India's Sacrifice in the World Wars: The History We Kept Forgetting



News reference: op-ed and reports on the occasion of Remembrance, November 2026 | Mains: GS-I, modern Indian history and world history

Original symbolic image: pcsmantra.com

Why in the News

Understanding the contribution of Indian soldiers in the memory of the World Wars is an important part of modern Indian history. While honouring their sacrifice, it is necessary to distinguish between the politics of colonial rule and the soldiers' own experiences.

Contribution in the First World War

By 1918, the army of undivided (British) India had grown to about 1.4 million, and more than one million Indian military personnel served overseas. The CWGC commemorates about 74,000 Indian military dead of the First World War. These soldiers fought in France, Mesopotamia and other distant fronts.

Contribution in the Second World War

In the Second World War, the Indian Army was the largest volunteer army in history, with more than 2.5 million personnel. The CWGC commemorates about 87,000 Indian military dead of the Second World War. The princely states also sent notable military forces. The Imphal and Kohima front was crucial to the defence of India's mainland.

The Neglect of Remembrance and Its Institutional Basis

The associated op-ed argues that the tension between the memory of India's anti-imperial freedom struggle and the memory of wars fought on the coloniser's side has been the reason for this neglect; even so, the belief that the World Wars were "someone else's war" is entirely at odds with

the facts. War memorials in India and abroad keep soldiers' names, service and sacrifice in public memory. While remembering, it is necessary to understand separately the political aims of British colonial rule and the personal experiences of the soldiers.

Conclusion and the Way Forward

Today's India owes a debt both to honesty towards its history and to honouring the sacrifice of the armed forces' forebears. The memory of the World Wars must be brought into the mainstream of national remembrance. Indian soldiers' contribution to the World Wars should be given its due place in curricula, memorials and official traditions of remembrance.

Prelims Practice Question

Question 1: Consider the following statements about India's contribution in the World Wars:

1. During the First World War, the Indian Army had grown to about 1.4 million by 1918.

2. In the Second World War, the Indian Army was the largest volunteer army in history, with more than 2.5 million personnel.

3. The Imphal and Kohima fronts were related to the defence of India's mainland.

Which of the statements given above is/are correct?

(a) 1 and 2 only

(b) 2 and 3 only

(c) 1 and 3 only

(d) 1, 2 and 3

Answer and Explanation

Answer: (d)

All three statements are correct.

About 74,000 Indian soldiers were killed in the First World War, while the CWGC commemorates about 87,000 Indian military dead of the Second World War.

Mains Practice Question

"India's contribution in the World Wars has been denied justice in both history and remembrance." Comment. (150 words, 10 marks)

Answer Outline

Introduction: Introduce the Remembrance tradition and India's indifference.

Main Body: Figures of military contribution in both wars; the colonial context; the Imphal-Kohima front; the question of remembrance; the soldiers' personal role.

Conclusion: The need for a due place in national remembrance.

Syllabus mapping:General Studies Paper-I: modern Indian history, world historyPrelims: World Wars, history of the Indian Army

Sources

CWGC institutional record

The Hindu - World Wars and India's sacrifice

Times of India - honouring Indian soldiers on Remembrance Sunday

ETV Bharat - honour for First World War martyr Jogendra Nath Sen in Chandannagar

Download the English PDF

PCSMANTRA.COM