



Impact Of World War I On India

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(The editorial is based on the article “Impact of World War I on India” which appeared in Livemint. It analyses the impacts of World War I on India.)

In context please refer: [World War I Centenary](#)

When the armed conflict kicked off, the British Expeditionary Force in France was a small, as a fighting force. Reinforcing it was essential; thus that led to the deployment of the two Indian divisions. Rushed to the Western Front, Indian soldiers fought tenaciously to stop a German breakthrough. By the time Indian soldiers sailed out from Marseilles 14 months later, they and their fellow countrymen-138,608 **Indians in all had helped to weaken Germany’s Schlieffen Plan.**

Schlieffen Plan, It was a battle plan first proposed in 1905 by Alfred, Graf (count) von Schlieffen, chief of the German general staff, that was designed to allow Germany to wage a successful two-front war. The plan was heavily modified by Schlieffen’s successor, Helmuth von Moltke, prior to and during its implementation in World War I. Moltke’s changes, which included a reduction in the size of the attacking army, were blamed for Germany’s failure to win a quick victory.

With the 100th anniversary of the Armistice on 11th November 2018 and the inauguration of monuments to Indian soldiers in France, it is a contribution worth remembering. **The broader impact of the war on India suffers from a lack of attention.**

Why did India support British’s war efforts?

- **Indian nationalism**, at that time, was **dominated by moderates who believed that** Indian contribution to the British war efforts would result in British’s benevolence towards the natives and **would grant them more constitutional reforms.**

- **Indian army was distant from the nationalist movement** as magazines, newspapers were not allowed in the barracks and so they fought for the British Raj.

WW I's significance for India

- **The world war ended the myth of the indestructible power of the British Empire** in India as the British faced many humiliating defeats during the war. This raised the self-confidence among Indians.
- The soldiers that returned after war **raised the morale of masses.**
- India supported Britain in the world war on its promise of fighting for democracy but serving India with Rowlatt Act immediately after the war served as an eye-opener for Indians. This **led to the rise of national consciousness and soon Non-Cooperation movement was launched.**
- **Formation of USSR after the war** also led to the **rise of communism** in India with the formation of CPI and imparted a socialist influence on the freedom struggle.

What motivated men to fight in war thousands of miles from home?

- Indian soldiers saw it as their duty to bring honour to their clan or caste, by fighting bravely on the battlefield.
- The pay for an Indian infantryman was a modest 11 rupees a month, but the additional income earned from participating in the war would have been useful to a hard-pressed peasant family so, money may have been one motive for enlistment.
- Indian soldiers frequently expressed a strong sense of personal duty to the King-Emperor George V, who is mentioned in their letters more often than anyone else.

The Indian national movement and the country's socio-economic development did not take place in isolation. World War I linked India to global events in profound ways with far-reaching consequences.

Political Impact

- In India, the return of Punjabi soldiers after the end of the war also **aroused political activity** against colonial rule in that province, which became the spark for further wider protests. Punjab which supplied a large proportion of the troops turned into an epicenter of nationalism after the war.
- **There was a surge of nationalism and rise of mass civil disobedience** when the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms' failed to deliver on the expectation of home rule that had led to popular support for the British war effort.
- As the war dragged on, **casualties mounted and recruitment methods grew more coercive, resentment grew to fuel nationalism.**

Social Impact

- Between 1911 and 1921, **literacy rates increased** significantly in heavily recruited communities. This effect is strongest for men of military age, which is consistent with the notion that soldiers learned to read and write on their foreign campaigns.
- Respect for particular communities who participated in the war grew in the society.
- The huge number of non-combatants were also recruited from India- such as nurses, doctors etc. **leaving Indian society deprived of essential services** in a situation where such skills were already scarce in India.

Economic Impact

- There was a **sharp increase in demand for Indian goods** in Britain as production capabilities in Britain itself were diverted to the war effort.
- However, the disruption in shipping lanes because of the war also meant that Indian industry faced inconvenience because of the shortage of inputs that were earlier imported from Britain and Germany. **There was excess demand as well as supply bottlenecks.**
- **Another result was inflation.** Industrial prices nearly doubled in the six years after 1914. Accelerating prices benefitted Indian industry.
- **Farm prices rose as well**, but at a slower pace than industrial prices. The internal terms of trade(ratio of export prices to import prices) moved against agriculture. This trend continued for most of the next few decades, and especially during the collapse in global commodity prices during the Great Depression.
- **Demand for food supplies, particularly cereals, led to rampant food inflation.**
- Exports of cash crops like jute suffered due to the loss of the European market. Meanwhile, rising military demand for jute products compensated for the decline in civilian demand with jute mills in Bengal establishing monopolies; skewed income distribution grew even more so.
- **The drain on the Indian economy** in the form of cash, kind and loans to the British government came to about 367 million pounds.
- **Domestic manufacturing sectors such as cotton benefited** from the decline in British goods that had dominated the pre-war market.
- **The steel sector benefited as well.** For instance, the ailing Tata steel mills were handed a lifeline in the form of a contract to supply rails to the Mesopotamian campaign.
- **British investment was rerouted to the UK**, creating opportunities for Indian capital. In short, the war economy boosted Indian capitalism in some ways at least.

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