



**United Service Institution of India, Centre for Military
History and Conflict Studies (USI- CMHCS),**

In collaboration with

**Imperial War Museums, London,
Indian Institute of Heritage, Noida,
and University of Liverpool**

Present

A Two-day International Conference

**INDIA AND
THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1939-47)**

WAR, SOCIETY, CULTURE, AND THE MAKING OF INDEPENDENCE

Date: 2–3 November 2026

Venue: Indian Institute of Heritage, Noida

INTRODUCTION

The Second World War occupies an uneasy position within Indian historiography. It is omnipresent in archival volume yet marginal in interpretive priority. It is treated either as imperial military history or as a backdrop to nationalist politics. Rarely has it been examined as a structural, social, and epistemic rupture that reconfigured the political field from which independence emerged. Yet, the Second World War was one of the most transformative events in India's modern history.

Between 1939 and 1945, India underwent transformations of extraordinary scale: mass military mobilisation; intensified extraction; labour migration; infrastructural expansion; famine; censorship; incarceration; ideological fracture; and global exposure. Over 2.5 million Indians served across global theatres of war—the largest volunteer army in history. Simultaneously, the home front underwent profound transformation: industrial expansion, labour mobilisation, famine, displacement, censorship, propaganda, and intense political realignment. Wartime experiences were not confined to the battlefield or administrative archives; they entered visual culture, vernacular art, popular music, folklore, urban politics, and everyday life.

This conference begins from a proposition: that the Second World War must be read not as a prelude to 1947, but as a constitutive condition of it. The war unsettled imperial authority materially (through economic exhaustion), institutionally (through unrest within sections of the armed forces), and symbolically (through mass public mobilisation around the INA trials and other wartime reckonings). It reconfigured the relationship between colony and metropole, soldier and state, civilian and empire. It accelerated the moral delegitimisation of colonial rule and restructured the political imagination of freedom.

At the same time, wartime experience produced contradictions. Service and resistance coexisted. Loyalty and dissent overlapped. The Indian National Army emerged alongside continued participation in Allied forces. The Bengal Famine unfolded within a militarised economy. The war produced both incorporation and radicalisation.

To revisit the war is therefore to confront layered histories of complicity, coercion, agency, aspiration, and rupture. As India approaches the 80th year of Independence, the war decade demands renewed scrutiny. The 1940s were not merely a terminal colonial phase; they were a laboratory of sovereignty. They restructured institutional hierarchies, recalibrated political claims, and altered the moral grammar of the empire.

The absence of sustained engagement with this period risks flattening independence into inevitability. The war reminds us instead of contingency, acceleration, fracture, and convergence. To study 1939–47 is to recover the density of the political field from which freedom emerged.

INSTITUTIONAL AND CURATORIAL CONTEXT

This conference forms part of a wider research and curatorial initiative conceptualised by the Centre for Military History and Conflict Studies (CMHCS), United Service Institution of India (USI), under the umbrella of India's War: Remembering 1939–47. The initiative seeks to recover, consolidate, and critically interpret the dispersed archival, material, and cultural record of India's experience of the Second World War.

CMHCS–USI is a full intellectual and research partner in a major international exhibition currently being developed in collaboration with the Imperial War Museums (IWM), London, scheduled to open in Feb 2027. Within this framework, India's wartime experience (military, economic, political, and social) constitutes a central pillar of reinterpretation.

The Indian programme, however, is not conceived as a replication of the London exhibition. It is envisioned as its national counterpart: rooted in Indian archives, regimental collections, private family materials, vernacular memory traditions, and scholarly debates. It seeks to build institutional capacity for archival preservation, digitisation, and ethical curation, while creating sustained spaces for academic interrogation of the war as an Indian historical experience.

The collaboration with the Indian Institute of Heritage (IIH) situates this work within a pedagogic and heritage-training framework. IIH's mandate, to integrate historical scholarship with museum practice, conservation, documentation, and public interpretation makes it an important academic and institutional partner in ensuring that research on the Second World War translates into strengthened archival standards, exhibition practice, and heritage governance within India.

Alongside this, the initiative draws upon ongoing academic collaboration with the University of Liverpool, particularly through the ArCHIAM Centre, which has been engaged in discussions on archival metadata systems, digital documentation, and the interpretation of military heritage landscapes. This partnership situates the project within a transnational research ecosystem, strengthening methodological rigour in documentation, interoperability of archives, and digital humanities approaches to conflict history.

The conference thus operates at the intersection of research, curation, and heritage governance, linking archival recovery with exhibition-making and long-term preservation.

THEMATIC AREAS

We invite original research papers engaging with (but not limited to) the following themes:

1. War and the Colonial State

- Emergency powers, surveillance, censorship
- Extractive economies and military-industrial expansion
- Legal regimes and political incarceration

2. Military Service and Social Transformation

- Recruitment geographies and caste/community formations
- Soldiering as labour and mobility
- Encounters across theatres of war

3. Famine, Scarcity, and Governance

- Bengal 1943: political economy and imperial priorities
- Visual culture and famine representation
- Moral authority and colonial legitimacy

4. Propaganda, Media, and Political Imaginaries

- Film, radio, print culture, and rumour
- Competing narratives: empire, nationalism, revolution
- Wartime publics and affective mobilisation

5. Captivity, Resistance, and the INA

- Prisoner-of-war experience
- The Indian National Army (INA) and Free Indian Legion
- The Red Fort Trials and mass political mobilisation

6. Gender and the War Years

- Women's Auxiliary Corps (India)
- Nursing, labour, and wartime visibility
- War and the reconfiguration of family and kinship

7. Demobilisation and the Crisis of Empire

- Royal Indian Navy Uprising
- Armed forces unrest (1945–46)
- Veterans, pensions, and the politics of recognition

8. War, Memory, and Cultural Production

- Folk forms, songs, literature, and vernacular memory
- Memorials, regimental museums, and commemorative practice
- War and Partition: fractured remembrance

9. Archives and Method

- **Working with military and colonial archives**
- **Metadata, digitisation, and knowledge infrastructures**
- **Oral history and intergenerational memory**

10. Comparative and Transnational Perspectives

- **India within global wartime networks**
- **Colonial soldiers and empire**
- **Postwar diplomacy and India's emerging international role**

SUBMISSION GUIDELINES

Please submit:

- **Abstract (400–500 words) engaging clearly with historiography and method**
- **Short bio (150 words) with institutional affiliation**
- **Indication of thematic panel**

Deadline for Abstracts: 31 July 2026

Notification: 7 August 2026

Full Paper Submission (6,000–8,000 words): 1 November 2026

Submissions should be sent to: imchh@usiofindia.org

Selected papers will be considered for an edited academic volume or peer-reviewed special issue and will contribute directly to the Indian iteration of India's War: Remembering 1939–47 and related public-history initiatives.

Independence in 1947 did not emerge in isolation; it crystallised out of the accelerated pressures, fractures, and reconfigurations of the wartime decade. This conference seeks to reopen that decade as a dense historical terrain, one in which institutional loyalties shifted, political imaginaries expanded, and the moral grammar of the empire was irreversibly unsettled. It aims to hold complexity without simplification and debate without polemic, situating India's wartime experience within broader conversations on empire, decolonisation, sovereignty, and the ethics of remembrance.