

A Memorial for Nand Singh: “Nischae Kar apni jeet karon!”

BRIG. CHANDRA B KHANDURI*

* 1685, Sector 29, Noida. 201303 (UP)

IT WAS SEVERAL YEARS BACK while I commanded the brigade at Uri, in Jammu & Kashmir, that an article by KC Katoch attracted my attention. Mr. Katoch lambasted his countrymen for what he clearly alleged, showing disrespect and ungratefulness to the soldiers who laid their lives for the cause of the Defence of the Motherland. He suggested that the Nation sanctify their martyrdom with the highest honour, and by creating a memorial for each one of them. Of course, General KM Cariappa, whose biography I would write later fumed at the lackadaisical attitude some of our political leaders showed to the fallen soldiers.

I must admit it served as a good source of inspiration to me and my historical mind impelled me **to ‘look’ for the real hero of Uri and see that a memorial is created for him appropriately.**

Was it Brig (later Lieut General) LP Sen, whose brigade saved Uri, I quizzed through the historical records of the Sri Div? Or, was he a Brigadier of the J&K State Forces who was killed at Mahura? Or was it Major Som Nath Sharma of 4 Kumaon, credited with saving the airfield at Srinagar? Frankly, I had begun to look for a man whose deeds would not only show an high act of gallantry and who probably made supreme sacrifice of his life but whose acts of selfless bravery would be emulated by future generations of youth of the country, motivating them into achieving yet higher laurels.

After a serious analysis, I homed on to Jemadar Nand Singh, of First Sikh, a man who, when the Battalion was mobilized to be flown into Srinagar on October 27, 1947, according to his officers and JCOs had ‘volunteered to remain with his battalion though his award of Victoria Cross of World War II could well have kept him in his Centre as a showpeice’.

Historically, every landmark of Uri has been contested, and its every inch has been **nourished by the blood of our martyrs**, which as I pondered, undoubtedly included our faithful civilians. It was this thought that I had trekked up to Bhatgiran (the abode of Bhutts), the sacred place that has been associated with my hero Nand Singh. Approximately 10 vertical kilometers from Uri, it involved a two hour hard walk over the snow of December. I scrambled up the slope of a Knoll where Pakistani soldiers had taken position for developing an assault on Uri, the HW of Brig Sen,, its town, the Bridge, and the highway. As I slipped through the snow-filled 65 degree slope every bone of the past sprang up to vindicative the severity of the contest that took place, some 39 years ago.

Nand Singh had been personally ordered by his CO to “capture the feature and hold it until relieved”. He was to assault the enemy in broad day light with his odd men of the Platoon he commanded.

“You have earned a VC against the formidable Japanese; these Pakis are mere lads before you,” so had his CO exhorted the wiry Nand Singh, who the Subedar Major of the Unit said had ‘just got married’.

He collected his men and showed them the snow-covered peak with deodar trees. "The enemy is there and we have to drive the rascals... It will be a tough going... Follow me," his briefing included.

"***Nischae Kar Apni Jit Karon!***" were the words Nand Singh told his platoon. He willed to give the objective to the First Sikh adding thus to its long list of decorations and Battle honours.

On that fateful day of December 12th, when 12 ft deep snow made the ascent by his men difficult, as it was the accurate and heavy volume of fire by the enemy watching every movement of the advancing Khalsas turned the movement suicidal. And soon casualties began to rise, with just about ten boys fit enough to carry on with the task.

At this critical moment, the Regiment's war cry, *Bole so nihal, Sat Sri Akal.... Bole so nihal* from Nand Singh made the ten crawl furiously from the flanks, Nand Singh leading them in that do or die move. And while the enemy kept looking for the Sikhs, **Nand Singh appeared from the rear and pounced on the enemy. In the close quarter battle that followed he was shot and killed, but the enemy bolted back to the rear.**

The bravery of Nand Singh, although at par with his similar act of World War II, earned him a Maha Vir Chakra. I wondered, why the powerful pen of Bogey Sen, could not be more generous than that?

There was already a bridge over the Hyderabad (Uri) Nullah that brought in torrents from the melting snow of the Pir Panjal from the direction of Haji Pir Pass and I found no better site than the high ground that towered over the bridge to immortalize Nand Singh in his battlefield. Interestingly, the National Highway One Alfa makes an incredible loop of seven kilometer here which lie, in fact, over a horizontal gap of 1.7 km between Uri and the Lagama Village, opposite it.

My operational commitments, operationally oriented training exercises, daily confrontation with the wily enemy on the 100 km long LOC, the Zorawar Trail – my adventure patrol and operational reconnaissance of a track over Kishtwar-Zanskar Valley and thence – Baralacha La, via the 19,000 ft Surchin La, and further east on the footstep of Zorawar Singh, the conduct of National Ski Championship at Khilenmarg, et al made the construction of the Memorial possible only at the fag end of my 24 month tenure at Uri. It took a month-long hard work for the Dogras, Sikhs, Gorkhas, the locals and the Tambis of my brigade to create the 24 Ft monolith, as NS Memorial in May 1986.

One of the daughters of a local patriot, offered to write an epitah for the NS Memorial as she adorned and clothed the gallantry of our hero:

"Thy sacred blood shall not go in vain,
Thy supreme sacrifice shall sustain,
Thy service to liberty and gallantry,
Is our honour and pride, eternally?"

Our efforts to ask Nand Singh's widow to unveil the memorial could not succeed but the then GOC 15 Corps obliged. So did the 3,000 strong contingent of people, including the Ex Servicemen of Uri honour us for the ceremony. It turned out to be an emotional scene where people described the Memorial as a symbol of the heroism of the Kashmiri civilians and our brave deeds.

“Nand Singh,” said Ghulam Hussein, the Sarpanch of Bhatgiran, and Mr. Kanth, Deputy Commissioner of Baramula, “is our saviour and we honour his soul as much as our own.’

My friend, Muzaffar Hussein, the former Raja Naloosa, and former MLA, was so moved that he tearfully recited the action by his people of retrieving “the Sikhs who became martyrs”, “We are the one,” he revealed pleasantly, “who guided the Paras to Haji Pir and made Dayal Sahib, a hero.”

Resonating the area with the famous couplet, he sang:

Shaheedon ki chitaon par lagenge

Har varash meley

Vatan par marne-walon ka

Yahi baqi nishan hoga!

(Martyrs shall be honoured annually and that’s the only niche they would leave behind.)

Time passed and the event recessed into the recycle bin of my memory, to be refreshed by the occasional season’s greeting card my successors sent. They became more regular when the efforts we had shown to reinforce and strengthen the defences proved of immense help during the worst period of Pakistani proxy War in the Valley (1990-2004). Then ‘Malangan’, ‘Kala Pahar’, ‘Chhatrapati’ and others played their vital role.

But Nature called me again when a massive earthquake, with Muzaffarabad as epicentrem, devastated Uri-Baramula and areas across the Kishanganga besides Jhelum. I was in Kargil on October 8th, when the news travelled. I made a dash to Uri and was happy to see the officers and men determined to rough it out in the wide spread damage. It was then I heard stories of their excavating the Pakistani soldiers from their bunkers and barracks; they floated as freely as the VIPs.

Above all, the Nand Singh Memorial stood unscathed and as majestic as I left in two decades ago.

It was then I happened to be told by Brigadier Hooda, commanding the Brigade, “See Sir, even Mother Nature respects the brave.”

