

India and the Great War : Project Update

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Following the successful conclusion of the “India and the Great War” international conference held at the USI from 05-07 Mar 14 (see report in the USI Journal of Jan-Mar 2104 pp. 112-126) considerable interest was generated both nationally and internationally in the project. This was reflected in the spike in number of “hits” on the project’s internet based platforms including the Facebook and Flickr pages. The inaugural and valedictory speeches of both, the Hon’ble Vice President and the Foreign Secretary, respectively, were featured on their own websites and served to generate greater awareness about the project as well as to act as a stimulus for greater official involvement in the numerous activities planned to highlight India’s role in the war on an international platform.

Upon returning to the UK, Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, GCB, CBE, DL, who had delivered the Keynote Lecture at the conference, was kind enough to circulate the conference programme along with the list of planned project activities under a covering note to a host of institutions and organisations. He also made mention of the planned commemoration at his talks at the Memorial Gate ceremony in London and at Sandhurst. Within the country, while an increasing number of civilians and service officers have been coming forward with details of their ancestors who served during the Great War, two major Indian magazines (The Week and Outlook) ran a special issue on India’s involvement in the First World War. The latter issue was substantially assisted by the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research. Research assistance/inputs also continue to be provided to a number of media representatives from various countries who are engaged in making documentary films or radio programmes focusing on India’s contribution to the war.

A database of descendants of soldiers who fought in the Great War is being maintained. A large number of descendants of distinguished soldiers have come forward with treasured family heirlooms, documents, medals and other historical artefacts. While it may be invidious to single out individuals, but two stand out for the uniqueness of the material in their possession. Mr Jitender Singh Bhati of Jaipur, great-grandson of Major Thakur Hukum Singh, OBI, IDSM, Commandant Jaipur Imperial Service Transport Corps has his ancestor’s wartime diary, while Brigadier Veer Pal grandson of Risaldar (Honorary Lieutenant) Sukh Pal, Bahadur, OBI, IDSM, 22 Cavalry (FF), has in his possession his grandfather’s published autobiography in Hindi, along with other letters and documents. Those who have worked on the history of those times will understand the priceless nature of these Indian voices from the past. Nearly all the records available are written by British officers of the Indian Army, and almost no narratives of the Indian experience of World War I have been recorded or have survived. Against this backdrop, these writings by Indian soldiers are worth their weight in gold. It is hoped that before the centenary project winds up in 2018, more such hidden gems will have been unearthed and be made available to be preserved for posterity.

Other upcoming events are the planned “mirror conference” being held at Ieper (Ypres) in Belgium on 24 Oct 2014, two days after the centenary of the first Indian soldier to be killed in action on European soil (22 Oct 1914). This is a joint event with the “In Flanders’ Fields” Museum. The day-long conference will conclude with the release of the “Battlefield Guide” to the Indian battlefields of the Western Front. This guide is a joint USI-UK venture and will serve to generate interest and awareness about the Indian Army’s activities in France and Flanders from the crucial period of autumn 1914 till the Indian cavalry divisions were withdrawn altogether from France in 1918. The same evening there will be a special wreath-laying ceremony at the Menin Gate; an Indian military ceremonial presence is expected. On the 25/26 Oct there will be a special tour of the Indian battlefields in France and Flanders, followed by a ceremony at the Neuve Chapelle Indian Memorial on the morning of 28 Oct 2014. This ceremony is being coordinated by the Jullundur Brigade Association (JBA), which commemorates four years of staunch comradeship in battle between three regiments, the 47th Sikhs (now 5 SIKH), the 59th Scinde Rifles (FF), (now 1 FF [Pak], better known as the Garbar Unsath) and the 1st Battalion, Manchester Regiment (now Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment). The 59th till this day commemorate the day when command of the battalion devolved on the Subedar Major, the redoubtable Parbhat Chand, after all British officers became casualties in the battle of Neuve Chapelle. Till date, the Subedar Major marches the battalion off parade on ceremonial occasions in memory of that battle.

The ceremony will be attended by members of the Jullundur Brigade Association. Representatives of the Duke of Lancaster’s Regiment and 5 SIKH are expected to be present. The evening of the 28th will see a major commemorative ceremony being organised by the Government of Belgium at the Menin Gate in Ieper. USI members who wish to attend these ceremonies in Europe may contact the Secretary CAFHR for additional details.

On 30 Oct 2014, a joint USI-UK reception is being hosted at the residence of Ambassador James Bevan, the UK High Commissioner in India to jointly commemorate India’s role in the Great War. The reception will be accompanied by an exhibition of large storyboards that will recount the tale of India’s sterling contribution to the conflict. The Government of the United Kingdom has digitised the war diaries of Indian Army units that served on the Western Front. These will be presented to the National Archives and to respective Colonels of Regiments on the occasion, by the High Commissioner. In addition, a plan to install memorial stones to the Indian recipients of the Victoria Cross for supreme valour in battle is also being processed. The memorial stones will be unveiled at the reception and handed over to the USI for further installation at selected locations. Apart from high civil and military dignitaries and veterans, descendants of distinguished World War I soldiers are also expected to attend the reception.

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