India and the First World War – two opposing views

1. 'World War I was a European war'

With 2014 being the centenary year of World War I, a group of English heritage enthusiasts is looking for Indian participation for a memorial ride to commemorate the sacrifice of Indian soldiers in the great war. However, such an event would hardly find resonance in India. True, Indian soldiers did play a crucial role in the two World Wars as part of the larger British army. But that is part of our colonial history and has no bearing on post-Independence India. To argue that Indian authorities should take an active interest in a memorial event for WWI - a battle among European powers thirsting for more colonies or fighting to keep what they had - is a stretch.

To begin with, Indian subjects had to obey diktats of their colonial masters back then. With the British having raised several Indian regiments to augment their army, Indian soldiers had little choice but to fight in western wars in far off lands that had little to do with Indian people. In fact, the British treated Indian soldiers just as an imperialist power would treat a conquered people. That English scholars and historians are now beginning to recognise the contribution of Indian servicemen in British military victories points to the white man's newly discovered sense of guilt.

Instead of harking back to a time when the Republic of India didn't even exist, the Indian government would do well to take care of its soldiers today. At a time when many soldiers and their families are striving for recognition and dignity for services rendered to their country, it makes little sense to eulogise historical contributions made by Indians to a past colonial power. In the 21st century British scholars may want to highlight this to obtain closure. But WWI wasn't India's war.

2. 'All links in history's chain', Sanjiv Shankaran

A century after the start of World War I, India still struggles to come to terms with the Indian army's British legacy. Rajputana Rifles, Punjab Regiment and Madras Regiment are parts of the army that can trace their beginnings to the 18th century following the advent of East India Company. In the century that followed, Indian soldiers fought across continents, from China to Sudan. They may not have fought under the flag of independent India, but that does not make them unimportant as they are links in the chain that lead to contemporary armed forces.

Basra, Gallipoli and Flanders are some historic sites of World War I which drew in more one million Indian soldiers. Over 60,000 were never to return. Ignoring them does no credit to contemporary India. Research by historians shows that World War I influenced India's national movement in the decade that followed. Mohandas Gandhi set up an ambulance corps, while Subhas Chandra Bose tried to enlist in 49th Bengalis. It is difficult to gauge the impact of letters Indian soldiers based in Europe wrote their families, but it is likely to have contributed to the churn that was to follow.

It makes sense to view history as a continuum. Independence in 1947 may have been our most important inflection point. However, that in no way lessens the importance of events that preceded it or their contribution to making India what it is today. By ignoring the role played by Indian soldiers in World War I, we do disservice to people who laid the foundation for an important period of Indian history. They may have fought under the banner of imperial Britain, but they were Indians. It is time to do away with imagined distinctions when it comes to honouring soldiers who laid down their lives.