increasing Public Understanding of the Decolonisation of British India | | |
| Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2012-2017 | | |
| Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit: | | |
| Name(s): | Role(s) (e.g. job title): | Period(s) employed by submitting HEI: |
| Dr Yasmin Khan | Associate Professor in British History | Oct 2012-present |
| Period when the claimed impact occurred: 2015 – July 2020 | | |
| Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N | | |
| <p>1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words) Khan's research on 1940s South Asia has significantly influenced public understanding of histories of violence, migration and displacement attending the decolonisation of the British Raj. By harnessing diverse media, Khan has shared the social histories accompanying the decolonisation of India with millions of people in Britain, in particular by presenting the three-part television series <i>A Passage to Britain</i> (2018). This has stimulated British people of South Asian descent to research their own family histories. Furthermore, Khan's methodology of using personal testimony and stories to elucidate broader historical analysis has changed curatorial practice through her consultancy work with museums and archives.</p> | | |
| <p>2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words) Khan has been researching the social history of the 1940s in South Asia for nearly two decades. Her work in archives in the UK, South Asia and the US has been funded by the AHRC (Principal Investigator, major research project 2012-14) and resulted in a major monograph and publications in research journals. Khan's published research has broadly coalesced around the theme of migration and violence at the end of the British Indian empire in the 1940s, as experienced in the daily lives of workers, refugees and migrants. This has included regional migration across the new borders of South Asia, long-distance migration in the arrival of Asian workers in Britain at the time of Independence, and wider displacement in the context of the Second World War. Her monograph, <i>The Raj at War</i> [R1] presents the overlooked history of India at war, and shows how mobilisation for the war unleashed seismic processes of economic, cultural and social change – decisively shaping the international war effort, the unravelling of the empire and India's own political trajectory. The book was described by Juliet Nicolson in the <i>Daily Telegraph</i> as 'Exceptional... balances analysis, history and human compassion in a narrative that leaves one shaken'.</p> <p>Khan's emphasis throughout has been on subaltern voices and on the linkages between state decision-making processes and subaltern lives in the 1940s. This research has facilitated a transition in thinking about South Asian decolonisation beyond the prism of high constitutional politics to one more determined by the social history of people's experiences at the time of the Second World War and Independence.[R4] She has consistently linked narratives of 'high politics' with research into the lives of ordinary people using archival and oral materials. This methodology is demonstrated in the impact described below where individual stories were used to increase public empathy for and understanding of the dramatic changes posed by decolonisation and war.</p> <p>Until recently, public knowledge about South Asian Independence in Britain was mostly confined to constitutional debates about the leadership of Gandhi, Jinnah and Nehru, and awareness about the lives of South Asians in the 1940s was limited. For example, the experiences of South Asians in the Second World War, including the lives of soldiers, were largely unacknowledged.[R1, R2, R3] Khan's research has been instrumental in promoting a broader historiographical shift in the academic and public understanding of empire, which includes a</p> | | |

number of historians in South Asia and the UK. At the same time, her research has uncovered and highlighted an essential feature of British political and cultural history.

3. References to the research (indicative maximum of six references)

R1.[Authored Book, listed in REF2] Yasmin Khan, *The Raj at War: A People's History of India's Second World War* (The Bodley Head, 2015). ISBN 9781847921208.

Long listed for the Penn Hessell Tiltman Prize; winner of the Karachi Literature Festival Prize 2015; reviewed in national and international press including *The Economist*, *The Observer*, *The Spectator*.

R2.[Edited Book, available on request] Ashley Jackson, Yasmin Khan and Gajendra Singh (eds.), *An Imperial World at War: The British Empire, 1939-45* (Routledge, 2016). ISBN: 9781317181903.

R3.[Chapter, available on request] Yasmin Khan and Gajendra Singh, 'Introduction', in Ashley Jackson, Yasmin Khan and Gajendra Singh (eds.), *An Imperial World at War: The British Empire, 1939-45* (Routledge, 2017), pp. 1-10. ISBN: 9781317181903.

R4.[Chapter] Yasmin Khan, 'Wars of Displacement: exile and uprooting in the 1940s', in Adam Tooze and Michael Geyer (eds.), *The Cambridge History of the Second World War*, vol. 3 (Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 277-297. DOI: [10.1017/CHO9781139626859.013](https://doi.org/10.1017/CHO9781139626859.013)

Research Grants

AHRC AH/J000019/2 (PI: Yasmin Khan), Jan 2013-August 2014, *Home Fronts of the Empire-Commonwealth: Imperial Interconnections and Wartime Social Transformations during the Second World War*, value GBP130,073.

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

The chief beneficiaries of this research and the resulting impact have been (a) **British South Asians** encouraged to explore their own family histories through Khan's writing and broadcasting, and (b) **museum and archive professionals** whose outreach work and curatorial practice has been informed by Khan's published work and consultancy. This impact has particularly strong significance to the understanding of the racial and cultural diversity of experience in the British empire and in the construction of British culture. It also demonstrates exceptional reach to communities often marginalised and has been accessed by a very large public audience.

BBC programming around the 70th anniversaries of VJ day and India's Partition drew directly on Khan's research. Khan acted as the credited historical consultant for a 2017 television programme on the Partition, was an on-screen contributor to four other BBC and Channel 4 programmes from 2015 to 2018 (including *Newsnight*, 15/8/2017) and took part in six discussions about India's decolonisation on national radio in August 2017.[E1] Journalistic citations of *The Raj at War* demonstrate that Khan's research and broadcasting has **shaped public debate on empire and decolonisation**. One prominent debate centred on 'whitewashed' portrayals of the British war effort in films such as *Churchill* and *Dunkirk*: Khan's research was cited in articles published by the *Washington Post*, *Huffington Post India*, BBC News and the Islamic Human Rights Commission, with the last of these (10/8/2017) noting that her research on the role of Indian soldiers had changed interpretations of Britain's war effort. The *Washington Post* (7/8/2017) wrote that 'Khan and others point to decades of enforced British amnesia' regarding the history of the empire, and quoted her describing the war as an imperial conflict.[E2]

Based on her research expertise, in 2018 BBC Two commissioned Khan to present a 3-part television series, *A Passage to Britain*. It was aired in prime time over 3 consecutive weeks in August and early September 2018, to mark the anniversary of Indian Independence, and

reached an audience of 1,100,000. The series focussed on the stories of migrations of South Asians to Britain in the 1930s-1950s, the decolonisation of the Raj and the lives of Punjabis, Anglo-Indians and Polish refugees affected by the Second World War and the 1947 Partition. These narratives were underpinned by Khan's research on wartime migrations, particularly *The Raj at War* and 'Wars of Displacement'.

BBC viewing figures show that *A Passage to Britain* reached a high proportion of BAME viewers (12%). The average audience for S1 was 958,000, with a BAME audience of 119,000; the BBC Two Commissioning Editor confirmed that 'This is a really strong BAME audience and above the average BAME profile for Factual on [this channel]'. [E3] This was reflected by widespread engagement on social media from British South Asians.

Of responses to Khan's tweets publicising the series, many were from BAME viewers, who expressed gratitude and pride at seeing their history represented. Some were moved to share family photographs and stories to recognise publicly their family's part in British history. One wrote: 'I've never seen my heritage represented on TV like this before'. [E4] Comments responding to the *Guardian's* review of the series (14/8/2018) reflected on the morality of British imperialism in India as well as contemporary attitudes to immigration. The term 'eye-opening' recurred several times in Twitter responses to the programmes, with **many viewers reporting an enhanced cultural awareness of 'forgotten' histories of migration, displacement and decolonisation**: one wrote that 'Yasmin Khan's Passage To Britain progs were great abt how Indian & Pakistani emigres arrived/settled in post-war Britain - a rarely told story, new to me anyway'. [E4]

The television series **directly led viewers to investigate their own family histories, leading to improved social inclusion of British South Asians, a group often marginalised in Britain's historical self-understanding**. Some were prompted to discuss family history with parents and grandparents: a typical response came from one Twitter user, who wrote 'Got me and my dad talking about family history + the questions we have not (yet) asked our Grandad!'. [E4] Khan received numerous letters and emails from members of the public intending to research their family history as a result of her books and programmes: for instance, one email received in 2020 described how Khan's research helped to reveal the fate of his great uncle through a death in battle. [E5] The British Library reported increased public interest in its South Asian archives 'probably as a result both of the television series – which several of our readers have mentioned – and of our own activities', as well as an increasing interest in material relating to Indian involvement in the World Wars, noting 'it is likely that Dr Khan's published work in this area has contributed to a wider awareness of the subject'. [E6] The National Archives saw a 12% increase in views of passenger lists showing immigration to Britain in 1878-1960 in the month when *A Passage to Britain* was aired, compared to the previous month, [E7] and pageview data for the National Archives' research guides on passenger lists shows clear spikes correlating with the broadcast of each of the three episodes. [E8]

Khan's research **has also informed the curatorial practice of professionals at the National Archives, the British Library and the Imperial War Museum, enhancing the preservation and interpretation of British South Asian heritage**.

For the **National Archives**, Khan's research provided 'invaluable context and important leads that have allowed public engagement to take place' with groups in Birmingham and London and 'her work has helped both in the devising of projects and their delivery'. [E9]

The **British Library** was inspired by Khan's research methodology as they prepared their programme of curating their collection relating to Partition in 2017: the Lead Curator, post-1858 India Office Records confirms that 'I drew on Dr Khan's published work and spoke to her informally, because her focus on the lived experience of Indian people was exactly the approach that we wanted to take'. [E6]

Since 2017, Khan has advised on the redesign of the Second World War Galleries at the **Imperial War Museum** (IWM) – to be opened in 2021 – playing a 'vital role in ensuring IWM critically examines Britain's relationship with the British Empire... during the war'. [E10] This has helped the IWM position Britain and its empire within a more global context, highlighting stories

that have traditionally been downplayed or excluded, which are a central focus of Khan's research. For example, on Khan's advice and based on her research, the IWM decided to tell the story of the Bengal Famine from the point of view of an Indian civilian who opposed British rule, rather than a British observer, and the galleries will include a case study of an Indian independence activist directly sourced from Khan's monograph *The Raj at War*. The Curator of the Second World War Regeneration Project (SWWG) confirms that 'Dr Khan's book "The Raj at War" has been an essential resource for the SWWG's curatorial team. The book highlights the lives and voices of ordinary Indian people. From soldiers to nurses, labourers and refugees, prostitutes and activists, their testimonies reveal diverse experiences of war. IWM has sought to emphasise the use of personal stories, such as these, as an integral interpretative approach within the galleries.' [E10]

Khan also advises the Museum on the development of 'Empire Interactive', an audio-visual experience telling stories from the British Empire and Commonwealth during the Second World War. The project's curator writes that '[Khan's] insights and recommendations for the narrative have been invaluable and will ensure that visitors will receive an authoritative and rigorous explanation of historical events. This is essential for IWM's mission'. [E10]

5. Sources to corroborate the impact (indicative maximum of 10 references)

- E1.** Details of Khan's TV and radio appearances (2017-2018), including screenshots of episode webpages for *Newsnight* (15/8/2017) and *Woman's Hour* (16/8/2017) confirming Khan's involvement.
- E2.** Journalism citing *The Raj at War: The Conversation* (10/11/2017), *Washington Post* (7/8/2017), *Guardian* (9/3/2018), *Griffith Review* (January 2018), *WBUR* (21/5/2018), *The Week* (India) (2/8/2020), *Huffington Post India* (1/8/2017), *BBC News* (27/7/2017), Islamic Human Rights Commission (10/8/2017).
- E3.** Email from Commissioning Editor – Specialist Factual, BBC, 6/6/2019, containing BAME viewing figures for *A Passage to Britain*.
- E4.** Selection of online responses from viewers of *A Passage to Britain*.
- E5.** Email from member of the public, 29/6/2020, explaining how Khan's research aided the sender's investigation of their family history.
- E6.** Emailed statement from Lead Curator, post-1858 India Office Records, British Library, 6/7/2020.
- E7.** Email from Head of Strategic Operations & Volunteers, National Archives, 17/7/2020, confirming increased viewing of passenger lists showing immigration to Britain in 1878-1960 in the month when *A Passage to Britain* was aired.
- E8.** Analysis of data supplied by Head of Strategic Operations & Volunteers, National Archives, showing pageviews of research guides on passenger lists during the broadcast period for *A Passage to Britain*.
- E9.** Email from Regional Community Partnerships Manager, National Archives, 19/6/2020, describing how Khan's research helped to advance work with community groups.
- E10.** Letter from Curator, Second World War Regeneration Project, Imperial War Museum London, 24/6/2020.