

**India's Services in the War**, by M.B.L. Bhargava, Imperial Edition,  
Printed by Bishambher Nath Bhargava, and published by the author,  
Lucknow, 1919, pp. 410, INR 5

**India's Contribution to the Great War**, Calcutta: Government  
of India, 1923, INR 5

**India and World War I**, edited by DeWitt C. Ellinwood and  
S.D. Pradhan, New Delhi: Manohar Publications, 1978, pp. 237

**'First World War: Purchasing Indian Loyalties: Imperial  
Policy of Recruitment and "Reward"'**, by Aravind Ganachari,  
Economic and Public Weekly, Vol. 40, No. 8, 19–25 February 2005,  
pp. 779–88

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#### INDIAN CONTRIBUTION TO THE FIRST WORLD WAR

The First World War (1914–18) was a momentous event in world history. It also left a deep impact on India, which was then under the British rule. As the world celebrates the 100th anniversary of the beginning of the war, it is worthwhile to reflect on the Indian contribution to British war effort, and how the war affected Indian political, military and economic evolution. We must also remember that the period 1914–18 was witness

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The views expressed here are personal.

ISSN 0976-1004 print

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*Journal of Defence Studies*, Vol. 8, No. 3, July–September 2014, pp. 121–133



to a renewed dynamism in the Indian National Movement, beginning with the return of M.K. Gandhi to India from South Africa.

Even today, there is very little contemporary research material on the Indian contribution to the First World War. The three books and one article reviewed in this essay provide a wealth of information on India's contribution to the war and how India was affected politically and economically by it.

It will be interesting to quantify the Indian help to Britain in the First World War to the extent possible. Bhargava's book, written in 1919, is most helpful in this regard. Spread over 400 pages, the book provides a thorough account of financial contributions and services in men and materials rendered by one of the poorest and most impoverished countries to the global superpower of the time. It details the sacrifices made by Indians, including classes and masses, rich and poor, women and students. Elaborate accounts of services by Indian royalty, including the Nizam of Hyderabad and Gaekwad of Baroda, and many others, have been provided. There is also an in-depth discussion of constitutional, administrative and economic reforms initiated during the war.

Why then did India help Britain, the oppressor country? According to Bhargava, Indians had the expectation that in return for its help, India would be able to 'advance her political position materially and substantially' (p. 35). Indians saw Britain fighting on the side of liberty. They expected, naively, as it turns out, that Britain would not 'deny to the people of India that for which she herself fought in Europe' (p. 36) and would grant a substantial amount of self-rule, if not independence. But no one set these conditions explicitly. The outcome, as we know, was very different. The British took all the help happily but belied Indian expectations of self-rule. The oppressors remained oppressors, as demonstrated by the Jallianwala Bagh massacre which was committed by a British official in 1919, a few months after the war was over. Yet, the First World War initiated a slow and tedious process of Indianization of the governmental institutions and unleashed social and political forces which led to major change in the Indian situation.

How many people were recruited from India for the war? The author quotes the Secretary of State, E.S. Montague, from a speech he gave after the war, as saying, '[D]uring the war 1,161,789 Indians were recruited to the Indian army and a grand total of all ranks sent overseas from India was 1,215, 318. The casualties sustained by these forces were 101,439' (p. 84).

The number of people sent on service overseas from India, till 30 September 1918, was 953,374, plus 42,430 to Britain. Of these, 588,717 were sent to Mesopotamia, 116,159 to Egypt and 131,496 to France. Other theatres where Indian troops went were East Africa (46,936), Gallipoli (4,428), Salonica (4,938), Aden (20,243) and the Persian Gulf (29,457) (p. 87). As compared to nearly a million Indian troops sent to these theatres, only a quarter million British troops were dispatched there. The grand total of casualties was as follows: deaths, 29,762; wounded, 59,296; missing, 3,289; prisoners, 7,459; presumed prisoners, 1,633. The maximum deaths occurred in Mesopotamia where 14,742 soldiers died (pp. 87–88).

Indians contributed generously to the war efforts. Table 1 sums up the Indian financial contribution to the war.

The table shows that India provided Rs 457 crore or about £305 million to the war effort at the time. The contributions made were in the nature of military expenditure for five years, financial contribution to the British treasury, including Indian war loans, payment of interest on war loans, and contributions to various war funds, etc. As the author points out, this contribution was made by an impoverished country, the majority of whose population did not know what a full meal meant (p. 70). At the time, of the total population of 315 million, only 240,000 were assessed for income tax, that is, those who had annual income of Rs 1,000 or more. Only 40,000 of those taxed had an annual income of over 5,000 rupees. Yet, the poor people gave willingly their lifetime savings for the war.

**Table I** Indian Contribution to First World War

	<i>Rupees</i>	<i>Pound Sterling</i>
Military Expenditure for 5 years	2,000,000,000	133,333,333
Indian war loans to the British treasury	1,500,000,000	100,000,000
Interest on war loans and British war debt	200,000,000	13,333,333
Contributions to various war funds and war gifts by the princes and people of India	200,000,000	13,333,333
Total	3,900,000,000	260,000,000
Add to this...	6,750,000,000	45,000,000
The proposed contribution of £45 million		
Total	4,575,000,000	305,000,000

*Source:* Abridged from Bhargava (1919, p. 70).

The princes of India, whose existence depended upon being in the good books of British rulers, made significant contributions to the war effort. Indian native states occupied about 600,000 square miles (sq m) of the total 1,766,442 sq m of the British Indian Empire. Native states had a population of 66 million of the total 315 million population of India. The loyal princes rose to the occasion by coming forward to help the British with men, money and material. Even before the First World War, many princes had sent troops to fight in various theatres of British wars, including China, South Africa and Somaliland. Therefore, it was not surprising that they would offer unconditional help to the British crown during the First World War. The author notes, 'The ruling chiefs vied with each other as who comes forward with the greatest offer of help to his sovereign lord, the king' (p. 38). The Nizam of Hyderabad put all his resources at the disposal of the king (p. 38). The Maharaja of Mysore gave Rs 50 lakh towards the Indian war fund (p. 39). The Maharaja of Scindia gave to the government an interest-free loan of Rs 50 lakh. There were numerous other contributions in cash and kind made by the Indian princes (p. 53). The author notes that in contrast to the huge contribution that the poor and rich of India made to the British war effort, the other dominions of the empire had to take loans worth £154 million from the British treasury for their own war efforts (p. 71).

The Indian population had to bear enormous indirect costs of the war. Inflation went up and agriculture suffered as many young people went away on war duty. The price of wheat went up to 5 seers per rupee, which was three times that in pre-war years. Large numbers of women were widowed and children orphaned as their husbands and fathers were killed on the battlefield. In a strictly regimented society like that of India, widowhood was a social curse. Women also took to knitting and sewing to supply clothing to troops fighting on the war frontiers. They tended for the wounded soldiers in numerous hospitals that were set up in the country and provided linen, bedding and other relief materials to hospitals in far-flung places like Alexandria. The British queen herself acknowledged the 'charity and compassion of Indian women' shown in the war (p. 212).

Industrial production also suffered. Restrictions were placed on the use of rail transport by ordinary people. In 1918, an influenza epidemic broke out in the country claiming millions of lives in a country that was already groaning under the weight of the war effort. Yet, most people bore these sufferings with grace and without complaining.

What were the implications of the war for India? The author states that the war raised the status of India as it came to be regarded as an 'equal partner, in some respects at least, in the British Empire' (p. 372). For the first time in the history of British India, the Secretary of State of India attended the Imperial War conference in January 1917. Significantly, he was assisted by three Indians—the Maharajas of Patiala and Bikaner and Lord S.P. Sinha. (pp. 372–73). These representatives were nominated by the government. The Indians who attended the conference were essentially loyal servants of His Majesty's government.

The war gave rise to expectations of self-governance among nationalist leaders. During the war years, a number of important developments concerning India's governance structures took place. The British Cabinet, on 20 August 1917, made a historic declaration setting out the goal of British government in India, and the subsequent proposals were contained in Montague–Chelmsford report (p. 235). The Indian National Congress adopted a resolution in December 1918 calling for the setting up of 'complete responsible government in India' having full control over foreign policy, and a status in the League of Nations equal to any 'self governing dominions.'

The official account of India's contribution is given in a Government of India report, titled *India's Contribution to the Great War*, in 1923. It gives a detailed description of India's contribution in terms of men, material and money. It discusses the contribution to the war of the Imperial Service Troops, the Indian Defence Force and the Royal Indian Marine. Two of the chapters deal with the direct impact of India's efforts on the conduct of the war and indirect implications on its national development. It lists the measures taken by the government to improve the position of the Indian soldiers during the war years.

According to the report, there was a great deal of support for the British Government when the war broke out and 'the whole country rallied to the king/emperor'. The German efforts to instigate revolt in India did not succeed. On 25 August 1914, the first division of Indian corps sailed for France. On 7 September, Lord Harding, the Viceroy, sent a telegram to the Secretary of State in which he gave an account of how the various princes had begun 'expressing loyalty and desire to serve government either in the field or by cooperation in India' (p. 64). After the despatch of Indian expeditionary force to France, the troops were also sent to East Africa for the 'protection of Zanzibar and the Mombassa–Nairobi railway, and an infantry brigade to the head of the Persian Gulf'

(p. 75). By the end of 1914, six expeditionary forces had been despatched overseas. Additionally, '32 regular British battalions and the bulk of the regular horse, field and heavy batteries were sent to England' (pp. 76–77). According to the report, the total number of 'men, animals and stores despatched from Indian ports from the outbreak of war up to November 1918 were (p. 78):

Personnel	1,302,394
Animals	172,815
Supplies and Stores (tonnes)	3,691,836

A massive recruitment effort was launched in the country to support the war. The strength of the Indian Army at the beginning of the war was 2,39,561 (p. 79). Up to 31 December 1919, 8,77,068 combatants and 563,369 non-combatants, making a total of 1,440,437, were recruited in India (p. 79). During the same period, the total number of animals sent overseas amounted to 184,350 (p. 80). The chapter includes a number of tables indicating how recruitment was done in different parts of India. Medical personnel were sourced from Indian Medical Service, Indian medical department, private practitioners and other medical establishments (p. 84).

Various mechanical transport units were raised during the war. Personnel from the Indian railways were recruited for military duty. Indian labourers were sent to numerous theatres of war (pp. 90–91). A number of veterinary personnel, employees of the Indian post office, ordinance services, etc., were sent abroad to various war theatres. The report notes that 'during the 150 years of its existence, the Indian army had taken no part in a European War'. Yet, a massive effort was made during the First World War to send over a million combatants and non-combatants to various war theatres. This was a major and unprecedented effort.

India's contribution in material was no less significant than that in men. Chapter 3 of the report provides fascinating details of how a massive industrial effort was organized in India to relieve Britain of conducting war in multiple theatres. The Indian Munitions Board (IMB) was set up to supply large quantity of material to Mesopotamia, East Africa and other theatres of war (p.105). The IMB became the nodal point for collecting all ordinance, clothing, hides and leather manufacturing, among others. It even controlled the products of Tata Iron and Steel works at Jamshedpur, the entire cement manufacture, ship repairs, etc (p. 106). By the end of September 1918, materials worth 18 million were supplied to the

various fronts (p. 107). Before the Indian Munitions Board came into action, the Railway Board had coordinated the war effort. Various tables in the chapter give detailed data on the production of ordinance, hide and leather, tents, jute goods, river craft, timber engineering plants and stores, steel, etc. A large amount of medical equipment and material was also produced in India. The Central Research Institute, Kasauli, and Bombay Bacteriological laboratory, Parel, produced a variety of vaccines, including the plague vaccine (p. 136). A Central Mechanical Transport Stores Depot was formed in Rawalpindi for procuring available mechanical stores in India (p. 138). Huge quantities of foodstuff were despatched from India during the war years. The wheat was procured and supplied even to Britain to relive food shortages there. Nearly 5 million tonnes of various food stuff costing 40 million were supplied to Britain (p. 146).

Chapter 4 of the report provides a detailed account of India's financial contribution to the war. The report notes that India's annual revenue had averaged about 106 million from land revenue, excise in customs, railways, irrigation, forests, and a small income tax on non-agricultural incomes (p. 154). At the beginning of 1917, India offered 100 million as a special contribution for war expenses to the British government (p. 156). Of this, nearly 75 million was raised by 1917–18 (p. 156). British Prime Minister Lloyd George expressed his 'most sincere gratitude for the magnificent contribution which India...made to financing the war' (p. 158). The contribution made from Indian revenues amounted to 146.2 million by the end of 1919–20 (p. 160). Apart from direct contributions, there were several additional charges which the Indian government had to bear on account of the prevailing war conditions. For instance, the government had to take additional measures for the protection of the North West Frontier. Measures were also taken to protect sea coasts and ports, and internal defence. Free rations were granted to all ranks with effect from 1 January 1917, costing about 400,000 a year. These measures cost additional money to the exchequer.

The Government of India report recognizes that Indian contributions were of great value despite the fact that India was a poor and backward country (p. 166). Apart from these direct contributions, the ruling chiefs made a wide range of gifts, including aeroplanes, tanks, ambulances, mechanical transport, medical supplies, and motorboats and launches, costing hundreds of millions of pound sterling. These contributions have been noted by Bhargava also. The Indian people contributed huge sums to the Imperial Indian Relief Fund and various other funds launched in

the country during the war years (p. 168). The report notes that retired Indian military personnel contributed income derived from the grants of lands which were given to them for military service (p. 169). Indian princes also contributed by way of putting their troops at the disposal of the government. There had been a tradition in the country that the ruling princes would send their troops for British expeditions. Chapter 6 of the report has a detailed account of the contribution made by the princes.

#### IMPLICATIONS OF THE FIRST WORLD WAR FOR INDIA

Ellinwood and Pradhan's *India and World War I*, published in 1978, is a major work on the subject. It relies to a fair extent on the data provided in the Government of India report discussed above. It examines the different aspects of India's involvement with First World War. Its main focus is to understand: (i) Indian involvement in the world; and (ii) the impact of the war on India during the war years. The editors note that serious economic and social changes were initiated in India as a result of the war (p. 9). The Indian military also underwent significant changes, including rapid expansion. These changes included the greater use of technology in the military, decline of the cavalry, rationalization of supplies, etc. (p. 12). Political life too changed significantly. The British government acknowledged India's contribution by inviting Indians to the Imperial War Conference by coming out with the 1917 Montague Declaration and by granting the King's Commission to Indians (p. 12). The British government made a number of changes in the political configuration but for most Indian political figures, these were insufficient (p. 13). The war speeded up the Indian desire for greater share in governance.

The re-organization of the army, which took place in 1922–23, set the tone for modernization of the Indian military (p. 14). The war-time economic impact has also been studied in the book. The steel industry expanded significantly in India. Some sections of Indian business class made huge profits, while others suffered.

One of the most important consequences of the war was the announcement, in August 1917, of the British policy aimed at the 'increasing association of Indian in every branch of the administration, and the gradual development of self-governing institutions, with a view to the progressive realization of responsible government in India as an integral part of the British empire' (p. 19). The British were guided by another factor, namely, to augment their relatively small presence in India to deal with the burgeoning issues. The British wanted to avoid



civil disorder in the country. Therefore, they looked for those who could collaborate with them in running the country. The empire came to the conclusion that without Indian collaboration in the non-European army, in the administration and judicial services, in the modern professions, in the municipalities, it would be difficult to perpetuate the Raj (p. 25). The First World War had further weakened the British presence in the subcontinent and many Britishers were sent on duty abroad. This was the background against which the 1917 Montague Declaration was made (p. 26).

Judith M. Brown, in her essay on 'War & the Relationship between India & Britain' during 1914–18, concludes:

...however, in responding to the challenge of war, the 'raj' started the process of adaptation which finally broke the imperial bonds tying India to Britain. The Montague Declaration helped to stabilise the Iraq in 1917 but it pointed the way to an independent sub-continent. (p. 43)

What was the shape of Indian Army at the time when the war broke out and what changes were brought about after the First World War? These aspects are discussed in an article by S.D. Pradhan (pp. 49–67). Based on official reports and correspondence, the author points out that in 1914 there were 118 regiments (1,28,854) in the Indian Army. Of these, the cavalry consisted of 39 regiments. The army had only 12 batteries of artillery. There were three corps of 5,018 men. The supply corps consisted of 3,858 men. The Indian medical service comprised of two main corps—Army Hospital Corps and Army Bearer Corps. The Remount Service supervised the horses, while the Veterinary Service took care of the British units. In addition to regular troops, there was also a reserved force (33,677 men) and Imperial service troops maintained by the rulers of different Indian states. The author notes that at the time of the First World War, the Indian Army had many shortcomings with respect to organization, training and equipments (pp. 51–53).

Recruitment during the war years was stepped up tremendously. The total strength of the Indian Army was 1,55,423 men, excluding non-combatants numbering 45,660 men. The normal rate of recruitment was 15,000 per year which was considered insufficient. However, up to 31 December 1918, 8,77,068 combatants and 563,366 non-combatants, totalling 1,440,337 men were sent overseas (p. 55). These totalled up to 2,85,037 British and 1,096,013 Indians and British ranks which were

despatched to England from where they proceeded on service. Such massive recruitment required a fundamental change in recruitment policy. Recruitment was opened up for the first time to the so-called 'non-martial' races. This was a major change (p. 56). A War Conference was summoned in Delhi from 27–29 April 1918, to invite cooperation of all classes to the war effort and to discuss measures for the prosecution of the success of war (p. 57). The activities of the Central Recruiting Board were stepped up.

The experience of the First World War showed that the Indian Army was in need of drastic transformation. A Military Council, consisting of Commander-in-Chief, Chief of the General Staff, Adjutant General, Quartermaster General, Financial Adviser and others, was formed to assist the Commander-in-Chief (p. 62). A separate 'Department of Production and Provision' was set up under a civil member of the Military Council. The size of the army headquarters was expanded. New services were included in the army. The infantry was organized on British lines (pp. 62, 63). Some new training centres were established like Staff College, Quetta, Army Signal School, Poona, Royal Tank Corps School, Ahmadnagar, Machine Gun School, Ahmadnagar, and Army School of Education, Wellington (p. 64).

The demand for Indianization of the army picked up after the war. A committee, set up in 1922, made several recommendations for changing the structure of the Indian Army (p. 62). The theory of martial races was buried gradually. Indian soldiers had come out with flying colours in the First World War and were now regarded as good as European soldiers.

The propaganda effort was as crucial as the war effort. During the War, the British rulers exercised strict control over information and opinion. Restrictions were placed on the expression of political views. Newspapers were regulated by a law enacted in 1867. In his article, N. Gerald Barrier discusses the propaganda efforts in during the First World War (p. 73). A chain of censorship offices was set up throughout India (p. 82). The 1915 Defence of India Act expanded the scope of censorship (p. 84). The government was apprehensive that the onset of war might lead to unrest in India which needed to be controlled. The author holds that despite these measures, 'the Indian government had limited experience attempting to influence the public opinion on a large scale' (p. 86). The government also projected Britain's achievement in the war through films like *Britain Prepared* and *The Battle of the Somme*. Several pamphlets were prepared on British participation in the war (p. 87). The propaganda

was also geared to achieve the objective of the massive recruitment for the war that was underway (p. 90). Mass contact programmes were organized by the Central Publicity Board. Audiovisual materials and posters on the recruitment theme were prepared. Special films, titled *Teja Singh Goes to War*, *Teja Singh Becomes a Soldier* or *Making of the Indian Soldier from Raw Recruit to VC*, were shown in the villages (p. 93). The Central Board also provided funds to local bodies for local propaganda (p. 95). The German emperor was portrayed as the 'Ravana' (p. 96). Public holidays were declared on the days allied forces won a battle (p. 99). According to the data given by the author, a total of 3.9 million leaflets, 3,30,700 posters, 2,468,900 issues of war journals, and 275 communiqués were produced during the war (p. 101).

Even after the war, the basic machinery set up for propaganda purposes was kept intact (p. 103). New themes of propaganda were taken up during 1919–21, namely, the 'Threat to British Rule' and 'Congress Non-cooperation Campaign' and the 'Muslim Khilafat Movement'. A new bureau—the Central Bureau of Information—was set up to handle relations with the press, monitor public opinion and carry out limited propaganda (p. 105). The British learnt the art of combining repression with propaganda to perpetuate their rule.

The war helped to galvanize Indian revolutionaries who wanted to overthrow the government by militant tactics. Indian revolutionaries saw British involvement in the war as a great opportunity for freeing India from the colonial rule. The Ghadar Movement was organized by Indian residents in North America and East Asia. The aims and weaknesses of Indian revolutionaries are examined by A.C. Bose in his article. The German government, which was fighting the British, began to extend help to Indian revolutionaries. About 4,000 Ghadarites infiltrated into India (p. 111). A Provisional Government of Free India was set up in Kabul on 1 December 1915, with Raja Mahendra Pratap as its President and Maulvi Barkatullah as its Prime Minister (p. 111). Yet, their efforts to overthrow the Raj went in vain due to their small numbers, insufficient resources, narrow social base, lack of support from leading political parties or social organizations (p. 112). A large number of Ghadarites were hanged or killed by the government (p. 111). The revolutionaries had notable presence in Europe, North America, Japan, Turkey and in the Indian neighbourhood. Several of these governments were allies of the British. The Germans, who were supporting these revolutionaries, had little understanding of Indian realities (p. 116). Indian revolutionaries

suffered shortcoming of arms, ideologies and organization (p.117) and British intelligence was efficient in cracking down on these leaders and workers (p. 121).

K.G. Saini, in his article, examines the economic aspects of India's participation in the First World War (p. 141). He notes, 'from August 25, 1914 up to November 1918, India sent overseas 1,302,394 combatants and non-combatant personnel, 172,815 animals, and 3,691,836 tonnes of stores & supplies' (p. 143). Contribution in materials included supplies consisting of inland water transport stores, timber, textiles and jute, Tata's rails and fish plates (p. 148). A huge amount of munitions and war stores were supplied by the Indian ordnance factories (p. 149). In the period from 1 April 1917 to 31 October 1918, India sent about 5 million yards of woollen cloth and, from July 1917 to October 1918, about 85 million yards of cotton cloth, 18 million yards of jute cloth and 20 million jute bags (p. 151). The author estimates that 'India's contribution in material to the war effort was at least and probably well above 250 million' (p. 152). This was comparable to the cash contribution of about 305 million. The author holds that the Indian economy was strained due to the war affecting everyday life (p. 162). India's overseas trade suffered drastically during the war years as trade with enemy nations stopped, but there was an expansion of trade with the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan. Industrial activity picked up during the war years as imports were reduced. Cotton, iron and steel, cement, sugar, engineering and chemicals industries expanded (p. 166). After the war, industrial production suffered again as foreign competition affected the Indian industry (p. 166). Production of minerals increased during the war but decreased thereafter (p. 172).

Official historians have maintained that recruitment effort during the war years was smooth. This may not have been the case. A recent article by Aravind Ganachari in the *Economic and Political Weekly* examines the imperial policy of recruitment and awards. The author says that the British tried to use favours to buy loyalties of Indians in the recruitment effort. The Indian political leaders, particularly Tilak and Gandhi, were divided on the question of recruitment. While Tilak offered a conditional support for recruitment, Gandhi extended full-hearted support. Indian loyalists were rewarded by lavish distribution of titles (p. 779). Nearly 60,000 men from Bombay Presidency participated in early stages of war (p. 781). From 1917 onwards, Bombay Presidency was given a monthly quota of 4,000 recruits which was increased to 6,000 recruits later (p. 781). This

quota was not fulfilled. During the Imperial War Conference held in New Delhi on 27–28 April 1918, attended by M.K. Gandhi, leaders like B.G. Tilak, Annie Besant, and the Ali brothers were excluded despite protest from M.K. Gandhi. The list of invitees included numerous princes as well as prominent people like Dorabji Tata, Purushottamdas and Thakurdas, N.B. Sokletwalla and M.A. Jinnah. It was decided to recruit and train an additional 5,00,000 combatants within the year.

The limited material available and reviewed in this essay brings out the enormous contribution that India made, mostly willingly, to the British war effort. Unfortunately, the present generation knows little about this. It is imperative on Indians to research and study their history from their own perspectives and disseminate new information. The First World War (and indeed the Second World War) has not been researched enough. Few people in the West, and even fewer in India, know about the Indian contribution to the Great War. India's contribution to the First World War, no mean feat, must be included in school textbooks.

It is doubtful whether Britain, the richest country in the world then, would have won the First World War without the help in men and material rendered by India, one of the poorest countries in the world at that time. Few people, even in India, realize the sheer size and scale of the contribution their forefathers made to their colonial master's war effort. The Indian contribution was far in excess of the contributions made by British dominions like Australia, Canada and New Zealand. As we commemorate the 100th anniversary year of the First World War, it is well to remember what Indian people did for Britain voluntarily and selflessly. The world at large should also know and recognize this.