

# The Sikh Prisoners of 1971 War

*Uday Mahurkar*

**With no solution to the issue of Indian POWS languishing in Pakistani jails since the 1971 war in sight, the prisoners' families blame the government for their unending misery**

December 19, 2005 was a great day for Nirmal Kaur, 69, and her son Baldev, 48, who have been waiting in Jammu for the past 35 years for the return of Subedar Assa Singh, who went missing in Pakistan after the 1971 Indo-Pak war. That day Baldev, one of Nirmal's seven offsprings, came running to his mother with a copy of Punjabi daily Ajit. A day before, the newspaper had carried a front-page news that a human rights delegation comprising Canada-based Indians, which had gone to the Kot Lakhpat Jail near Lahore a couple of years ago, had found that many of the 55 missing Indian soldiers and officers of the 1971 war were still alive and incarcerated in Pakistani jails as prisoners of war (POWS). The report carried the names of 11 of these 55 including that of Assa Singh Nirmal's husband, and also quoted sources as saying that many of them had died in various Pakistani jails and that their ashes were waiting to be disposed off.

The news sent a wave of jubilation across Nirmal's house. Worn out by endless wait and accompanying fatigue, Nirmal was once again a picture of hope. In the absence of Assa, who disappeared in the Cham sector in the war, Nirmal toiled hard to raise their seven children. Her youngest child, a daughter, was born soon after the war and has, therefore, not seen the man who is her father. As this news travelled to the families of the other 10, memories surged back and hope was rekindled in many a heart. But with the Pakistan Government once again dismissing such findings as false, hope soon gave way to despair.

The plight of those suffering in the absence of their dear ones was evident last month at the release of a book-Indian Prisoners of War in Pakistan-authored by two retired army officers, Lieutenant Colonel R.K. Pattu, and Brigadier M.M. Sharma. The book chronicles the heart-rending wait of the affected families and the inability of the Indian government to make any breakthrough with Pakistan on the issue. In the past three decades, this issue has been raised 11 times in the Lok Sabha and each time the government in power has replied that the Pakistan government simply refuses to acknowledge the presence of these Indian soldiers in their prisons. An emotional M.K. Pal, a Rajkot-based lawyer and vice-president of the Missing Defence Personnel's Relatives' Association (MDPRA) says: "It should rank as one of the greatest betrayals of its soldiers by a nation. It also should rank as one of the most serious violations of international laws by Pakistan. India returned 93,000 Pakistani soldiers caught in the 1971 war as part of the Shimla Accord but Pakistan chose to abuse it by not returning ours."

The human rights team which found the POWS in a Pakistani jail was sent by the South Asian Human Rights Commission with Canada-based Shitaldas Kaler and Amrit Rai Singh as members. The duo had gone to Kot Lakhpat Jail in 2003 to visit Sarabjit Singh, an Indian, who had been sentenced to death in Pakistan on spying charges. While the duo was in the jail, its attention was drawn by shouts emanating from a particular barrack of the prison: "We are 1971 POWS. We have been rotting here for the past 35 years. Please get us out of this hell." They then found out that 11 of the POWS were lodged in Kot Lakhpat Jail while some were in other Pakistani jails and many had died. Kaler says: "These Indian POWS are living in a miserable condition in Pakistani jails."

Of the 55 who went missing, 22 were pilots. Many of them were reportedly seen by Chuck Yeager, the famous former US Air Force chief, after the war while he was on an assignment in Pakistan. Yeager has mentioned this in his autobiography published in 1984. In the following years, there was some more corroborative evidence of the presence of some

Indian prisoners. Bhogal Ram, who spent eight years in Pakistan on charges of spying and was released in 2000, claims he met Assa in Kot Lakhpat Jail's interrogation cell. Assa was brought for interrogation there on the charges of trying to smuggle a letter to his family out of the jail. "Assa was very weak and looked worn out due to his long imprisonment. He told me that he was a 1971 Indian POW," says Ram. Years earlier, Kishorilal, an automobile engineer-turned-spy now based in Ludhiana who had stayed in various Pakistani jails and was released in 1974, says that during his imprisonment in Kot Lakhpat Jail he had also met Flight Lieutenant Vijay Vasant Tambe and Major A.K. Ghosh, two of the 55.

Tambe's name once appeared in Dhaka-based English daily *Sunday Observer* on December 5, 1971 (war began on December 3 and ended on December 17). The front-page report, date-lined Rawalpindi, said that Pakistan had bagged 46 Indian aircraft and captured five pilots alive. Tambe's name was mentioned as one of the two pilots captured in the western sector, the rest being in the eastern sector. Then a photograph of Ghosh behind bars had appeared in a December 27, 1971 *Time* cover story on the 1971 war. Says a dejected Sushila Tyagi, mother of Flying Officer Sudhir Tyagi, one of the POWS: "Our story is of a stuff of which only nightmares are made of. Though free, we have virtually lived in hell all these years. But the ruling class of this country could never feel our pain." According to the Ministry of External Affairs (MEA), Pakistan always denies the existence of any such prisoners.

