



A Literary Memorial to India's World War I Soldiers: Sarojini Naidu's the Gift of India

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Article Info

ISSN (online): 2583-8261
Impact Factor (RSIF): 8.41
Volume: 05
Issue: 04
July - August 2026
Received: 15-05-2026
Accepted: 23-06-2026
Published: 01-08-2026
Page No: 144-146

Abstract

Sarojini Naidu's *The Gift of India* stands as one of the most poignant literary tributes to the countless Indian soldiers who served and perished during the First World War. The poem is written with profound patriotic conviction and maternal compassion, which transforms the voice of India into that of a grieving mother whose sons were dispatched to distant battlefields in the service of an imperial power. It not merely commemorates military valour, but foregrounds the immeasurable human cost of war, drawing attention to the silent anguish of bereaved families and the immeasurable sacrifices rendered by Indian soldiers whose courage remained largely unacknowledged in colonial narratives.

The poem eloquently captures the collective emotions of a nation that witnessed its finest youth offered to a conflict beyond its own making, separated forever from the familiar landscapes, cultural roots, and familial affection that had nurtured them. Through evocative imagery and lyrical intensity, Naidu immortalises their courage while exposing the futility, devastation, and moral contradictions of global warfare. Her verses transcend the historical moment, inviting readers to reflect upon the enduring consequences of armed conflict and the immeasurable price paid by ordinary lives in the pursuit of political ambitions.

This paper examines *The Gift of India* as a literary memorial that preserves the memory of India's wartime contribution while simultaneously challenging imperial indifference to colonial sacrifice. It argues that Naidu's poem is both an elegy and a nationalist testament, restoring dignity to the forgotten martyrs of the Great War and affirming their place in India's collective historical consciousness. This paper examines the *Gift of India* as a poetic tribute that preserves the memory of India's World War I soldiers and foregrounds themes of sacrifice, grief, patriotism and colonial injustice.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.54660/IJSSER.2026.5.4.144-146>

Keywords: War, martyr, valour, remembrance

Introduction

Wars, irrespective of the era in which they are fought, have invariably left behind a legacy of devastation, shattering societies, displacing communities, and altering the destinies of nations. Among the poetic responses to the First World War, Sarojini Naidu's occupies a distinctive place as a moving testament to the forgotten sacrifices of Indian soldiers under British colonial rule. *The Gift of India*, composed in 1915, is a poem intertwines patriotic sentiment with deep human empathy, presenting India as a sorrow-stricken mother mourning the loss of her sons on distant battlefields.

While celebrating their courage and unwavering devotion, Naidu also questions the silence that overshadowed their immense contribution to the Allied war effort. The poem transcends the boundaries of patriotic verse, serving as a powerful literary archive that preserves the memory of those whose lives were surrendered far from their homeland. Being a historical reflection, *The Gift of India* is an enduring meditation on sacrifice, remembrance, and national consciousness. Through rich symbolism and emotional intensity, Naidu transforms the experiences of Indian soldiers into a universal narrative of loss and resilience, compelling readers to recognise the human cost of war and the enduring significance of honouring those whose sacrifices shaped history.

Catastrophe of War

The First World War (1914–1918) stands as one of the most catastrophic conflicts in modern history, engulfing much of the world in unprecedented violence. The Allied Powers, led by Britain, France, and Russia, confronted the Central Powers, comprising Germany, Austria-Hungary, and the Ottoman Empire. As the conflict intensified, it unleashed widespread human suffering and irreversible destruction, extending far beyond the battlefields.

However, very little has been spoken about the 1.3 million brave hearts of the Indian soil who have fought alongside the allied forces of Britain in World War I. Hindus, Sikhs, Muslims surged forward in large numbers echoing in unison their full-fledged support. Some men wrote or addressed their own letters, but majority of these were probably written by scribes on behalf of their senders, since most Indian soldiers were illiterate. Likewise, the British deliberately recruited soldiers from the least educated classes of the rural population of India who were thus less affected by 'dangerous' Western political ideas.

Epistolary Bonds:

Numerous letters were sent to or from soldiers' women folk. Although the soldiers were told not to write about the war, plenty of them threw caution to the wind and revealed the gory details of trench warfare. For instance, in the letter sent by a native to the soldier from Punjab, she expresses the unrest created by the war. To quote "The harvest is good, but grain is very dear. There is great unrest in our villages. Letters are coming from outside and people are very frightened ..." Santa Singh writes to his mother on 20th July 1915, "Many sons of mothers, brothers of sisters, and brothers of mothers have been lying dead for a whole year on the field of battle. A year has passed and there they lie. He who sees them for the first time says that there is no place left empty. All the ground is covered with corpses. So many corpses are there, and all have perished in forty seconds. They too are the children of mothers." The trepidation of war is for all to see. There were concerns pertaining to disability of these sons of our soil who were wounded in the world war. A father whose son was wounded writes to a British officer, "My son has given full proof of his loyalty. He went six or seven times into action. Now he has been wounded. I trust that your kindness will have him sent back to the depot, so that he may be well-rubbed with oil and make his appearance in the mosque. When he is well, he can be set to train the recruits or sent on recruiting duty, if he is able to walk. I make this request at the insistence of his mother who has been ill and helpless since

we heard of his wound."

Jemadar Ghulam Hassan Khan wrote to his family in Punjab, "It rains day and night - both sorts of rain. I cannot describe it. If God is merciful to me, I will escape with my life, otherwise not. To describe what is happening is one thing, to see it for yourself is an entirely different matter." Another one grieves "In one hour 10,000 men are killed. What more can I write?" Yet another uses an apt metaphor to describe the gory details of war. "As a man climbs a plum tree and shakes down the plums, so fall the bodies of soldiers dying in masses." The banner of victory has come at the expense of so much blood shed; the ruthless butchering of countless Indian soldiers bound by duty is gaping in the face of victory. Thousands perished, some returned home crippled. Mother India bled. Hence, the meaninglessness of such victory.

Tracing the Poetic Narrative

Her poem 'The Gift of India' rightly upholds the sentiments of millions of Indians about the sacrifice made by India and her children during World War I. The poem 'The Gift of India', written in 1915, is a tribute to the contribution of Indian warriors in World War I. It is a celebration and a homage; celebration because her gallant sons responded to the call of duty. Mother India seems to question if she is left with any more sacrifices that her people can make. She has handed over, willingly and liberally to the war machine, gifts of cloth, food grains, gold and cash. But, most of all, she has deployed her brave sons to distant places to fight someone else's war. Roughly, one in ten was sent to war to aid the British.

Naidu draws our attention to the impact of World War I on the families of these Indian soldiers – men, women and children have borne the brunt. Parents have lost their sons, wives have lost their husbands, children have lost their fathers. And then, there are those children unborn who are yet to see their valorous fathers. Who will wipe the tears of them all? The speaker questions the allied forces if they could measure the grief experienced by millions of Indian families, of mothers who prayed for their sons' safety, of wives who hoped for their husbands' safe return. They can never gauge the pride that engulfs her heart in the face of despair. The grief of those dying is writ large in their letters from the war front sent to members of their family in their villages back home that are now available in the British library.

Conclusion

In the context of such apathy, I would like to bring to the fore, a poem written by Sarojini Naidu, a Nationalist, politician and poet of modern India. It transcends the boundaries of patriotic verse to emerge as a proThe poem talks about the ultimate sacrifice made by the Indian soldiers and whose contribution is overlooked altogether in the history of the war. The poem also makes a mention of the numerous benefits these allies reaped from India. India is said to have contributed 88 million pounds sterling in cash and kind.

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