

A Call to Remember

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India has witnessed the remarkable service and sacrifice of her men and women in various military operations since 1914. Yet, the significance of the role and contribution of the Indian Armed Forces' personnel has failed to find its place into the mainstream narratives of our culture. The commemorations held in the country are largely military-service based and, therefore, are not inclusive of the wider communities. Furthermore, the existence of multiple dates to remember and commemorate various military achievements fails to engage Indian civil society in a holistic commemoration.¹

Many countries around the world have designated special days and symbols to honour the valour and sacrifice of their service personnel. The “Poppy” is recognised in the United Kingdom and many Commonwealth countries as a symbol of remembrance. Likewise, the date of the Armistice, which marked the end of the First World War -11th November – is observed in many countries as ‘Remembrance Day’. There is a strong need for India to similarly institutionalise a ‘Day of Remembrance’, which could help foster a culture of remembrance.

This article attempts to address the various reasons which have led to a lack of culture of remembrance in the country. By highlighting the contribution of the Indian Armed Forces, it sheds light on the recent efforts made to sensitise and enable the Indian communities to honour and commemorate the Indian servicemen and women.

The first half of the twentieth century marked a watershed in Indian history, both in the national as well as the global context. The first four decades of the century witnessed rapid development of the struggle for freedom from colonial rule on the home front and outbreak of the two World Wars on the global front. In an attempt to gain greater political autonomy, India decided to support the British Empire in its hour of need and joined the First World War

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as a colony in the Empire.² The immense Indian military contribution in the two World Wars is evident from the fact that over three million servicemen and women from 'undivided India'³ served in these wars, suffering more than 160,000 casualties.⁴

The national movement for freedom culminated in 1947 with the attainment of Independence from the colonial yoke and the birth of two nations. Within just two months of gaining Independence, India was faced with its first external threat from the newly created Pakistan over the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Since Independence, the Indian Armed Forces have been in four major wars with Pakistan; in 1947, 1965, 1971 and 1999 along with many border skirmishes and military stand-offs; and with China in 1962. The Indian Armed Forces have also participated under the banner of Indian Peace Keeping Force (Sri Lanka and Maldives) and peacekeeping missions around the globe under the banner of the United Nations.⁵ Over 22,000 military personnel have lost their lives in the post-Independence military operations. On one hand, the numbers of Indian war dead since the First World War continue to add up with each passing year, on the other, they go largely unnoticed and escape the consciousness of the masses – such is the anomaly prevalent in India.

The lack of awareness of the sacrifice made by the Indian Armed Forces among the Indian masses and their failure to acknowledge this has undermined the contribution of the military personnel. In the recent years, their sacrifices have been reduced to a short-term media coverage accompanied by momentary public outcry, which is forgotten as soon as the next 'media event' occurs. However, such momentary outcries and media coverage have proved to be ineffective in preserving and resuscitating the memory of the fallen Indian soldiers in the minds of the people.

Recently, with the commemoration of hundred years of First World War (2014-18), individual and collective efforts of research scholars and institutions have been instrumental in highlighting the often-sidelined contribution of India in the First World War. The efforts made by the United Service Institution of India – Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research (USI-CAFHR) through the joint USI- Ministry of External Affairs 'India and the Great War' centenary commemoration project since 2014 has been vital in changing the

official and public perception of India's role in a war that changed the course of modern world history, both in India and abroad.⁶ It has also played a key role in widening the scope for academic intervention into the subject. Moreover, the recognition provided by the Government of India and the Indian Armed Forces has helped generate awareness amongst various sections of the Indian society and the Indian diaspora.⁷ This is evident from the remarks made by the Prime Minister of India referring to the shared history of the First World War in joint statements with partner countries (such as Australia, France and New Zealand).⁸

Furthermore, the USI-CAFHR launched 'India Remembers' pilot project in partnership with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission,⁹ Flags of Honour Foundation¹⁰ and Big Ideas Company¹¹ on 14th July 2016, a date that marked the centenary of the first major Indian cavalry charge on the Somme during the First World War. The project intends to raise awareness of the role of the Indian Armed Forces' personnel who served and died in various military operations, before and after Independence, and to encourage Indian communities to honour and remember their sacrifice by undertaking commemorative activities such as visiting war memorials and museums, interacting with veterans, debates, creating art, etc. The pilot project came to a close on 07 Dec 2016, a day which is annually observed as the Armed Forces Flag Day. The project's close engagement with diverse community groups from across India brought out three fundamental factors responsible for the apathy among communities to remember, honour and commemorate the Indian Armed Forces' personnel.¹² First, the lack of awareness about India's military contribution over the last century; second, lack of accessible war memorials and a National War Memorial; and lastly, an absence of a 'Remembrance Day' and a symbol/culture of remembrance in India.

While many members of the community groups had basic understanding of the Indian Armed Forces' role in the post-Independence military operations, their knowledge pertaining to India's contribution in the two World Wars was insignificant. This general lack of sufficient knowledge to some extent has resulted from failure of elementary educational institutions to include the military aspects of Indian history into their curriculum and complexity and difference in the narratives of the twentieth century modern

Indian history, which has led to the emergence of 'historical amnesia'.¹³

War memorials play an important role in any society, reminding us and the future generations of the sacrifice made by servicemen and women in the line of duty. In India, there are three kinds of war memorials; firstly, war memorials that commemorate the sacrifice of men of undivided India who served and died in the two World Wars, most of which are maintained by the Commonwealth War Graves Commission; secondly, post-Independence war memorials constructed with the Government's sanction within military cantonments and stations; and thirdly, war memorials constructed by the State Governments and civic bodies.¹⁴

Despite their existence in large numbers across the length and the breadth of the country, war memorials have failed to evoke a sense of remembrance among communities and engage them in acts of commemoration. They have become a symbol of reverence for concerned few – war veterans, retired service personnel, descendants of fallen soldiers, etc. The development of these paradoxes of war memorials in India may have been caused by the lack of awareness and acknowledgement among Indian masses with regards to India's contribution in the two World Wars, which has led to the negligence of the war memorials dedicated to undivided India's war dead. For instance, built in 1931, India Gate stands tall overlooking the capital city, New Delhi. It is visited by hundreds of tourists and locals each day; yet, it is a matter of lament that very few of them know its significance. Inaccessibility of locations of war memorials is another reason as most of them are built within the military cantonment and stations; and also the absence of a National War Memorial.

The need for a National War Memorial cannot be overemphasised. The proposal to build the country's first National War Memorial and National War Museum was approved by the Government of India in 2015. According to the proposal, while the memorial will be built in the vicinity of India Gate, the museum will be set up in the adjoining area of Princess Park. However, while it is called a National War Memorial, it will only commemorate the sacrifice of those personnel of the Indian Armed Forces who served and died in the post-Independence military operations,¹⁵ thus making India Gate a *de facto* First World War memorial, leaving the country

with no memorial to commemorate the 2.5 million men who served in the Second World War.

David Omissi has rightly pointed out “the army often remains in the background, but the background is an important part of the picture”.¹⁶ In India, there is an urgent need to bring to fore the role of the Indian Armed Forces since 1914 in the larger mainstream narrative and to engage communities in Indian military history discourse fostering a culture of remembrance. Furthermore, it is important to commemorate the contributions of Indian Armed Forces’ personnel holistically and apolitically, rather than viewing the same through the prism of the pre- and post-Independence military operations. Besides, the need for India to dedicate a specific day of remembrance and a symbol of remembrance which can allow citizens here, as well as the international diaspora, to acknowledge the valour and sacrifice of the Indian Armed Forces in the service of the nation over the last century remains equally strong.

The timely realisation of these issues led to the inception of ‘India Remembers’, a dynamic, creative and transformative community engagement project which proposes that a Day of Remembrance or *Sainik Smriti Divas* be instituted to commemorate the sacrifices of Indian Armed Forces’ personnel across the nation annually, and that the Marigold flower be adopted as a unique Indian symbol of remembrance.¹⁷ While the proposal is under consideration of the Government, the India Remembers pilot project, which ran for a period of over five months (14th July- 7th December, 2016), was successful to a large extent in generating awareness about India’s role and contribution in military operations since 1914, and in encouraging the community groups to adopt the use of Marigold flower as a symbol of remembrance.

For a nation whose military strength is the fourth largest¹⁸ in the world and whose “resolve may yet to be tested in conflicts to come”,¹⁹ we are left with a responsibility to acknowledge and commemorate their valour and sacrifice which is long overdue. Therefore, the time is ripe for communities to come together and work towards developing a culture of remembrance in the country.

Endnotes

¹ 15 January observed as Army Day; 26 July observed as Kargil Vijay Divas; 8 October observed as Air Force Day; 4 December observed as Navy Day; 7 December observed as Armed Forces Flag Day; and 16 December observed as Victory day.

² Chhina, Rana, *India and the Great War*, New Delhi: USI-CAFHR, 2015, pp. 26.

³ Undivided India here refers to the geographical territory of British India during the two World Wars, which extended to present Pakistan in the North-West and present Bangladesh and Myanmar in the East.

⁴ <http://www.cwgc.org/news-events/news/2011/11/forever-india-website.aspx>, accessed on 5 March 2016.

⁵ For the history of Indian Peacekeeping missions, see Nambiar, Satish, *For the Honour of India: A History of Indian Peacekeeping*, New Delhi: USI-CAFHR, 2009.

⁶ To know more about the project, visit www.indiaww1.in

⁷ The Indian Army had organised an exhibition from 10- 14 March 2015 to commemorate the contribution of Indian Soldiers in WW1 - <http://www.ndtv.com/india-news/army-to-commemorate-martyred-indian-soldiers-in-first-world-war-745208>

⁸ Remarks by the President of India made in Belgium on 03 October 2013; the Vice President of India in New Delhi on 05 March 2014; Joint Statements following the Prime Minister's visits to Australia on 18 November 2014 (<http://www.narendramodi.in/joint-statement-during-prime-ministers-visit-to-australia-november-16-18-2014-6908>), in France on 11 April 2015 (http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/26297/IndiaFrance_Joint_Statement_on_the_occasion_of_the_State_Visit_of_President_Francois_Hollande_of_the_French_Republic_to_India_January_25_2016) and in New Zealand on 26 October 2016 (http://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/27535/India_New_Zealand_Joint_Statement_during_visit_of_Prime_Minister_of_New_Zealand_to_India).

⁹ <http://www.cwgc.org/>

¹⁰ <http://www.flagsofhonour.in/>

¹¹ <http://www.bigideascompany.org/>

¹² Community groups comprised of schools, universities, NGOs, housing colonies, rotary clubs, research groups, etc. Visit www.indiaremembers.in

¹³ Tharoor Shashi, *India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in our Time*, New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2015, pp. 100.

¹⁴ Chhina, Rana, *Last Post: Indian War Memorials Around the World*, New Delhi: USI-CAFHR, 2014, pp. 161.

¹⁵ <http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/cabinet-clears-rs-500-crore-for-war-memorial-museum-for-postindependence-martyrs/article7734542.ece> accessed on 5 March 2016.

¹⁶ Omissi, *The Sepoy and The Raj*, pp. xx.

¹⁷ In the United Kingdom and the Commonwealth countries, Poppy is universally recognised as a symbol of remembrance and 11th November is observed as the Remembrance Day.

¹⁸ http://www.idsa.in/jds/2_1_2008_NeedforHolisticRestructuringoftheIndianMilitary_VOberoio accessed on 9 March 2017.

¹⁹ Tharoor, *India Shastra*, pp. 100