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Commemoration, Cult of the Fallen (India)

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The betrayal of popular political aspirations by the colonial state, followed by severe repression, resulted in the “Punjab Uprising” and the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. Unfolding political events overshadowed the end of the Great War, and commemoration found little space outside official or military narratives. Post-independence and partition, the war was seen as an event belonging to India’s colonial past with little relevance to the history and ideals of the new Republic. It was not until the global centenary that remembrance and commemoration, driven in part by diaspora communities, once again entered the public discourse in India.

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Introduction

Despite its strong and deeply entrenched military institutions, modern India had not developed a unique culture or language of commemoration either in the period prior to independence, or after it.^[1] However, commemorative practice was not unknown in ancient and medieval India, as evidenced by the existence of funerary “hero stones”, prevalent since antiquity in many parts of the country, and, in monumental form, by *Jaya-stambhas* (victory pillars) or the more commonly found *chhatra*, or elevated dome, that served to mark cremation sites. Research on the origin and significance of the “hero stones” has shown that the hero-cult and the philosophy underlying the process of commemoration are deeply rooted in ancient Indian literature and history.^[2] The highest form of commemoration, though, was through literary works, or epics, that bore the panegyric of a king’s material achievements.^[3] While indigenous commemorative practice declined with the loss of political autonomy following colonial subjugation, the literary or poetic tradition of commemoration survived into the period of the Great War, particularly in areas where local forms of state patronage still held sway. The Rajput aristocrat, Thakur Amar Singh (1878-1942)^[4], one of the few Indians to hold a King’s Commission at the time, noted the necessity of bringing *Charans* (hereditary poet-historians) from Jodhpur State to the Western Front to see for themselves the conditions that the Indian soldiers had to endure so that they may accurately record them as a memorial for future generations:

Poetry is the best form in which records ought to be kept. It is only through this means that the great deeds of our heroes from the most ancient times have been kept... Formerly our ancestors had no wide scope. Cabul [Kabul, Afghanistan] was the farthest they ever had their troops to; but now we have got the first chance to come to Europe and are fighting on the part where many and many a time before the fiercest European struggles have taken place and we are missing the chance of immortalising our deeds however poor they may be...^[5]

One such bardic composition is “Dalpat Raaso” which commemorates the valour of Major Thakur Dalpat Singh, MC, (1892-1918) who was killed in action at the head of the Jodhpur Lancers during the Battle of Haifa in September 1918. Yet, by and large, commemorative practice in India may be seen as a modern innovation introduced during the colonial era.

Indian Contribution and the Politics of Commemoration

India’s participation in the Great War took place amidst a growing nationalist movement with its attendant political aspirations. The substantial Indian contribution to the war effort^[6] gave rise to the expectation that the country’s long-standing goal of political autonomy would finally be met.^[7]

However, the dichotomies inherent in the ideologies of the British Raj were based on deeply ingrained notions of racial difference and ensured that Indian demands for responsible government were left unfulfilled.^[8] The outbreak of the war had been greeted with widespread expressions of loyalty and mass support for the war effort, which, though not universal, took even the colonial administrators by surprise. Yet, instead of the expected reward of political concessions, the Raj

reacted with a series of reactionary measures that led to the “Punjab Uprising” of 1919, with the fateful climax of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in April of that year. This set the stage for the Indian freedom struggle that saw its denouement in 1947 with the end of the colonial state and the independence and partition of the subcontinent.^[9]

Compensation as Commemoration

With growing political discontent and the launch of the non-cooperation movement in August 1920, it was perhaps not unsurprising there was little demand from civil society, or the relatives of soldiers who had died during the war, for memorials or symbols of commemoration. The end of the war was greeted with carefully orchestrated official celebrations where the emphasis was on political reward rather than remembrance. In the Punjab, where state pressures on the populace for military recruits had begun to border on coercion by the middle of 1918, Sir Michael O'Dwyer (1864-1940),^[10] the autocratic Lieutenant-Governor, organised “Victory Durbars” where those among the rural-military elites who had contributed to the “glorious result” of four years labour, were duly rewarded.^[11] These rewards included the grant of 420,000 acres of land distributed among 5,902 soldiers, a monthly cash allowance called a *Jangi Inam* (war reward) payable to two generations, *Jagirs* (proprietary land grants yielding a fixed annual income or assignment of land revenue), and honorary King's Commissions to select Viceroy's Commissioned Officers, among others.^[12]

The colonial state did not create any narrative space for national mourning for its native subjects. In contrast, there were strict orders governing the annual ceremonial observance of Armistice Day on 11 November by British (European) troops. Church bells were to toll in cantonments at 1055 hours, followed by a two-minute silence, the commencement and termination of which was signalled by the firing of a gun. These orders were repeated annually.^[13] No such orders were issued for official ceremonies to be conducted in regimental mosques, temples or *gurdwaras*, although Indian regiments did commemorate certain Great War-related “battle honour” days.^[14]

The Raj instead provided official acknowledgement of the Indian war effort by publicly rewarding those who had helped in that effort both on the home and the war fronts. The machinery that had been created to systematise the increased provision of military manpower for the war effort, the Recruiting Board, was transformed post-bellum into the Indian Soldiers Board. Established in January 1919 to deal with problems that could arise out of the termination of the war and the demobilisation of soldiers, its charter of duties included, inter alia: “Rewarding officers and men of the Indian Army for distinguished service during the war”, as well as “Commemoration of the exploits of the Indian Army”.^[15] In the absence of any formal rituals of commemoration, the former aspect served the dual purpose of state acknowledgement as well as public recognition of war service both at the individual as well as community level. Moreover, by reducing remembrance to reward and limiting commemoration to paternalistic patronage, the Raj was able to justify and perpetuate its self-defined notions of Indian “difference” in larger social and political spheres as well.

War Memorials

In order to mollify public opinion in the face of mounting nationalist sentiments, the Indian Soldiers Board, which had as its primary objective the welfare of enlisted and discharged soldiers, as well as the dependants of those who had died, was tasked to erect a number of memorials “in order to commemorate the achievements of the Indian Army and to pay tribute to the memory of the brave men who have fallen.” The Board proposed to undertake this by erecting an “Imperial memorial” in Delhi, and by setting up other memorials to commemorate the exploits of Indian troops in battle, in each of the five principal theatres of war in which they had served. In addition, war commemoration tablets were to be presented to all villages in India that had supplied a large number of *fighting men* for the army.^[16] No such tablets were proposed for villages that had supplied men for the numerous non-combatant labour corps. In discharging its “imperial” obligations, the Board worked in conjunction with the Imperial War Graves Commission (IWGC) which undertook the design and construction of the All India War Memorial, now universally known as “India Gate”, in the heart of New Delhi.^[17]

Designed by the architect of New Delhi, Sir Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944), the monument was unveiled by the Viceroy, Lord Irwin (1881-1959), on 12 February 1931. Located in the heart of the new imperial capital along the processional axis of King’s Way (now Raj Path), the Memorial has provided a focus for civic commemoration ever since. The addition of the Amar Jawan Jyoti (eternal flame of the immortal soldier) following the Indo-Pak conflict in December 1971 has imbued the site with new meaning.

India Gate

Lutyens, who was also responsible for designing over ninety war memorials including the iconic Cenotaph in Whitehall and the evocative Thiepval memorial on the [Somme](#), conveyed the same simple yet solemn grandeur in the towering 138-foot high memorial arch. India Gate commemorates the over 74,000 personnel from undivided India who died in the First World War as well as those that fell in operations on or beyond the North-West Frontier and in the Third Afghan War in 1919.

However, only 13,516 names of the latter are inscribed on it.^[18] A short distance to the east of the arch, Lutyens raised the King George V Memorial in 1936. The architectural historian Philip Davies described these monuments as:

Examples of architecture and public sculpture used for political ends, the Arch and the Memorial were intended to be emotive unifying symbols; one a testimony to the blood ties which linked Britain and India in perpetual fraternity, the other investing the concept of Imperial dominion with the mystical qualities of kingship. Today the radiating rays of the Imperial suns carved beneath the cornice of the Arch demonstrate that the stones which commemorate power are a more durable medium than power itself. Indeed from under Lutyens's great Moghul-Renaissance canopy the statue of George V has been removed, and it frames only thin air.^[19]

Theatre Memorials

The original intention to make separate memorials for the Indian army in the five major theatres of war was shelved following the decision of the Battle Exploits Memorial Committee at the War Office in London to erect “general memorials” in [France](#) and Flanders (at Ypres), [Gallipoli](#), [Egypt](#) (at Port Tewfik, Suez), Mesopotamia (at Baghdad), and [East Africa](#) (at Nairobi).^[20] The government of India allowed the Indian contribution to be subsumed by the larger whole, with the exception of the Western Front. Here, near the spot where the Indian Corps had suffered its heaviest [casualties](#), an individual Indian Memorial was constructed at Neuve Chapelle. This served the dual purpose of a “battle exploit” memorial as well as a memorial to those missing. The term “missing” was generally applied to those fallen in the war who had no known grave. In the case of the Indian dead, this technically applied to the numerous Sikh and Hindu soldiers whose remains had been cremated in accordance with their faith, as well as those of all faiths whose remains were never recovered on the battlefields.

Despite professions to the contrary, the treatment meted out to the commemoration of the Indian war dead was discriminatory as compared to that accorded to the fallen soldiers of [Britain](#) and the white dominions. Grave Registration Units in key Indian theatres like [Mesopotamia](#) did not keep a record of Indian graves which were often left unmarked and deemed “unmaintainable”. Military experts opined that “the marking of individual graves is not considered of importance by the Indian” and a central memorial was therefore “the only satisfactory way of dealing with the situation”. To support this view the British representative of the Anglo Egyptian War Cemeteries Executive Committee opined that it “would be a myth to suppose that any Indians will make the voyage to Egypt or Palestine for the purpose of visiting the grave of a deceased relative”. The IWGC were accordingly directed that in every case white officers and other ranks along with “native” officers would be commemorated by name, while Indian other ranks would simply be recorded by number of casualties per regiment.^[21] The same report suggested that if a monument did not commend itself, a building “to act as an institution of some sort ... which would be of permanent use to Indian troops...” might be considered instead. The latter suggestion represented a view widespread among the British Indian officer class.^[22] However, in Europe, “where the memorials will be seen by many visitors” and the number of Indian names was not so great, it was decided that the Indian rank and file were to be commemorated by name.^[23] The political agenda behind such views, though unstated, was clear. In areas of high visibility, the [Empire](#), and the liberal ideals it espoused, must be represented in the commemorative structures built to honour those who had died to uphold them. In the backwaters, native lives, and native deaths, mattered less.

When an Indian officer subsequently pointed out that whilst the Indian memorial in Europe was visited only by a small number of wealthy Indians, the sites in Palestine and Iraq were annually visited by thousands of Indian pilgrims,^[24] his suggestions for a more befitting memorial were dismissed by the Army Department.^[25]

Village Memorial Tablets

By far the most widespread public commemoration of the war was the erection of memorial tablets in towns and villages that had contributed a significant number of men to the war effort. The exact number of the tablets that were installed in the country is not certain. Although the initial intent was to have 500 of them, other sources indicate different figures.^[26] In order to arrive at a figure for the number of tablets to be provided to each province, it was decided to first fix the number to be given to the Punjab, the wellspring of the Indian military labour market. The allotment for the other provinces was then calculated based upon the ratio, which the number of recruits sent to the army by each province bore to the Punjab numbers.^[27] Each province was then asked to confirm if they were satisfied with the number of tablets allotted. An increase in allotment could be asked for “if considered absolutely necessary”.^[28] The official rationale for this undertaking was laid down in Army Instructions and aimed at attaining a two-fold purpose in which commemoration of loss was secondary to an acknowledgement of loyalty and support.^[29] By focusing on rural commemoration, the Raj was able to further strengthen its ties with the rural-military elite that it had so assiduously cultivated and which it hoped to build as a bulwark against the rising tide of urban-fuelled [nationalism](#).

Centenary Commemoration

There were of course many other Great War memorials constructed in different parts of undivided India, ranging from the great urban centres of Calcutta, Bombay, Karachi and Madras, to the then remote corners of northeast India. Yet after independence these remained largely forgotten, until the centenary of the Great War generated interest in India’s role in the conflict and gave fresh impetus to commemoration in India and abroad. The United Service Institution of India took the lead and spearheaded the “India and the Great War” centenary commemoration project along with the Government of India, Ministry of External Affairs, which supported the project as a public diplomacy initiative. For the first time, official acknowledgement of India’s significant role in the conflict was forthcoming at the highest levels of government from the president of India down.

Indian diaspora communities also acted as drivers for commemorative activities in different parts of the world. This followed a trend set a century earlier, when an Indian War Memorial Committee was formed in [South Africa](#) to erect a memorial to those who had lost their lives while serving in the South African Indian Bearer Corps during the Great War.^[30] When the memorial was delayed, one of the reasons advanced for early completion was the perceived need to inform Europeans of the services rendered by the Indian community (in South Africa) in the service of the empire and as a means thereby of demanding greater respect and desegregation.^[31] The Chhatri Memorial on the Brighton Downs and the Muslim Memorial Peace Garden at Woking in the United Kingdom, today serve to provide both a focus for commemoration by British South Asian diaspora communities, as well as a means of integration into the host society.

Conclusion

During the British Raj, commemoration in the Indian context played second fiddle to the need for imperial spectacle. In keeping with the widely held colonial belief of Indian “difference”, utilitarian rather than abstract or symbolic methods of commemoration were advocated by many who claimed to know the sepoy best. These paternalistic attitudes towards commemoration persisted till the end of the Raj. Writing on the subject of an Indian war memorial in 1943, an officer using the *nom de plume* “Pyen Dua” (a play on the Punjabi “paindua” or rural rustic) suggested that “while military memorials such as quarter guard gongs, tablets and memorial towers were all very well”, they were inadequate in their purpose, which, in his opinion, was best served by providing education to the wards of soldiers, with a special emphasis on educating girls, in order to transform society.^[32] Neither the writer, nor any of the officers who subsequently supported the suggestion, felt the need to acknowledge that Indians might need memorials that could also serve as sites for public commemoration or private mourning in the manner as they did in Europe and other parts of the world.^[33] The prevailing sentiment was summed up by a later writer, who advocated an educational war memorial fund that would amount to the raising of “a memorial which will never die” instead of “a few blocks of tortured marble at which the Sepoy, who cannot read, gazes with lack-lustre eye.”^[34]

Shashi Tharoor, the author and politician, aptly sums up the reasons for a lack of commemoration of the sacrifices of Indian soldiers during the Great War. In an essay where he blames colonial perfidy for making them the orphans of history in their own country, he concludes that the “rethink” caused by the centenary has finally begun the long overdue process of their rehabilitation.^[35]

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Notes

1. ↑ The term most commonly used to describe the fallen is *shahid* (Urdu/Arabic for one who lays down his life for a cause). Its counterpart in English usage is “martyr”.
2. ↑ Settar, S. / Sontheimer, Gunther D., (eds.): Memorial Stones. A study of their origin, significance and variety, Dharwad 1982, p. vii. See also Aiyer, E.S.: Vardaraja: Ancient Tamilian Warfare, in: Journal of Oriental Research, Madras, Vol XIII (1939), pp. 228-229.
3. ↑ Krishnamoorthy, K.: Hero Death. Commemoration as reflected in Sanskrit Literature – A Study, in: Settar, S., and Sontheimer, Gunther D. (ed.): Memorial Stones, 1982, pp. 9-16.
4. ↑ Thakur of Kanota; Captain, Indian Army; Major General, Jaipur State Forces.

5. † Ellinwood, Dewitt C.: *Between Two Worlds. A Rajput Officer in the Indian Army 1905-21*, Maryland 2005, pp. 396-397.
6. † For details regarding manpower, material, and financial support, and an official view of the Indian contribution, see: Government of India: *India's Contribution to the Great War*, Calcutta 1923, and Leigh, M.S.: *The Punjab and the War*, Lahore 1922. For an Indian nationalist perspective see: Sundaram, Lanka: *A Century of Unequal Imposts for an Army of Occupation and a Mercenary Army*, Bombay 1946.
7. † Guoqi, Xu: *Asia and the Great War: A Shared History*, Oxford 2017, pp. 77-85.
8. † For an examination of ideological notions of "difference", see: Metcalf, Thomas R.: *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge 1995.
9. † Wilson, Jon: *India Conquered. Britain's Raj and the Passions of Empire*, London et al. 2016, p. 398. For the political developments of the period from an Indian nationalist perspective, see Chandra, Bipin: *India's struggle for Independence*, New Delhi 1989.
10. † Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab 1912-1919. He was assassinated at Caxton Hall in London by an Indian revolutionary named [Udham Singh \(1899-1940\)](#) for his role in the 1919 Jallianwala Bagh massacre.
11. † Leigh, *The Punjab and the War*, 1922, pp. 282-283.
12. † Prasad, Bisheshwar (ed.): *Monograph's A.G.'s Branch. Honours and Awards*, Delhi 1950, p. 1.
13. † For an example see India Army Order (IAO) 553/1934.
14. † For instance, 2nd Lancers annually celebrated Cambrai Day (Sandhu, Gurbachan Singh: *The Indian Cavalry. History of the Indian Armoured Corps*, vol. 1., New Delhi 1981, p. 434) as did Hodson's Horse; whilst the Deccan Horse and 61st Cavalry celebrate 23rd September as Jordan Valley and Haifa Day, respectively (Cavalry Officers Association: *Valour, Honour, Tradition. Vignettes of the Indian Armoured Corps 1773-2005*, Delhi 2006, pp. 45, 95).
15. † Government of India, *India's Contribution*, 1923, pp. 248-249. This reproduces an official report dated 10 September 1919, produced for circulation among members of the Imperial Legislative Council, titled: *A Brief Account of the Work of the Indian Soldiers Board* (British Library IOR. L/MIL/17/5/2317).
16. † *Ibid.*, pp. 258. See also The National Archives (henceforth TNA). F. No. WO 32/5878: *Erection of Memorials in France to the Indian units*.
17. † Now the Commonwealth War Graves Commission (henceforth CWGC).
18. † Official: *The Registers of the Names inscribed on the Delhi and Shillong Memorials*, India, vol. 41, London 1931, p. 5.
19. † Davies, Philip: *Splendours of the Raj. British Architecture in India 1660-1947*, Middlesex et al. 1987, pp. 233-235. See also Metcalf, Thomas R.: *Dulce et Decorum Est*, in: *Outlook*, 31 (March 2014). Available online: <http://www.outlookindia.com/magazine/story/dulce-et-decorum-est/289882> (retrieved: 13 March 2017).
20. † TNA. WO 32/5878. DO letter no. 717-S dated 26 June 1919, from AH Bingley to Lt Gen Sir HV Cox, Military Secretary, India Office. See also IWGC letter No. 8/C/302/S.1 dated 14 March 1922 from the Principal Assistant Secretary IWGC to Secretary, India Office, in CWGC File No. 1/1/9/D/WG 861.
21. † CWGC F. No. WG 909/5, and CWGC F. No. WG 219/16 part. 1.
22. † See footnote 34 below.

23. ↑ CWGC F. No. WG 219/16 pt. 1.
24. ↑ CWGC F. No. WG 909/5.
25. ↑ CWGC F. No. WG 909/5.
26. ↑ The Pioneer Mail, 17 December 1920, p. 17. See also: Hamid, Maj Gen Syed Ali: Great War Village Memorial Tablets in the Punjab, in: Durbar, Journal of the Indian Military Historical Society 33/3 (2016), pp. 115-119.
27. ↑ DSA. Chief Commissioner's Office, Military Department, Part B, F. No. 3/1920. The initial number of tablets allotted were: Madras: 30, Bombay: 24, United Provinces: 94, Punjab: 150, North-West Frontier Province: 15, Bihar and Orissa: 14, Central Provinces: 5, Assam: 5, Ajmer-Merwara: 3, Delhi: 5. Total: 345.
28. ↑ Army Instructions (India) 437/1920. The number of tablets allotted herein to each province were: Punjab: 150, United Provinces: 102, Madras: 30, Rajputana: 27, Bombay: 24, North-West Frontier Province: 15, Bihar and Orissa: 14, Kashmir: 10, Assam: 4, Delhi: 4, Hyderabad: 4, Central Provinces: 4, Mysore: 2. Total: 390. This number was further slightly modified based on feedback received from the provinces.
29. ↑ Ibid.
30. ↑ Indian Opinion, 1 Mar 1929, p. 78.
31. ↑ Indian Opinion, 5 May 1939, p. 175.
32. ↑ This reflected in part the growing post-war aspiration of providing better education to their wards, expressed by Indian soldiers as a result of their wartime exposure.
33. ↑ Dua, Pyen: War Memorials for the Indian Forces, Journal of the United Service Institution of India (henceforth JUSI), April 1943, pp. 205-209. Also, Orr, Maj J.R.: A worthy war memorial, JUSI April 1944, pp. 244-246, and Princep, Col E.S.M.: Education of Indian Soldier's Children, [letter to the editor], JUSI October 1943, pp. 463-464.
34. ↑ Orr, Maj J.R.: A Worthy War Memorial, JUSI April 1944, p. 246.
35. ↑ Tharoor, Shashi: India Shastra. Reflections on the Nation in Our Time, New Delhi 2015, pp. 98-101.

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