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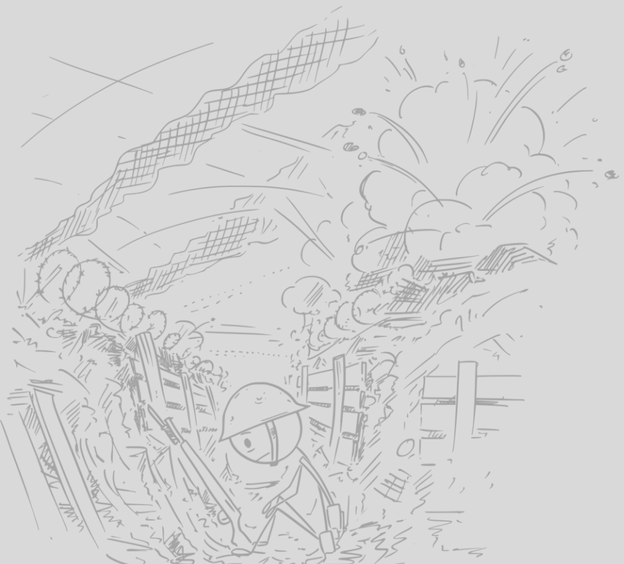
Hindu Contributions to World War 1 and 2



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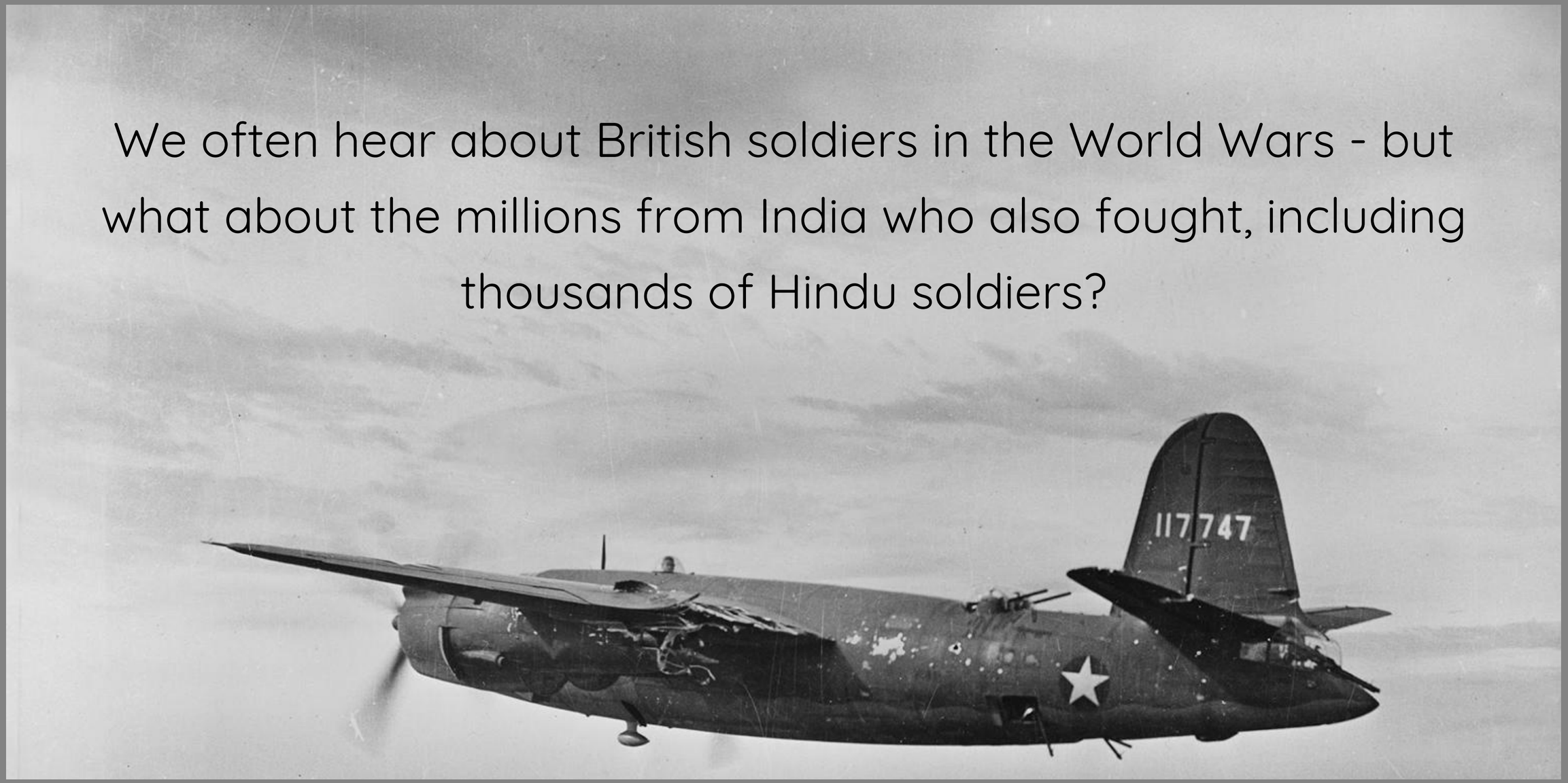
WW1 1914–1918

WW2 1939-1945

We often hear about British soldiers in the World Wars - but what about the millions from India who also fought, including thousands of Hindu soldiers?

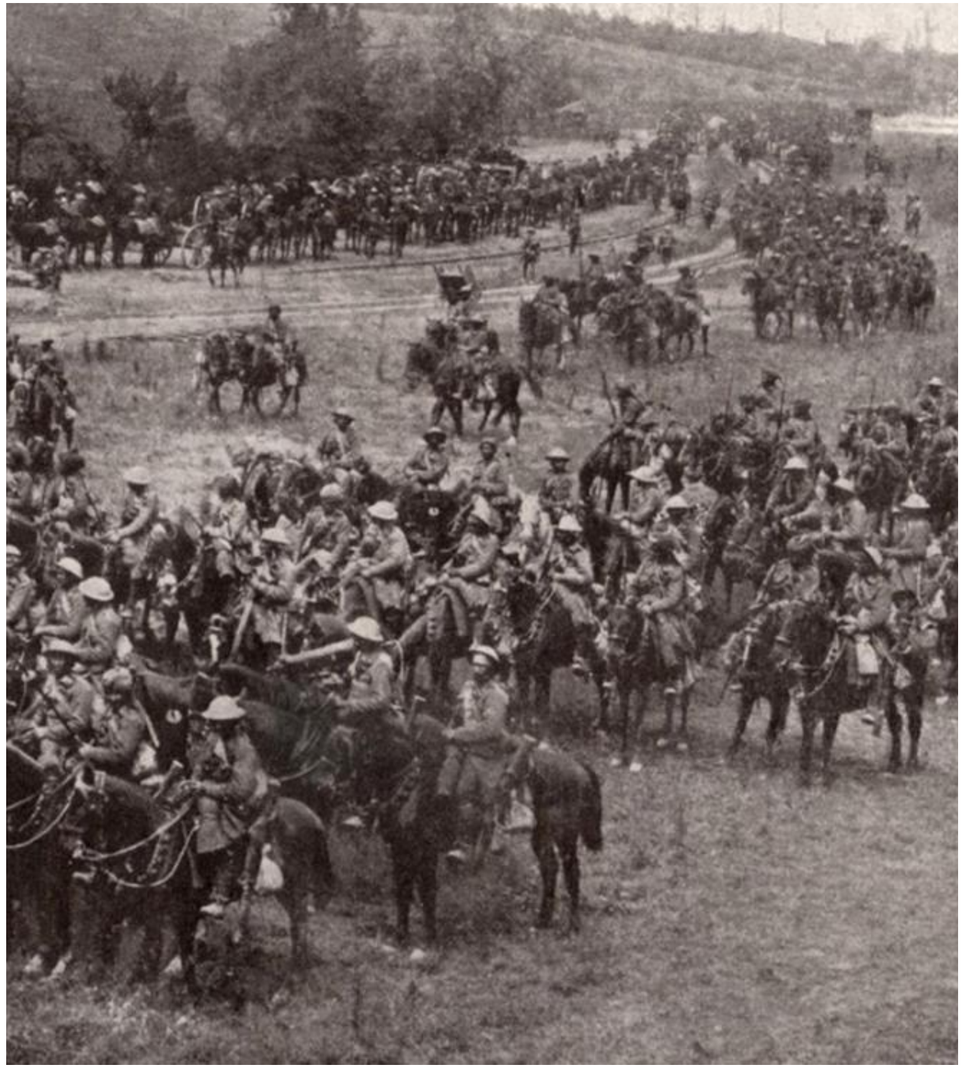


The British Empire

- At the time of both World Wars, India was still a colony of the British Empire.
- The British Government had taken India as a colony in 1858, after the Sepoy (Indian soldiers) rebelled in 1857.
- India became known as the ‘Jewel in the Crown’ of the British Empire because of its resources, population and location.
- Their time in India became known as the British Raj, and Queen Victoria became the Empress of India in 1877.

The British Empire

- When war broke out in 1914, Indian soldiers were recruited to fight on the front lines alongside men from many other British colonies.
- Britain had control of over 25% of the entire world, and around 400 million people.
- Colonial soldiers were incredibly important to the British, and without them, Britain and its allies most likely would not have won the war.
- However, soldiers from India were often treated as inferior to their White counterparts.



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Why did Hindu soldiers fight?

They had several reasons for joining up – but the deepest came from their faith and values.

REASON 1

Economic

Regular pay, pensions and grants of land supported families at a time of great poverty in rural India.

REASON 2

Political

Loyalty to their regiment and the Crown – and the hope that loyal service would earn India the right to rule itself.

THE BIGGEST REASON

Faith and values

Hindu dharma holds freedom, equality and democracy among the highest values. Standing up to tyranny and injustice was a sacred duty.

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Hindu values worth fighting for

Freedom

Hindu thought prizes freedom of the soul, of thought and of worship.

Equality

The same Atman (soul) lives in every being. The wise “see with an equal eye” all living beings – Bhagavad Gita 5.18.

Democracy

“Meet together, speak together, let your minds be in harmony” – Rig Veda 10.191. Vedic sabha and samiti were assemblies for shared decisions.

Dharma – righteous duty

Krishna teaches Arjuna that standing up against injustice is a sacred duty – Bhagavad Gita 2.31–33.

These beliefs gave Hindu soldiers a moral reason to fight: to defend freedom and protect others from tyranny.

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Hindu values and British values

Hindu values		Fundamental British values
Svatantrata – freedom of the individual and of belief	⟷	**Individual liberty**
Samatva – seeing every being as equal	⟷	**Mutual respect and tolerance**
Sabha and samiti – shared, open decision-making	⟷	**Democracy**
Dharma – a just and righteous order for all	⟷	**The rule of law**

In both World Wars, Hindu soldiers fought alongside Britain against aggression and tyranny – defending values they already held sacred.

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Fighting for India’s own freedom

1914–18

Hoping for freedom

Many Indians believed that loyal service in WW1 would win India the right to govern itself.

1919

Hope betrayed

Instead came the harsh Rowlatt Act. On 13 April, at Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar, troops fired on a peaceful, unarmed crowd, killing hundreds of innocent people.

1927–28

Shut out

The Simon Commission was sent to decide India’s future – without a single Indian member.

1939–47

Freedom at last

Still, 2.5 million Indians served in WW2. On 15 August 1947 India gained independence from colonial rule.

Their courage and sacrifice in both wars strengthened India’s case for freedom.

WW1 - Conditions on the Front

- Over 1.3 million Indian soldiers served in WW1, in Europe, the Middle East and Africa. Around 74,000 lost their lives.
- Many Hindu soldiers fought on the Western Front in France and Belgium, in freezing, damp trenches.
- Language barriers and distance from home left many feeling isolated and homesick.
- **Indian soldiers won 11 Victoria Crosses** – Britain's highest award for bravery. Hindu Garhwali soldiers Darwan Singh Negi and Gabar Singh Negi were among them.

WW2 - Key battles involving Hindu soldiers

Over 2.5 million Indians served in WW2 – the largest volunteer army in history.
The Indian Army won **30 Victoria Crosses**, including Hindu soldiers Kamal Ram and Yeshwant Ghadge.

Time	Battle	Location	Approx. Number of Indian Troops
1940–1941	East African Campaign	Ethiopia, Eritrea, Somalia	20,000–30,000
1942	Battle of El Alamein	North Africa	200,000
1942–1945	Burma Campaign	Burma (Myanmar)	700,000
1943–1945	Italian Campaign	Italy	50,000–60,000

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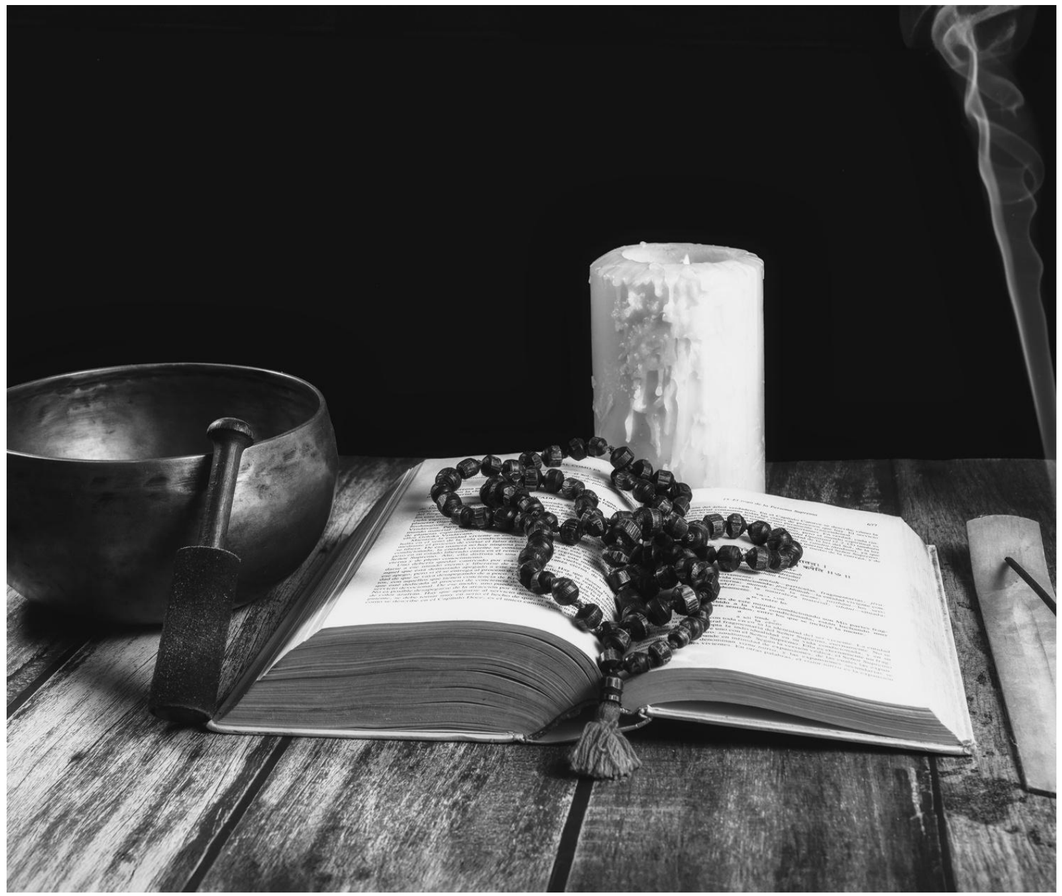
*Image shows Indian Army tank operatives shake hands with Italian children during the **Liberation of Italy** in World War 2.*

Practicing their faith on the Front



- Many soldiers carried small objects that reminded them of their Hindu faith - including small murtis (statues) and versions of the Gita (one of the holy texts).

- Having these items would have really helped these soldiers feel close to home.

- In the trenches, soldiers would have had to make do with what they had. There are some recounts of them making small structures out of the mud into temporary shrines.

Challenges faced on the front

- Many Hindu soldiers faced unequal treatment - they rarely held high rankings and were kept out of leadership roles, no matter how experienced or brave they were.
- Lack of respect for their cultures and faith - early in World War 1 the British army served Hindu soldiers' beef - violating dietary rules.
- Quality of care given at Brighton hospital - Hindu soldiers were treated separately from British soldiers and sometimes received second-class treatment.

"They treat us like children - we fight for them but we are not seen as equals."

From letters written by Indian soldiers during World War I, preserved in the India Office Records and National Archives (UK) collections.

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Honouring Indian soldiers in England

Princess Sophia Duleep Singh

- Granddaughter of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Sophia lived in England at Hampton Court and campaigned for women's right to vote.
- In WW1, she visited wounded Indian soldiers in Brighton and organised Flag Days, from 1916, to raise funds to improve their conditions.

Cremation with dignity

- Injured Hindu and Sikh soldiers who died in Brighton's hospitals were given open-air cremations on the South Downs, honouring their religious tradition.
- 53 soldiers were cremated there. The Chattri memorial now stands on the site.

The Chattri Memorial - Brighton

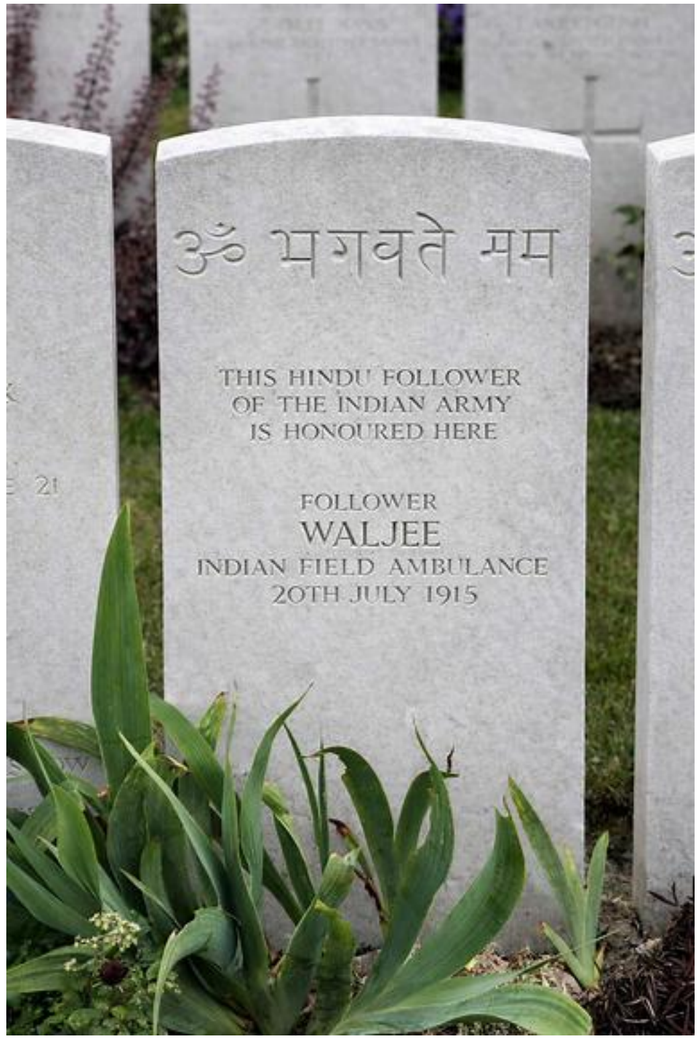
- Built in 1921 just outside Brighton city centre.
- Designed to be a memorial for Hindu and Sikh soldiers, and a site to mark where the cremations of these soldiers took place.
- Wounded Indian soldiers were cared for in Brighton hospitals, including the Royal Pavilion – it was thought the sea air would help them heal.
- The Chattri is still used for annual remembrance services each summer.
- It was designed with Indian architecture in mind - ‘chattri’ means umbrella, a symbol of protection and honour.
- It was a rare gesture of respect and acknowledgement at the time.

Hindu Memorial Day

- A day of collective remembrance to honour and offer gratitude to Hindu soldiers who served and sacrificed their lives in wars including World War I, World War II and other conflicts.

- Hindu soldiers were often under-recognised in British history. This day ensures their bravery, duty (dharma) and contributions are remembered with dignity.

- Hindu Memorial Day is observed annually on the last Saturday or Sunday of Pitṛ Pakṣa (the Hindu fortnight of ancestral remembrance).



Hindu Memorial Day

- Each year in September, usually on the last Saturday or Sunday of Pitṛ Pakṣa (Shrāddha), when Hindus traditionally offer prayers to ancestors.

- This annual Memorial Day is marked by prayers, reflection and often events are held in Mandirs (Hindu temples) across the country. Visits to memorials such as the Chattri in Brighton and community events, talks and remembrance ceremonies.

Image of Chattri Memorial - Brighton

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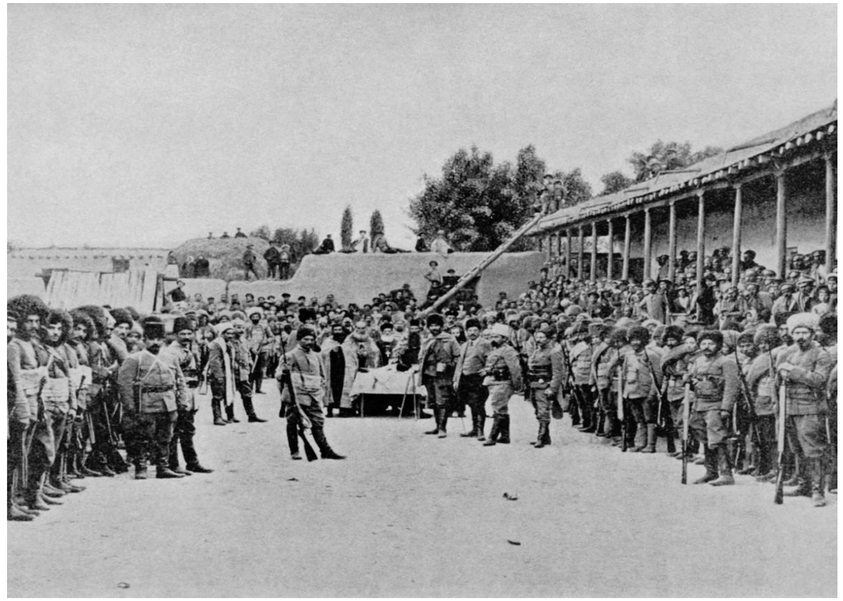
Recognition



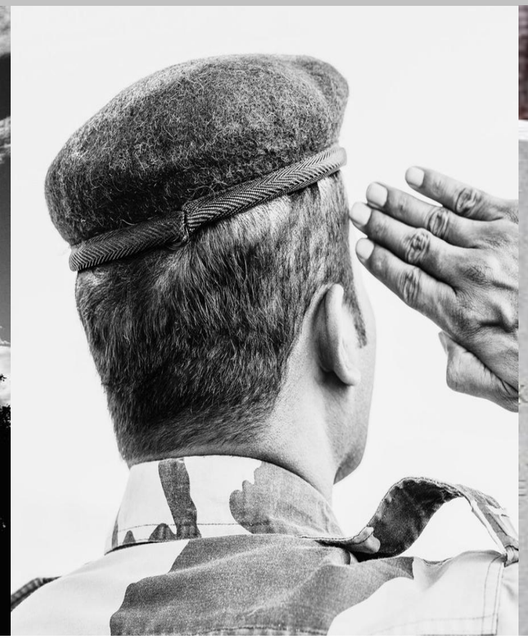
- The recognition of Hindu soldiers has grown substantially over time, including through memorials, like the Chattri in Brighton, posthumous medals and more inclusion in remembrance efforts.
- Some units - like the Rajput unit - are still active in the Indian army today and honours are proudly displayed in museums across India.
- Many Indian soldiers were awarded the Victoria Cross and service medals after the war, but so many had passed away without acknowledgement because of Colonial bias.

Discussion questions – Key Stage 2

1) How would you feel being far away from home and trying to celebrate something like Diwali in a war zone?
2) Do you think it's important to remember these soldiers today? Why?
3) Why do you think the Hindu soldiers still chose to fight even though they were treated unfairly?

Discussion questions - Key Stage 3/4

1) Why do you think Hindu and other Indian soldiers received less recognition than British soldiers, even when they were just as brave?

2) How can we make sure stories like theirs aren't forgotten in history lessons today?

3) Do you think remembering colonial soldiers' changes how we view the world wars — and the British Empire?