

# India and the Great War

**Squadron Leader RTS Chhina (Retd)<sup>®</sup>**

**A**s the centenary of the commencement of the First World War in August 2014 draws closer, countries across the globe are engaged in hectic activities to highlight and commemorate their individual national involvement in the first global conflict in human history.

The First World War involved approximately 48 nations across five continents and left behind a trail of devastation that included over 16 million dead and 20 million wounded. The throes of that gigantic struggle signaled the end of four empires and also heralded the beginning of a new political consciousness in many countries, including India. The sterling role played by Indian soldiers was used by the country's intelligentsia and political classes to try and leverage greater political autonomy from the colonial authorities. The War proved to be a turning point in India's relationship with Imperial Britain and the developments arising from the events of 1914-18 set Indian politics firmly on the road to Independence.

The joint USI-MEA project to highlight India's involvement in the First World War needs to be seen against this backdrop. The project is a national initiative that seeks to credibly highlight not just India's substantial military role and heritage, but also to commemorate the valour and sacrifice of over 1.4 million Indians who served voluntarily in battlefields around the world. It also seeks to ensure that when the world remembers the conflict that changed the course of modern history, the Indian involvement in it is not forgotten. The view expressed in certain quarters that the conflict was a colonial war with no significance for India is therefore an untenable one and based on a narrow sectarian reading of history. While the project will commemorate the sacrifice of Indian soldiers and examine the numerous ways in which the War impacted India in their entirety at the national level, it will also highlight the futility of conflict in the international arena.

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The project therefore has two operative levels: the popular and the academic. At the popular level it seeks to generate awareness and interaction among people, both nationally and internationally, based on the numerous fascinating episodes concerning the gallantry and sacrifice of Indian soldiers in battlefields around the world. This is being done through the medium of the internet, through the publication of booklets and illustrated coffee table books

At the academic level, the project seeks to examine the impact of the war on India at various levels. This will involve academic conferences, seminars and the publication of a series of volumes including 'theatre histories' of the Indian Army's operations in the First World War. A tie-up has been made with a reputed publisher overseas as well as in India to bring out these volumes as a series titled "India and the Great War".

Preparations are currently under way for the flagship international conference at the USI from 05-07 March 2014. This conference explores Indian participation in the First World War through a variety of perspectives ranging from the representation of Indian involvement in propaganda films, music, poetry to the larger political consequences of the War for India and its struggle for independence. A conference in partnership with the "In Flanders Fields" museum, at Ypres in Belgium, is also scheduled to be held in October 2014. Other planned events include:

- (a) A JNU - USI seminar on "India and the Great War" to be held at the JNU in 2014.
- (b) Exhibition on Indian Army Corps on the Western Front to be held at the chateau that housed the Headquarters of the Indian Corps in 1915; the Chateau La Peylouse, in Saint-Venant, France (2014/2015).
- (c) Planned talk by Ms Jody East (Creative Programme Curator, Brighton Museum, UK) on the experiences of Indian soldiers at Brighton during the Great War at the USI in February 2014.
- (d) Exhibition by the Royal Pavilion, Brighton to be organised in India and the UK (2014/15)
- (e) Exhibition at National Archives of India (NAI), New Delhi,



in collaboration with the NAI and the British Library. Travelling exhibitions in India at civil and military venues also being planned.

The USI is providing research support to national and international scholars and is also liaising with the Australia - India council for scholarly exchange, joint research, and diaspora outreach. Call for research proposals on themes relating to India's role in WW1 have also been circulated among scholars and students in India, the UK, Australia, France, Ireland, the USA.

In addition to the 'India and the Great War' documentary to be produced by the Ministry of External Affairs, a documentary on 'War as Memory' is planned to be produced subsequently, with corporate sponsorship. The USI is planning a series of talks on 'India and the Great War' on All India Radio's overseas service and is also assisting the BBC in its production of programmes relating to Indian involvement in the First World War. A project to preserve Indian bardic heritage pertaining to the Great War period is also being planned.

As a symbolic tribute to the sacrifices of Indian soldiers, the USI aims to enable the issue of a postage stamp to mark the centenary commemoration of Indian involvement in the Great War, in addition to the issue of Army Postal Service special covers and cancellations with the assistance of the Service headquarters.

Utilising the commemoration activities as a platform to further people to people ties, the USI is working, together with the UK High Commission in the construction of memorials for Indian Victoria Cross recipients in suitable locations across the country. In this regard, the role of families/villages that contributed significantly to the Great War will also be highlighted. We are also tracing the descendants of distinguished soldiers who served during the Great War for attending suitable commemorative ceremonies to be hosted by various embassies and organisations. The project is also engaging with the High Commissions/Embassies of France, Belgium, Australia, New Zealand, Turkey and Israel to identify areas of mutual collaboration in commemorative activities and remembrance activities.

Marking its online presence, the Joint USI - MEA Great War commemoration project is all set to launch its project website

shortly. This website will highlight to new audiences the oft-forgotten role of India in the Great War and will serve as a digital platform of resources and information pertaining to Indian participation in the First World War. A Facebook page and Twitter account have also been started for greater outreach among a global audience.

In conclusion, the success of the project is dependant to a very large extent on the cooperation of all project partners including the support of the Service Headquarters, Indian Army Regiments, and our members, both retired and serving. The project team is confident that it will receive the whole hearted support of all to make the venture a grand success. Suggestions and feedback including details of ancestors who may have served during the First World War are welcome and may be conveyed to the project team through the Editor.

### **RESULTS : USI GOLD MEDAL ESSAY COMPETITON 2013**

#### **GROUP 'A'**

**Subject:** "Bridging the Gap – Balancing Personal Aspirations and Service Requirements in the Armed Forces".

<b><u>First</u></b>	IC - 03588 – B Cdr Sunil D Dogra Dte of Administration IHQ MOD (Navy) New Delhi – 110 011	Gold Medal and Cash Award of Rs.15,000/- and entry accepted for publication.
<b><u>Second</u></b>	IC – 54312 K Col Amit Singh Dabas 44 RR 934 544 C/o 56 APO	Cash Award of Rs.10,000/-.

#### **GROUP 'B'**

**Subject:** "Officer-Men Relationship : A Critical Appraisal".

<b><u>First</u></b>	IC – 29892 – T Flt Lt Rohan Chacko Jacob 102 Sqn Air Force Station HQ Air Force Chabua – 786 102	Gold Medal and Cash Award of Rs.15,000/- and entry accepted for publication.
<b><u>Second</u></b>	IC - 63866 K Maj Sushil Rana 7 Sikh 912 207 C/o 56 APO	Cash Award of Rs.10,000/-.