



## **The Spirit of Duty: Major 'Baba' Harbhajan Singh's Supernatural Protocol in the Indian Military**

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The Indian Military, known for its valour and the spirit of patriotism, consists in its staff a martyr of the battle, at 14,500 feet of the Nathula Pass in Eastern Sikkim. An Indian army soldier, Harbhajan Singh's transformation into a 'Baba' after his death, is analysed in this article. The fine-tune between fact and fiction is observed from the transcendental point of view. It is said that 'Man is a trapped consciousness'. The unfortunate early demise of a soldier of the 18 Rajput Regiment did not end his responsibility towards his motherland, India. The anecdotes about him describe his role in cautioning soldiers at the Sino-Indian border.

### **The Border Crux**

Tourists visiting Sikkim opined that it is the prettiest of all Indian states. The local people belong to the Bhutia community. The International boundary of the two Asian giants, India and China, is situated here. The border poses crucial challenges to the soldiers posted here. The ultraviolet rays at this rarified altitude darken their faces. At these oxygen-deprived heights, the river flows in blue and wild-white. Here, the vegetation changes from subtropical to alpine grasslands. One would find the Army establishments, mostly camouflaged shelters. The yak herders are seen even at this height. It is said that the Bihar regiment was posted here first, but the Biharies couldn't take the cold, and so the Punjabis came.

"Everything in war is very simple..."



But the simplest thing is difficult."

Harbhajan Singh drowned in a glacier in 1968 while he was patrolling. As he was not a battle casualty, he was reported missing. The loss of a soldier with a weapon is a serious matter to the Army, so the search was launched. His body was found three days later.

### **Supernatural v/s Superstition**

The Latin term 'Supernatural is' refers to the ability to control or manipulate the elements. Supernatural is also associated with the paranormal, religious and occultism. It has neoplatonic, medieval and scholastic origins. Supernatural existence can be defined as an order of existence beyond the known Physical Laws of Nature. The varied perceptions of Supernatural entities awed and nullified the rationality of the onlookers.

It is said that the spirit of Harbhajan Singh led the search party to his body and later, through a dream, instructed one of his colleagues, Pritam Singh, to build and maintain a shrine for him. So, the Army built a shrine at his Samadhi in the hills of Tuk-La, where the company was posted. It is like the Sufi shrine in the Khemkaran sector of Punjab, with its Hindu priest, worshipped by Indians and Pakistanis alike.

The Chinese of the Red Army also reported that they had seen a man, all alone on a horseback, patrolling the border. To give Harbhajan Singh the due respect, they keep a chair aside during the Flag meetings and believe he would caution them before any impending attack. These views may appear quixotic, but they are not superstitions, as the term 'superstition' can't be applied to the transformation of an ordinary young man into a deity. If at all, a modern man with a scientific point of view calls it superstition; it's a harmless superstition that boosts the morale of people and Jawans in a stressful situation.

"True soldiers are immortal"

From the Jataka, we learn that being a soldier is no way to negate one's ultimate ability to attain Salvation; in fact, being a soldier might be an aid, as seen in the category, Nibbanic action is War, a superior soldier has the necessary qualities of a monk to succeed in one's destination.



## **Saint-Sentinel's Legend**

It is said that Harbhajan Singh was a stickler for unit discipline and would admonish soldiers who dozed while guarding the border. He answers prayers, grants boons and guards the lives of soldiers on the inhospitable border. According to popular beliefs, the slippers kept in the Baba's mandir would help patients with gout and other foot problems. The standard water bottles kept here for days will turn into holy water that cures ailments. The local people and Army personnel believe that Baba would have foreseen the accident in the valley much earlier than it happened.

Sikkim, the 'Flower Kingdom' and the twenty-second state of India, has to its credit the only temple in the world built in memory of a soldier. Much earlier than this incident, Guru Nanak also visited this place during his Eastern travels in 1516. Now, this area, also known as 'Angel of Peace', is bustling with devotees and a heavy military presence. Baba's legend instils moral strength among the soldiers facing isolation in the unfriendly terrain of the Himalayan foothills.

Even today, in the campsite, a camp bed is kept for him, and his boots are polished, and his uniform is kept ready every night. It resembles the same incident involving a French soldier, II Lieutenant Hubert Rochereau of the 15th Dragoons Regiment. After he died in World War I, all his belongings were preserved and maintained. But it is devoid of any supernatural happenings. This is an example of pure emotional attachment to his parents. In Baba Harbhajan Singh's case, the spread bedsheets are reportedly crumpled every morning, and the boots are muddy by evening. His earlier stipulated leave period is still in effect, from 15th September to 15th November. On September 14<sup>th</sup> every year, a jeep departs with his belongings for the nearest railway station, New Jalpaiguri. Then it sends him by train to his hometown, Kuka, in Kapurtala district of Punjab. His mother is given salary cheques and allowed to get the time-bound promotions. Additional troops have to be deployed during his leave, and they are pulled back when he returns on 15th November.

## **Military Career**

Harbhajan Singh was born in a Sikh family on August 3, 1941. After his matriculation in 1955, he was enlisted as a soldier in the Corps of Signals in June 1956. On June 30, 1965, he was granted a commission and posted to the 14 Rajput Regiment. He served as an



Adjutant during the Indo-Pakistan War of 1965. Later, he was transferred to the 18 Rajput Regiment.

### **The Catastrophe**

Severe natural disasters, including landslides, floods, and heavy rain, struck the two states of Sikkim and North Bengal in 1967. On October 9th 1967, while he was carrying a mule caravan from Headquarters in Tekula to Dengchukla, he fell into a fast-flowing stream of a glacier and drowned. The "Hero of Nathula" was awarded the 'Maha Veer Chakra' medal on September 11<sup>th</sup> 1967, for his bravery. The Sikh warrior, who breathed his last in Sikkim, became a legend of veneration.

### **Reality v/s Truth**

The border skirmishes with the Chinese Red Army, amid natural hazards in the inhospitable, high-altitude terrain of the Himalayas, strengthened the Jawans' faith in the Baba's popular folklore. The Army's faith in the blessings of the invisible, supernatural force draws the world's attention to validate its authenticity. Even though Reality is an objective term, it is evident that Truth is very much individualistic. The intervening facts of culture, religion, faith and supernatural events examine the intricate truths, hidden in this supernatural existence.

### **Tribal Link**

In *A Glossary of the Tribes of the Punjab and North-West Frontier*, whenever a new village is built, a mound is kept for the one, who dies first in that village. That person is burnt on the mound of the earth, and that man is deified as the Bhumia or the Earth-God and worshipped by all the town, being looked upon as its sole guardian Deity. Baba Harbhjan was the first casualty of the 18 Rajput Regiment at Nathula Pass. So, according to their beliefs, he became their "Bhumia". Five years later, the Regiment fought the battle of Longewala, which is portrayed in the Hindi movie "Border". The troop won the battle, and undoubtedly, they credited the victory to their 'Baba'.



## Interface with Rationality

The story of this dead Sepoy, the Holy or Revered Ghost of Baba Harbhajan Singh, also raised many logical questions among people. One of his old colleagues, Mr Pyara Singh of Jalandhar District, put a court case against the Indian Army and the Ministry of Defence for allowing such weird Dead Worship of a person who had been dead long, long ago. The Tarksheel (Rationalist) Society in Punjab launched a campaign against the Army for spreading superstition.

## Baba's Practical Boons

The Baba deity is next in importance to the Lord Kanchenjunga for the Sikkimese. It valorises the military. The funds raised at the Baba temple are used to help the local population, and the 164 Mountain Brigade adopts helpless children. The real incident involving the tourist, Rohit Singh, in 2004 opens new vistas into the Baba's supernatural existence. When Rohit was wounded in an accident, an unknown man with a steel bangle (kara) came with a bottle of water and First Aid provisions to dress up the wound. This experience of timely help from the Mystery Man at 'Milestone 5' is written by Rohit in the book *Chicken Soup for the Indian Soul: A Book of Miracles*. This is one such incident among thousands that occurred in that area. A French poet, Alfred de Vigny, has said,

"Army is a good book to study Human Life."

We can safely add to Vigny's line that the Army is also a good reference for the After-Life.

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