

India and the Great War 1914-18 : International Conference
05-07 March 2014 - A Report

Squadron Leader RTS Chhina (Retd)@

The India and the Great War international conference held at the USI from 05-07 March 2014 marked the successful start to the USI's four-year long programme to commemorate the centenary of the conflict. One of the stated aims of the project is to examine and highlight not only the role of Indian soldiers but also the impact that the conflict had on Indian society, culture and politics. To this end, the papers presented at the conference were representative of the diverse range of subjects that the project aims to engage with in the coming four years. The 17 speakers who presented papers at the conference came from Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom, Sweden, Finland, Belgium and of course, India. They discussed India's role in the Great War from a wide variety of perspectives. The audience at the conference largely comprised USI members, serving officers, diplomats, political dignitaries, representatives from other think tanks, scholars, media persons and academics, students, including some NCC cadets.

The conference was successfully concluded and has generated considerable interest both within the country and internationally as well. The papers were well received by all who attended and the presence of the Hon'ble Vice President of India, Shri M Hamid Ansari who delivered the Inaugural Address, Foreign Secretary Smt Sujatha Singh who presided over the concluding Valedictory Session, and Field Marshal Sir John Chapple GCB, CBE, DL, who gave the Keynote Speech and attended all the sessions, further added value and significance to the event. The presence of a large number of eminent and distinguished individuals in the audience added greatly to the proceedings of the conference. This event has, therefore, effectively kick-started the USI-MEA India and the Great War Centenary Commemoration Project and has set a positive tone for all activities planned over the coming years.

The conference also provided an opportunity for USI members to interact with the scholars and discuss a host of issues on the sidelines. A small exhibition of interesting artefacts, photographs and documents was organised by Professor KC Yadav, Director of the Haryana Academy of History and Culture. The exhibition added greatly to the interest generated by the papers and was favourably commented upon by all who saw it.

A one-day "mirror conference" is planned to be held at the "In Flanders Fields" Museum at Ypres, Belgium on 24 Oct 14 as a continuation activity. The conference will conclude with the launch of the USI's Battlefield Guide of the Indian Army on the Western Front 1914-1918. This will be followed by an organised tour of the battlefields on 25 Oct 14. This conference is also slated to coincide with an exhibition of the Indian Army in France in Flanders to be held at the Chateau La Peylouse in Saint-Venant, France, which was the Headquarters of the Indian Corps in France. These events will be held in collaboration with the "In Flanders Fields" Museum, Ypres, under the umbrella of HERA (Humanities in the European Research Arena). A HERA panel was also organised at the recently concluded USI conference.

Inaugural Address by the Hon'ble Vice President of India,

Shri M Hamid Ansari

I am happy to be here today for the inauguration of the "India and the Great War" Conference organised by the United Service Institution of India. It is the flagship event of the "India and the Great War" Centenary Commemoration Project. I congratulate the USI and MEA for this initiative.

The First World War was a seminal event in modern history. It transformed the global political, economic and social order irreversibly. Its repercussions were felt across the world, including in our country. A century later and with fading memories, it is relevant to recall its military and the politico-diplomatic aspects as also some wider consequences.

The War which began as the third Balkan war rapidly turned into a European war and eventually ensnared countries on almost all the continents of our planet, with battles fought in Europe, Asia, Africa and the Pacific.

In one of his books Henry Kissinger has penned a perceptive chapter on the events leading up to the war. His assessment has a wider relevance. Allow me to cite a passage from it :

"The statesmen of all the major countries had helped construct the diplomatic doomsday machine that made each succeeding crisis progressively more difficult to resolve. The military chiefs had vastly compounded the peril by adding strategic plans which compressed the time available for decision-making. Since the military plans depended on speed and the diplomatic machinery was geared to its traditional leisurely pace, it became impossible to disentangle the crisis under intense time pressure. To make matters worse, the military planners had not adequately explained the implications of their handiwork to their political colleagues. Military planning had, in effect, become autonomous."

The damage caused by the Great War had no parallel in history. In earlier wars, the civilian populations were generally spared. In World War I, the casualties suffered by the civilian population from bombing and the famines and epidemics caused by the war far exceeded those suffered by the armed forces. The War was also unprecedented in terms of resource mobilisation. According to some estimates, the conflict mobilised 65 million troops, claimed around 20 million military and civilian deaths and 21 million wounded. It imposed a heavy cost on the global economy and led to many serious social problems.

The First World War also set new standards in the capability and willingness of human race to inflict extreme violence and pain on their own kind through use of modern weapons of destruction, such as poisonous chemical gas, aircrafts and airships, tanks, U-boats etc.

In political terms, the War brought to an end four great empires - German, Austro-Hungarian, Russian and

Ottoman - and transformed the geopolitical landscape of Europe and other parts of the world. One immediate result was the Russian Revolution of 1917. Economically and militarily, Europe was surpassed by the United States, which emerged from the war as a world power.

The post-war Peace Conference held at Versailles and the ensuing treaties were not a result of negotiations between the defeated and the victorious powers but were imposed on the defeated by the victors. They took on, to quote Kissinger again, "a nihilistic character." These created fertile conditions for future conflicts.

In Asia, Europe and Africa, new states were created out of the former imperial territories of the defeated powers. Their geographical boundaries were at times arbitrary, drawn to serve the interests of dominant European powers. Colonies exchanged hands and areas of influence were mandated amongst the victors.

The unethical and arbitrary sharing of the spoils of war between the victorious powers prepared the ground for some of the most intractable international territorial disputes. These continue to haunt international peace and security to this day, particularly in West Asia and Africa. The American historian, Fritz Stern aptly described the War as "the first calamity of the twentieth century, the calamity from which all other calamities sprang".

The War germinated the idea of an international organisation of all independent states aimed at the preservation of peace and security and peaceful settlement of international conflicts. The resultant 'League of Nations' bound its members 'not to resort to war.' Its eventual fate is another story but it did inspire the founding of United Nations in 1945.

The post-war perpetuation of colonial rule and exploitation by the victorious powers, in spite of their professed principles of freedom and democracy, was a wake up call for the nationalist movements in Asia and Africa. Some of the colonies, including India, had supported the war effort expecting to be rewarded with a major move towards independence or at the least self-government. This betrayal transformed the nationalist movements from seeking a more representative self-rule within the colonial framework to demanding complete freedom and independence from colonial yoke. The trend was aggravated by the resentment generated due to forced recruitment of soldiers and labour for war, and the exploitation of resources of the colonies by the imperialist countries.

The Great War marked a watershed in the political history of the freedom movement in the Indian subcontinent. When the war broke out in August 1914, many in our country supported the war effort in its bid to gain Dominion Status. The overwhelming majority of mainstream political opinion was united in the view that if India desired greater responsibility and political autonomy, it must also be willing to share in the burden of imperial defence. This was summed up in Gandhiji's observation that "If we would improve our status through the help and cooperation of the British, it was our duty to win their help by standing by them in their hour of need."

The major impact of the First World War, and its aftermath, was the realisation by the Indian nationalist movement that the British were not going to live up to the promises of representative self-rule which they had made during the war. The Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 disappointed the Indian people who longed for greater constitutional changes in the direction of self-rule. Repressive legislations like the Rowlatt Act rubbed salt on their wounds. A combination of these factors led to a shift in nationalist aspirations from Home Rule under the British Empire, to complete Independence from Britain; an objective which was realised almost three decades later on 15th August 1947.

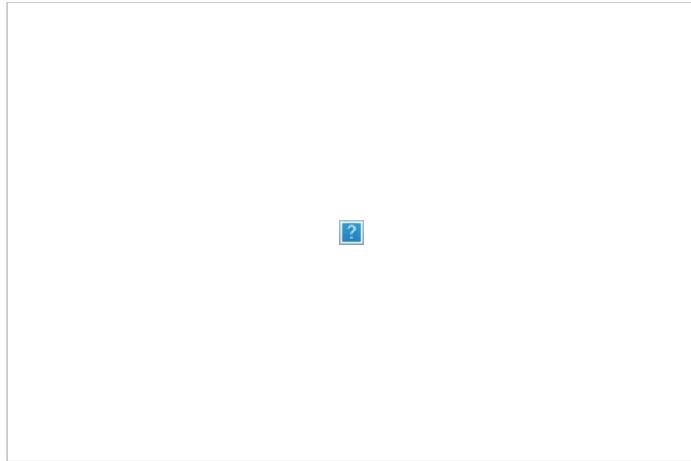
According to the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, around 1.1 million Indian personnel were sent overseas on war duties, including to France, Belgium, Mesopotamia, Egypt, Persia and Palestine. Smaller contingents were deployed in Aden, East Africa, Gallipoli and Salonika. Around 60,000 troops from undivided India sacrificed their lives in the War. Over 9,200 decorations were earned, including 11 Victoria Crosses.

Despite this, the story of the Indian Army in the Great War has so far received no separate scrutiny. The Indian story, and it was a substantial one, must therefore be unravelled from amongst the larger official accounts of the War. There are almost no records that preserve the subaltern voice of the Indian rank and file, apart from the fortuitous collection of letters passed down by the Indian censors in France. The various narratives get a human touch by the accounts of a few British officers of the Indian Army, who recount the doings of their men in passing.

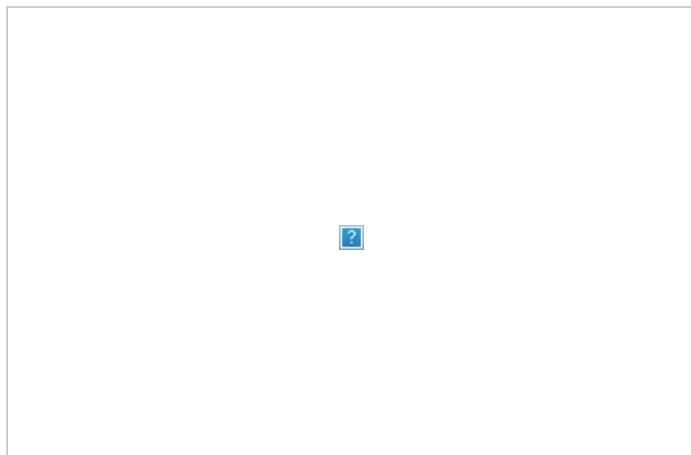
Today's Conference is important and relevant in this context. This impressive and knowledgeable gathering of scholars and soldiers will serve as a good starting point for redressing this glaring gap in our understanding of that period of our history. Your discussions would contribute to a better comprehension of the events which influenced our past and affect our present. I wish you all success in your deliberations.

I thank the organisers for inviting me today.

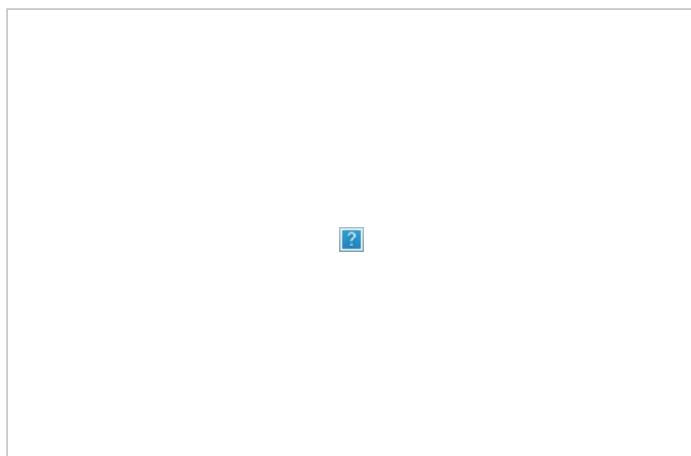
Jai Hind"



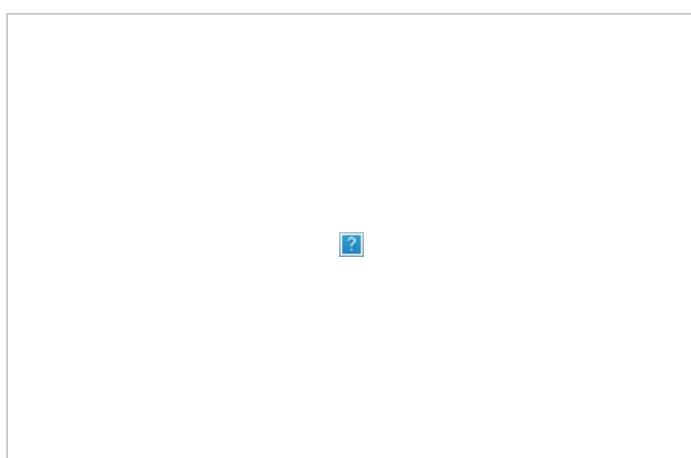
Inaugural Address by the Hon'ble Vice President of India



Director USI introducing Field Marshal Sir Hohn Chapple prior to the Keynote Address



**Replicas of World War I Medals being presented to
the Hon'ble Vice President of India**



A View of the Audience



**Director USI, Foreign Secretary Smt. Sujatha Singh, and
Field Marshal Sir Hojn Chapple share a light moment**



Sitting Row (L to R) :- Mr Alan Jeffreys, Sqn Ldr RTS China, Mr Andrew Kerr, Capt Ashok Nath , Fd Mshl Sir John Chapple,
Amb Sujatha Singh, Lt. Gen P K Singh, Ms Suzanne Bargett, Dr. Prabhjot Parmar, Amb Navtej Sarna.

Standing 1st Row (L To R) :- Rep Sikh Reg, Mr Dominiek Dendooven, Mr Tom Donovan, Mr Tony McClenaghan, Brig MS Jodha,
Lt Cdr Kalesh Mohanan, Dr. Santanu Das, Prof Steven Wilkinson, Rep Sikh Regt.

The Valedictory Address by the Foreign Secretary, Government of India, Smt Sujatha Singh, IFS

Let me begin by saying that I am indeed honoured to be included in this flagship event that brings together scholars and experts from all over the world to examine diverse facets of India's involvement in the Great War and commemorate the role of over one million Indians who served overseas and 60,000 Indians who laid down their lives in the line of duty. I am grateful to USI and General PK Singh for inviting me to deliver the Valedictory address today.

As we all know, this year marks the centenary, the start of one of the most cataclysmic events in modern world history - the First World War, a war that changed the social and political fabric not just of Europe, but of the entire world, a war that continues to have profound effects today, in the manner in which it shaped countries and their destinies. Many contemporary conflicts, particularly in the Middle East, trace their roots directly to the fallout of the Great War. It also sowed the seeds of another catastrophic war two decades later.

At the time the War broke out, India was still under colonial rule. It is a reflection of the professionalism and discipline of Indian soldiers that despite India's own struggle against colonialism back home, they fought in different theatres of battle all over the world to share the burden of imperial defence. India contributed immensely to the war effort in terms of both men and material. Her soldiers served with credit and honour in numerous battlefields around the globe: in France and Belgium, in Aden, Arabia, East Africa, Gallipoli, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Palestine, Persia and Salonika.

I understand that this Conference is the first of its kind, bringing together distinguished scholars, each one of them an expert in their respective fields, to discuss and review various aspects of India's involvement in the Great War in the light of contemporary scholarship. The range of subjects covered is truly impressive; ranging from military aspects of the war to examining the role of the nearly forgotten Indian labour corps, to the repercussions on Indian society and culture, art, literature, film and visual representation as well as the role of the Indian princely states. The

Great War scarred a sweep of nations, with both the victors and the vanquished suffering unprecedented losses of millions of human lives, destruction of vast parts of their economies and lasting damage to their national psyches. Although its impact was felt around the globe, historians and academics tend to view World War-I primarily from the European perspective.

I commend USI and the distinguished scholars who have presented their works at the Conference over the last few days for bringing into focus a narrative from the Indian perspective and from Indian sensitivities to what has hitherto predominantly been a Euro-centric discourse, and I might add, within Europe, an Anglo-centric discourse.

I would like to digress a little here, to give you a perspective from a personal point of view of the various levels at which any narrative of the Great War plays out. I first learnt of the Great War when I was a child; my father read out to me that beautiful poem of John McCrae, "In Flanders Fields" and told me about the millions of men who had died there. The War did not form part of our history curriculum, but I remember learning about it through myriad books about the various theatres in which it was fought - the Middle East, the Somme, Gallipoli. I remember the exceptional BBC series that came on Doordarshan in black & white in the mid-70s, and the film "Oh, what a lovely war!" which brought home like no history book can, the pathos, the tragedy and the utter futility of those years.

Those of us who joined the Foreign Service, have what we call a compulsory foreign language. I chose German. I think my choice was in some way influenced by a sub-conscious desire to see the war years from the other side. My four years in Germany, and more recently my one and a half years as Ambassador, took me beyond the stereotypes one had come across in literature and in comic books. Learning the language and the idiom and looking at World War I through German eyes, including in little villages where the cemeteries are filled with rows of graves of their fallen sons, brought home the pathos even further : this was the side that had lost.

Similarly in postings around the world, one came across monuments, cemeteries and events that drew attention to India's participation in World War I, known mainly to Indians or to only those countries where they had actually fought. As Joint Secretary (West Europe), I signed off every year on our sending two bagpipers every November to the Menin Gate to commemorate our fallen soldiers.

In my posting in Australia as High Commissioner, I got to see yet another aspect. The manner in which the Anzacs commemorate Gallipoli and the pride they take in their soldiers who fought there. It is truly something to be seen to be believed, including the little children who march in the parades and the relatives who wear their grandparents medals with pride. Knowing as I did, about the Indian soldiers who fought in Gallipoli, it was curious for me to see no mention of our soldiers who had fought there or the role that they had played in the Gallipoli campaign. I made it my business to find out more and the stories that I came across were truly fascinating. About Indian Regiments and medical corps that had served at Gallipoli; about the casualties that they incurred which, as a proportion of the men who fought, were one of the highest; of the Australian medic Simpson, who became a legend along with his donkey, which I believe were actually several donkeys, (each time a donkey died, there would be a new donkey), as they fearlessly carried the wounded from the front to the field hospitals and how Simpson used to bed down every night with the Indian contingent. There were other stories too, of how wood was very scarce to come by in Gallipoli but that the Indians always managed to light a fire in the evenings to cook their dal and rotis and that the fragrance of their food and the smoke from their camp fires remained a distinct memory for many Australian soldiers who fought there. The person who told me this story remarked that he could never figure out where they got the wood to light their fires. I think it might have been a bye-product of their donkeys' and an early example of our 'jugaad' spirit. I am not sure how much of this is accurate, but I thought I would tell you for what it was worth. I also learnt that there were Indians who fought on the Turkish side.

In the years that I was there, I was in touch with Delhi to see if we could take part in the Anzac Day ceremonies. It was around this time that I met General PK Singh and found someone even more enthusiastic than I was about commemorating the role of the Indian soldier in every battlefield where he had laid down his life. I told him that we should send two bagpipers to the Anzac Day ceremonies in Australia and see how we can honour the role played by our Indian soldiers at Gallipoli. At some level, we seem to be conflicted about whether we should be commemorating something we did under colonial rule. I hope this Conference will help to acknowledge the role that we played in all theatres. As importantly, Gallipoli strikes a very deep emotional chord in the Australian heart. As a diplomat in the business of building bridges to partners and communities all over the world, it is in our interest to make this particular connection better known in Australia itself. Successive High Commissioners, including I, have done this and the effort continues. I hope it gets to a point where it is part of the national consciousness at the people-to-people level.

To come back to the present Conference, the Ministry of External Affairs is playing a significant role in commemorating the part played by our soldiers in the Great War, through events in India as well as other countries around the world. The USI Centre for Armed Forces Historical Research is our partner in many of these projects; we have drawn up a broad calendar of projects and events across the next four years that will seek to holistically examine, and focus on the oft-forgotten role played by India in the War. The proposed events include participation of contingents of the Indian Armed Forces in commemorative ceremonies in India and countries abroad, publications, research projects, exchange of scholars, exhibitions, enhancing people-to-people contacts, and enabling descendants of distinguished soldiers to attend relevant commemorative ceremonies/events.

I commend the USI for its foresight and vision in preparing for the Great War commemoration activities. This included a panel discussion on 'India and the Great War' held at the Jaipur Literature Festival in January this year. In February, a series of interactions and talks were arranged for a curator from the Royal Pavilion in Brighton which had been used as a hospital for Indian troops wounded in the Western front during the War. In the months and years ahead, several collaborative events in consultation with foreign Governments including France, Belgium, Australia and Israel are also being worked upon.

Our efforts, of which this Conference is an important part, will pay homage to the valour and sacrifice of previous generations of Indian soldiers. I trust we would also bring out the futility of war and the accompanying

carnage that it unleashes.

I would like to propose a companion project to the USI project regarding the memorials to our soldiers in foreign lands; this would be to record the name of each of our soldiers in every country where our fallen soldiers are buried. This would be on the website of each High Commission and Embassy in the countries concerned. MEA would be glad to partner USI in the project.

I hope that through the medium of the Centenary commemorations, we can also reflect of how the events of the past have impacted our present. Through the collaborative nature of commemorative ventures that will take place in concert with partner nations, we hope to bring about a greater understanding of India's role in the War effort at the level of governments, academics, media and most importantly, people.

I warmly felicitate the United Service Institution of India and its Director, General PK Singh for conceiving, organising and successfully putting together this Conference. Let me close with a poem from Sarojini Naidu, the Nightingale of India and the first woman President of the Indian National Congress. The poem, "The Gift of India", captures the sacrifice of India and its fallen soldiers during World War I. She wrote, and I quote :

Is there ought you need that my hands hold?

Rich gifts of raiment or grain or gold?

Lo! I have flung to the East and the West

Priceless treasures torn from my breast,

and yielded the sons of my stricken womb

to the drum-beats of duty, the sabres of doom.

Gathered like pearls in their alien graves

Silent they sleep by the Persian waves,

scattered like shells on Egyptian sands,

they lie with pale brows and brave, broken hands,

strewn like blossoms mowed down by chance

on the blood-brown meadows of Flanders and France.

Can ye measure the grief of the tears I weep

or compass the woe of the watch I keep?

Or the pride that thrills thro' my heart's despair

and the hope that comforts the anguish of prayer?

And the far, sad, glorious vision I see

or the torn red banners of victory?

when the terror and tumult of hate shall cease

and life be refashioned on anvils of peace,

and your love shall offer memorial thanks

to the comrades who fought on the dauntless ranks,

and you honour the deeds of the dauntless ones,

remember the blood of my martyred sons!

Unquote

Thank you and Jai Hind!

Conference Schedule

Day 1 - Wednesday, 5 March 2014

Welcome Address: Lieutenant General PK Singh, PVSM, AVSM (Retd) Director, USI

Inaugural Address: Shri M. Hamid Ansari Hon'ble Vice President of India

Keynote Lecture: Field Marshal Sir John Chapple, GCB, CBE, DL (CGS British Army, 1988-1992)

Session I: The Fighting Fronts

Session Chair: Santanu Das (King's College, London)

Peter Stanley (University of New South Wales, Canberra) : The Indian Army's contribution in the Gallipoli campaign

Dominiek Dendooven (In Flanders Fields Museum, Ypres): Sikhs in the Salient: The Indian Army Corps at Ypres, 1914-15

Tom Donovan (Chattri Memorial Group, Brighton): The Indian Army Corps in France and Flanders in 1914

Day 2 - Thursday, 6 March 2014

Session II: Military Labour and Officer Experience

Session Chair: Peter Stanley (University of New South Wales, Canberra)

Radhika Singha (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi): The ends of war: The Indian Labour Corps in France and lessons for the 'returnee', 1917-1919

Alan Jeffreys (Imperial War Museum, London): The Indian Army officer experience during the First World War

Session III: Indian Army Regiments and the Royal Indian Marine

Session Chair: Tony McClenaghan (Indian Military Historical Society, UK)

Captain Ashok Nath (University of Stockholm, Sweden): A Grand Spectacle - Indian Cavalry and Infantry Regiments of the Great War

Lieutenant Commander Kalesh Mohanan (Indian Navy History Division): Royal Indian Marine in the First World War

Session IV: Repercussions on Indian society and culture

Session Chair: Indivar Kamtekar (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi)

Steven Wilkinson (Yale University, USA): The Great War and its Political Legacies

Anirudh Deshpande (University of Delhi): 'Retrenchment and Demobilisation after the First World War - the case of the Indian armed forces'

Fredrik Petersson (Åbo Akademi University, Finland): Subversive Indian Networks in Berlin and Europe, 1914-18

Day 3 - Friday, 7 March 2014

Session V: Art, literature, poetry, and filmography

Session Chair: Radhika Singha (Jawaharlal Nehru University, Delhi)

Santanu Das (Kings College, London): The Indian Sepoy in the Great War: Words, Images and Objects

Narendra Yadav (History Division, MoD, Delhi): Tradition and Folklore in augmenting War efforts in Haryana

Prabhjot Parmar (University of the Fraser Valley, Canada): Sepoys, Scribes and Sahibs: Cultural Representations of Indian Soldiers in the Great War

Screening of Film: Whose Remembrance?

Session VI: Indian State Forces

Session Chair: Sqn Ldr RTS Chhina (Retd) (USI CAFHR, Delhi)

Tony McClenaghan (Indian Military Historical Society, UK): The Maharajas' Contribution to the First World War

Andrew Kerr (UK): 'I can never say enough about the men' - the experiences of a SSO attached to an Indian State Forces battalion in East Africa

Brigadier MS Jodha (Indian Army): A Rajput in France and Palestine: With the Jodhpur Lancers in the Great War

Valedictory Address : **Smt Sujatha Singh, IFS**, Foreign Secretary, Govt of India

Vote of Thanks : **Sqn Ldr RTS Chhina (Retd)** Secretary and Editor, USI-CAFHR

