

India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration Project - An Update
Shri Adil Chhina@

During the period under review (Oct-Dec 2015) the first ever conference on India's role in the First World War was held at an Indian University and the first ever USI event was held in the UK.

Having gained adequate momentum, the India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration Project is now being extended into community outreach and education modules. As a part of this endeavour Mr Dominiek Dendooven of the In Flanders Fields Museum in Ypres, Belgium and Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd), Secretary USI-CAFHR spoke at Amity Global School, Noida on 5th November, 2015 on India in World War I. This was followed by a joint USI-Shiv Nadar University (SNU) international conference titled India and World War I: Across Generations. This was held on 6-7th November and included a wide variety of speakers who examined 'art, literature and the history of the conflict' from an Indian perspective. The Belgian ambassador His Excellency Mr Jan Luykx presided over a session. A session on 'sepoys and labour' featured talks by Dr Kaushik Roy, Dr Radhika Singha and Dr KC Yadav. This was followed by a session on representations of the war in art and literature where papers were presented by Dr Vikram Kapur and Dr Narendra Yadav. As Dr Rimli Bhattacharya was unable to attend, her paper was read out by Squadron Leader Rana Chhina.

Day Two of the conference was held at the Shiv Nadar University's campus in Gautam Budh Nagar, UP. The day began with the opening of an exhibition of charcoal drawings by Professor Sumantra Sengupta. The exhibition was inaugurated by Prof SN Balakrishnan, Chancellor of SNU. Professor Sengupta used a few period photographs and muslin gauze to create artistic interpretations of the experiences of Indian soldiers from the Great War. A poem based on letters written by Indian soldiers was recited by Dr Akhil Katyal. A session on commemorations was conducted in the morning where Mr Dominiek Dendooven presented a paper on the Indian involvement in Belgium and Squadron Leader Rana Chhina spoke on the Indian contribution and the commemoration activities undertaken so far.

The commemoration project hopes to engage with more schools and universities in the coming years as part of the project so that India's contribution in the war is passed down through the generations.

The USI-CAFHR has also signed a MoU with the Commonwealth War Graves Commission to honour and commemorate the sacrifice of Indian servicemen who fell in various battlefields around the world in the First and Second World Wars.

Another conference titled Voices of India: The First World War was organised by the Royal Pavilion Museums, Brighton and Hove, along with the USI and the UK Punjab Heritage Association on 21 Nov 2015. Papers were presented by scholars from Germany, India, Canada and the UK attempting to recover the Indian voice that has long since been forgotten. The conference could not have been held at a more appropriate location; namely Brighton, where Indian soldiers wounded on the Western Front in WW I were brought to convalesce.

Dr Prabhjot Parmar from the University of Fraser Valley in Canada examined censored letters of Indian soldiers held at the British Library in London. Mr Kevin Bacon from the Royal Pavilion focussed on how these soldiers were portrayed in the media at the time. Dr Heike Liebau from Germany explored the Indian voice through the German Prisoner of War recordings. She played a recording of a Gurkha sepoy who died in captivity which was very moving. Adil Chhina brought to light many of the diaries and memoirs of Indian soldiers recovered as a result of the project along with photographs and recordings of Indians veterans of the war.

Mr Tom Donovan discussed the landscape of Belgium where the 129th Baluchis had fought during the First Battle of Ypres and compared present day photographs to what it looked like in 1914. Davinder Dhillon of the Chattri Memorial Group was in conversation with Squadron Leader Chhina on the Chattri Memorial where Indian soldiers (Hindus and Sikhs) who died in hospitals in Brighton were cremated. Dr Glyn Prysor of the Commonwealth War Graves Commission spoke about Indian memorials from the War around the world. Amandeep Madra of the UK Punjab Heritage Association discussed how their organisation has engaged the Sikh community in the UK to commemorate the Sikh soldiers from the War.

BBC radio presenter Anita Anand spoke about her book on Sophia Duleep Singh, granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjeet Singh and specifically about the fact that she had volunteered to become a nurse when she heard Indian wounded from the Western Front were being sent to the UK to convalesce in WW I. Kamila Shamsie discussed her book A God in Every Stone with Dr Santanu Das and the relationship between history and fiction. The conference ended with a haunting Punjabi folk song presentation by Jasdeep Singh, Amanroop Kaur and Harleen titled Take the Bachelors to War: Songs of Separation which moved many in the audience to tears.

On 08 Dec 2015, the first in our series of WW I theatre histories specific to the Indian Army was launched by Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd), Director USI, at the Australian High Commission. The book titled Die in Battle, Do not Despair: The Indians on Gallipoli, 1915 has been written by Professor Peter Stanley of the University of New South Wales, Canberra. The launch included an illustrated talk by Professor Stanley and an 'in conversation' session with Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd).

Our forthcoming events include the release of the book - Les Hindous: The Indian Army on the Western Front by Squadron Leader Rana Chhina (Retd). The foreword for the book has been written by the Hon'ble President of India Shri Pranab Mukherjee. The CAFHR will also work with the CWGC to build the CWGC/USI community engagement resource pack for disseminating knowledge about the role and sacrifice of Indian soldiers in the two world wars as well as the CWGC role in honouring their memory. A joint unveiling of the CWGC/USI project by the Director USI and Commission's Director-General will be organised at the USI once the project deliverables are in hand.

Endnotes

1 Anita Anand, *Sophia: Princess, Suffragette, Revolutionary*, (Bloomsbury, 2015)

@ **Shri Adil Chhina** is a research assistant with the USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research. He is working on the India and the Great War centenary commemoration project.

Journal of the United Service Institution of India, Vol. CXLV, No. 602, October-December 2015.

	
<p style="text-align: center;">Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina responds to a query about the commemoration activities that have been undertaken in India at the Voices of India Conference held at Brighton. Image credits - Mr Taranjeet Singh Padam</p>	
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Ms Anita Anand talking about Sophia Duleep Singh as a nurse during WWI (Voices of India Conference, Brighton). Image credits - Mr Taranjeet Singh Padam</p>	
	
<p style="text-align: center;">Mr Dominiek Dendooven, Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina (Retd) and Mr Subhashis Gangopadhyay during a panel discussion at the SNU-USI Conference</p>	



**Opening of exhibition by Prof SN Balakrishnan, Chancellor of SNU
of the charcoal paintings by Prof Sumantra Dasgupta**



**Sqn Ldr Rana Chhina, Prof Peter Stanley and Lt Gen PK Singh at
the book launch of 'Die in Battle, Do not Despair; The Indians
at Gallipoli, 1915' at the Australian High Commission**



A selection of the audience at the book launch