

Projects : India and the Great War 1914-18 Centenary Commemoration and India Remembers – An Update

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During the period under review (October- December), a number of activities were undertaken by the Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (CAFHR), as part of its two main projects: The Joint USI-MEA 'India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration' Project, which began in 2014 and the 'India Remembers' Project which was launched on 14th July 2016.

On 19th October, a one-day symposium titled 'Meeting of the Minds II' was held in London, UK. The symposium was jointly organised by the USI-CAFHR, the Imperial War Museum (IWM), the Royal Pavilion & Museums, Brighton & Hove and the Golden Tours Foundation (GTF).

The above event was second in a series of programmes organised with the aim of remembering the contribution of Indian soldiers in the two world wars. It was built on the similarly organised discussions held earlier in May 2016 in Brighton, UK. The event brought together a steering group of like-minded individuals and organisations to discuss, collaborate and create a collective remembrance of the contribution of Indian soldiers in World War I and World War II. The panel of speakers at the symposium came from a wide spectrum with varied interests and backgrounds. It included academicians, curators, archivists and individuals who develop and deliver historical projects for public participation.

At the symposium, Squadron Leader Rana TS Chhina (Retd), Secretary and Editor, CAFHR, Ms Bhanushali Gahlot, the 'India Remembers' Project Manager shared the aims, objectives and rationale behind the 'India Remembers' project and discussed the possibility of developing a similar project for communities in the UK. Dr Glyn Pryor, Chief Historian, Commonwealth War Graves Commission (CWGC) spoke about the efforts of the CWGC and

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the USI to work together on the Basra Memorial Project that seeks to highlight the sacrifice of the thousands of personnel of the Indian Armed Forces who died in Mesopotamia and are commemorated there. The symposium concluded with a reception organised at the House of Commons where the group shared the outcome of the day's discussion with Members of Parliament.

As part of 'India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration' Project, a number of lectures and talks were delivered in an attempt to engage with a varied audience in order to educate them about India's participation in the Great War. These included a lecture delivered by Squadron Leader Chhina to cadets at the National Defence Academy, Khadakwasla, detailing India's contribution to the Great War. A talk by Dr Graham R Winton, PhD, F.R.G.S, Fellow of the Royal Historical Society, UK, titled "The Equine Forces and Services of the Indian Army prior to and during First World War, 1914-1919", was held at the USI on 26th October. It was chaired by Lieutenant General AJ Singh, VSM, Director General Remount and Veterinary Services. In addition Squadron Leader Chhina chaired a talk titled "Coolie, Convict and Colonies: Indian Labour in Mesopotamia 1916-1921" by Professor Radhika Singha. The talk was held on 28th November at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library.

Subsequently, the Project's latest publication titled "*Les Hindous: Indian Army on the Western Front: 1914 – 1919*" was launched at the Embassy of France, New Delhi, on 22nd November jointly by Mr Alexandre Ziegler and Mr Jan Luykx, the French and Belgian Ambassadors to India respectively. Speaking on the occasion, Mr Zeigler said that the book illustrated and underlined the close historic ties between France, India and Belgium. In his remarks he said:

*"I would like to seize this occasion to renew, in the name of France, our immense and eternal gratitude, to those who fought – and for those who died- on our land for the sake of our freedom. France paid tribute to those Indian soldiers when it inaugurated the Neuve-Chapelle memorial, in 1927. And, I would like to recall the promise made at that moment by **Maréchal Foch: 'we will watch over their graves with the same devotion that deserve our dead.'**....."*

The book we are launching today is substantial contribution to keeping this memory alive. And the date we have chosen for

this evening is not a coincidence: this week, we are celebrating the century's anniversary of the end of the Battle of Somme, which took place between the 1st July and 18th November 1916. The battle was intended to hasten a victory for the Allies and was the largest battle of the First World War on the Western Front. More than one million men were wounded or killed, making it one of the bloodiest battles in human history.....

Rana Chhina's book highlights the role played by Indian soldiers and aviators on the Western Front during the First World War. Despite terrible climate conditions, which they were not prepared to face, these men were instrumental in halting the German advance towards the channel ports in October/November 1914.....

This book touches upon the many facets of the Indian experience in Europe in 1914-1919, through the medium of visual imagery, including many rare photographs."



L-R: HE Mr Alexandre Ziegler, Ambassador of France to India, Maj Gen PJS Sandhu, Deputy Director & Editor, USI, HE Mr Jan Luykx, Ambassador of Belgium to India, Dr Samuel Berthet, Associate Professor, Department of Sociology, Shiv Nadar University and Sqn Ldr Rana TS Chhina, Secretary & Editor, USI-CAFHR at the launch of the book Les Hindous: Indian Army on the Western Front: 1914 – 1919" held at the Embassy of France, New Delhi on 28th November 2016.

India Remembers Project

The pilot of the 'India Remembers' Project, which was launched on 14th July 2016 at the USI, culminated on 7th December, the Armed Forces Flag Day. In an attempt to inculcate a culture of remembrance in the country, the project, through the course of six months, has engaged with diverse community groups from across the country, including schools, NGOs, etc. Using a specially designed resource pack and online resources, the project team has encouraged participating groups to undertake various commemorative activities according to their means and organisational capability.

While the proposal for institutionalising a National Day of Remembrance in the country is under consideration, the participating community groups through the course of the project chose existing significant dates to undertake commemorative activities to honour and remember Indian defence personnel who have served and died in various military operations since 1914 till date.

One of those significant dates is 11th November and the first Sunday that follows it. These are observed in the United Kingdom and Commonwealth Nations as Remembrance Day and Remembrance Sunday, respectively. 'India Remembers' community groups observed Remembrance Sunday (13th November) by participating in Remembrance ceremonies and visiting their local war memorials.

On that day in Delhi, three community groups namely; Bright Futures, an NGO that works towards the empowerment of children of Gazipur Village in East Delhi, Ahlcon International School, Mayur Vihar and war veterans of Bhondsi Village, Harayana participated in the remembrance service that was organised at the CWGC Delhi War Cemetery by the British High Commission. In Imphal, Manipur, members of 'Imphal Campaign WW2 foundation', an organisation working towards highlighting the regional contribution of Manipur in the two World Wars, visited the CWGC Imphal War Cemetery to pay homage to India's war dead. In Pune, Maharashtra, members of the History Club of the College of Engineering under the supervision of 'India Remembers' community group, Pedal Power Foundation, went on a tour of local war memorials. They visited four war memorials in Pune: the CWGC Kirkee War Cemetery, Seamen War Memorial in Bund Garden, National War

Memorial, Southern Command (Pune Cantonment) and Maratha War Memorial in Pune Cantonment. They also participated in the film screening held at the National War Memorial, Southern Command that focussed on the role and contribution of Indian Armed Forces' personnel in military operations since World War I till date.

Lastly, on the same day, St Paul's School, Darjeeling, West Bengal, held a Remembrance Mass at the school chapel and also felicitated local veterans.

To mark the culmination of the project on 7th December, participating groups from Kalimpong and Darjeeling in West Bengal, Bengaluru in Karnataka, New Delhi, Kohima in Nagaland, Surat in Gujrat and Jaipur in Rajasthan organised commemorative events to raise awareness about the project and to highlight the importance of remembrance amongst the local communities. At most commemorative events held on the day, war widows, descendants of fallen soldiers, veterans, serving and retired defence personnel from the respective regions were felicitated. The groups also visited local war memorials in an effort to explore their regional military heritage.



India Remembers commemorative event held at the CWGC Kohima War Cemetery on 7th December. The event was organised by the project community groups, Youthnet and Path Finders; organisations that work towards the empowerment of youth of Nagaland. Display boards highlighting the contribution of servicemen and women, from the region, who served and died in the two World Wars were exhibited at the event.



India Remembers commemorative event held at a local town hall in Kalimpong, West Bengal. The event was organised by the project community group, Rotary Club of Kalimpong. Local war veterans as well as serving and retired defence personnel from the region were felicitated at the event. Rifleman Kharga Bahadur Limbu, WW2 Veteran can be seen walking in front with a marigold flower pinned to his lapel. He served with 2/4 Gurkha Rifles in the Italian Campaign during the Second World War.

The pilot project had its last event on 11th December in Pune; a commemorative cycle rally, which was organised by 'India Remembers' community group, Pedal Power Foundation with Giant Starkenn, a cycle manufacturing company. The rally began with a wreath laying ceremony at the CWGC Kirkee War Cemetery.

About 30 cyclists from Pune participated in the rally. Among them, 10 came from the Bombay Engineer Group (or the Bombay Sappers as they are informally known, are a regiment of the Corps of Engineers of the Indian Army). While the youngest cyclist was Daanish Mundroina, a 14 year old boy from Pune, the oldest was Lieutenant General Surinder Nath, PVSM, AVSM**, SM, VSM (Retd), former Chief of Staff, Southern Command, Pune.

The rally was flagged off at the CWGC Kirkee War Cemetery by Lieutenant General RJ Noronha AVSM**, SM, Chief of Staff, Southern Command, Pune. Lieutenant General Noronha delivered a short speech in which the joint initiatives of the USI and the

CWGC, and the endeavours of the India Remembers project were acknowledged.

The cyclists rode their way through Pune and Satara to Apshinge Military Village in Maharashtra, a village with a rich military heritage, covering a distance of 130 km. The village has a long legacy of men serving in the Indian Army. As many as three generations from a single family in the village have served in Indian Armed Forces since World War One. The rally came to an end with a grand reception followed by a cultural programme at the village.



'India Remembers' Project team with some of the cyclists after their arrival at Apshinge Military Village, Satara, Maharashtra.

While the pilot has come to an end, allowing the project team and the external evaluator who has been commissioned for the Project to assess its impact, the Centre's endeavours to inculcate a culture of remembrance for its soldiers, sailors and airmen in the Country will continue.