

The Missing PoWs in Pakistan

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Three years ago, when I visited 63-year-old Sardarni Nirmal Kaur and her family in a small locality in the Nanak Nagar area of Jammu city, they were glued to a black and white television set in the corner of their two-room house. Three years hence, the family is still hooked on to their old television set – not watching a movie but the release of two prisoners of war, Jagseer Singh and Arif Mohammed, at the Wagah border. With tearful eyes, they keep updating themselves about developments regarding the return of 54 prisoners of the 1971 war from Pakistan Jail. One among them is Sardarni Nirmal Kaur's husband, Subedar Assa Singh.

In the summer of 2001 when former Indian Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee was meeting his counterpart General Pervez Musharraf in Agra, this family would not miss a single news bulletin as many of these carried stories about missing Defence personnel in the 1971 war. But nothing happened, and the attack on Parliament poured cold water on their hopes of seeing Subedar Assa Singh return home.

Against the backdrop of renewed Indo-Pakistani relations and Dec. 2005 exchange of two PoWs – Singh and Mohammad – the hopes of Subedar Assa Singh's family to seek him alive have been rekindled.

Thirty-two-year-old Ravinder Kaur has no memories of her father. She was born four months after Subedar Assa Singh went missing from the Chamb sector in Jammu and Kashmir. Her elder sister, Satwant, who was a year old at the time, doesn't recall anything about her father either. All they know about his is through newspaper reports and the documents their mother has preserved in a box in their small house in Guru Nanak Nagar.

Left to fend for herself and her five small daughters and two sons, 33 years ago, Nirmal Kaur plunged into deep grief when her husband went missing. But she struggled hard to build her children's lives, with the hope that her husband would return some day.

A white dupatta draped over her head, Sardarni Nirmal Kaur, who has aged much before her time, recalls that the Diwali of 1971 was the last time she saw her husband. The Subedar who participated in the war which began on 3 December 1971, as a member of the 5th Sikh Regiment, went missing after a couple of days. On 17 December, the family received a telegram from his unit saying he was "killed in action". Surprisingly, two days after that, many people who knew the Subedar heard him speak on Radio Pakistan, along with other PoWs. He clearly stated his name and that of his family members, his rank and address.

"Immediately, we became hopeful about my father being alive," said Devinder Kaur, the Subedar's eldest daughter who was 15 years old at the time. What strengthened the belief was the release of an Indian from a Pakistan jail in 1988. This was Mohinder Pal returning to his native village, Floura, in Ranbir Singh Pura sub-sector, Jammu. He told the family that he had met the Subedar, who had been taken ill and shifted to a hospital from a Pakistani jail.

Their hopes were raised again in 1996 when the *Indian Express* published a list of 54 PoWs of 1971 in Pakistani jails. Subedar Assa Singh's name was among the five defence personnel who had gone missing from J&K in 1971. Once again the family began correspondence with the Indian Army and the Missing Defence Persons Relatives' Association, hoping to get him freed.

Over the last three decades, Nirmal often thought of writing to Pakistani generals but was

scared to do so. The reason being that when they wrote to Army authorities refuting their claims about the Subedar being killed in action, her son-in-law, an army man, was harassed. CID officials came to her house, and demanded to know their source of information. “Even that poor man from RS Pura who had seen Subedar Sahib in the Pakistani jail, was harassed so much by them that he snapped all links with us,” she added. Tears well in her eyes when she recalls how she would put a cooking pot on the stove with water in it and tell the children that she was cooking *dal*.

“Despite all the difficulties, I have lived with dignity along with my seven children and taught them the same,” says Kaur. All her daughters are married. The elder son, Harcharan, has a government job and the younger one, Baldev, drives an auto-rickshaw in Jammu.

While neighbours and relatives weren’t too helpful at the time of her distress, her husband’s colleagues have been cooperative. Besides helping Kaur marry off the daughters, jawans from the unit have also been very protective about the family. Then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi had promised that all the 1971 war victims would be allotted petrol pumps, but nothing much came of it.

For seven years, Nirmal Kaur drew Rs 323 as Assa Singh’s salary, later converted to a pension. Although Singh had been promoted to the post of Subedar on 20 May 1971, Kaur continues getting what he would have drawn as a retired Naib Subedar – a junior post. **Her written appeals to the Army authorities have not elicited a response. But since her husband was awarded the Raksha and Sangram medals “Posthumously” by the Army, she is sometimes invited to Army functions, which she attends.**

The story of Kanta Devi, wife of Subedar Kali Dass, is quite similar. Her husband, who belonged to the 8 Jammu and Kashmir Light Infantry, had come home on leave to spend some time with his family, but was recalled to the front in Chhamb sector when the war began.

Soon afterwards, Kanta and her five small children received a telegram from the Army saying Kali Dass had been ‘killed in action’. But two days later, the family, which was in a state of shock, heard him speak over Radio Pakistan.

Kanta’s eldest son, Ramesh, who was nine years old at the time, recalls that seven months later, an Army vehicle came to their house and handed over a mangled body saying it was the Subedar’s. Though the family believed that it was not his body, they, however, performed the last rites but never held the *kriya* ceremony. Their hopes were raised when they read the Kali Dass’ name on the list of PoWs in the newspaper followed by a letter from MDPRA vice-president MK Paul that the Subedar was in a Pakistan jail, and they were trying to secure his release. But nothing positive has come of it so far and the wait continues.

[Courtesy: *The Statesman*]