

A Soldier's General: An Autobiography

by General J.J. Singh, New Delhi: Harper Collins, 2012, pp. 386, INR 799

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It is rare for Army officers to write their autobiographies and rarer still for those who have reached the very pinnacle of their careers. It is probably a mix of inertia and security concerns that stops the ink to make contact with paper. The autobiography of General J.J. Singh is therefore a welcome change to the trend. The publication is all the more creditable, as it has been written while the author continues to hold a constitutional appointment of Governor of Arunachal Pradesh.

There are varying opinions on what should ideally be the focus of an autobiography. This dilemma weighs in favour of either personal or professional life. The final decision, which must remain that of the author, is largely dependent on the audience being addressed and their envisaged interests. In that sense, General J.J. Singh, much like his style of functioning, comes across as 'unorthodox and different'. He achieves this through a healthy mix of personal and professional incidents, which have chartered his early years followed by a long and distinguished career.

There are certain distinct characteristics, which are visible through the first few chapters. The author was obviously influenced by the martial traditions of his ancestors, clan and *gurus*, especially Guru Gobind Singh. Luckily for him, this was reinforced by his commissioning into the illustrious Maratha Light Infantry regiment, which, much like the Sikhs, draws its strength and motivation from an equally famous warrior

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in Shivaji. This is evident in his thought process and it also leaves an indelible impression on his outlook towards soldiering. The emphasis on surprise and deception, both in personal and professional life, are, evidently, deeply imbibed qualities.

The author recounts many experiences from his early years in an engaging, candid, and simple writing style. His description of events preceding the capture of Mowu Angami, the leader of the Naga Army, is especially interesting. The incident, which took place over 44 years ago, resonates with a theme (which subsequently became the basis of the Army's Sub-conventional Doctrine) of which the General was the fountainhead. The emphasis on establishing a good 'rapport' with the locals, 'exemplary conduct and people-friendly activities' was in contrast to the mistake made by Naga leaders. Unlike the Army, they considered the border tribes to be 'inferior'. This was a lesson in the conduct of counter-insurgency operations and is relevant even today. It is also evident from the narrative that strict orders were given by functionaries at every level of the hierarchy, to ensure conduct behoving of 'officers and gentlemen'.

A number of decisions, which are bound to have a major impact on strategic decision-making were influenced by the General. Amongst these was the Siachen Glacier issue. There are a number of analysts who advocate the demilitarization of Siachen Glacier in pursuit of resolution of lesser contentious issues along with Sir Creek. However, this honourable intent, as the former Chief of Army Staff (COAS) contends, can only become a reality if the Pakistanis agree to 'authenticate the present positions'. This has been the stand of the Indian Army, which has been voiced in the recent past as well. Given the realities of relations with Pakistan, the advice is both valid and realistic, as vindicated by past actions.

The book gives a candid assessment of the Kargil conflict. The initiation of the conflict, according to the author, was characterized by forward commanders being 'caught off guard' and their initial assessment of the situation being 'totally off the mark'. This assessment goes on to describe the early reaction as 'uncoordinated attacks without adequate artillery support'. The General, who was a senior functionary in the military operations branch of Army Headquarters at that time, refutes Musharraf's justification for the attack. In his autobiography Musharraf states that India was planning to attack the Shaqma area of Pakistan-occupied Kashmir (PoK). This is outrightly negated by the former COAS, given the winter posture of the Army, which effectively precluded any possibility of such a military initiative. He goes on to nail many a lie

perpetuated by Musharraf, with the disowning of his own soldiers being the most disgraceful for a military leader.

There were a number of lessons that the Kargil conflict taught both sides. For the Indian Army, it changed the very basis of fighting a determined well-entrenched enemy at super high altitude. The suggestion by General Singh to employ trained mountaineers, probably with the backdrop of his own mountaineering expertise, helped break the stalemate and overcome the disadvantage of not being able to cross the Line of Control (LoC). It assisted in dislodging Pakistani soldiers from heights, which were probably considered impregnable, leading to the rollback of entrenched positions.

The successful conduct of Exercise Poorna Vijay was a significant event, which is described in the book in great detail. However, the key takeaway from the exercise was the ability of an armour heavy formation to conduct operations in what was generally conducted a non-campaign period. This forced a strategic re-think and opened military options which were considered closed by conventional wisdom.

One of the most far-reaching initiatives undertaken during 2006 was the Indian Army's re-balancing, much in the same way as the diplomatic Look East Policy, more than a decade earlier. Traditionally, given the emergence of a majority of threats from Pakistan, a tendency to gravitate attention and resources towards that sector had become the norm. This thought process was further reinforced in both 1999 and 2001. However, the decision to re-balance the Army and raise additional divisions for the East, along with infrastructure development was probably the most visible sign of the shift. The deployment of additional forces and strengthening of infrastructure has restored the 'desired strategic balance' and confidence of the nation for any future land-based eventuality.

The suggestion to acquire ultra-light 155 mm howitzers, underslung with heavy lift helicopters, was also made by the author while he was the COAS, to enhance the availability of firepower in mountainous areas. This would also enhance the capability of the armed forces in out-of-area contingencies and raise the profile of an expeditionary force, as and when the need arises for the same.

The concept of 'Iron Fist and Velvet Glove', which became the foundation of the Sub-conventional Doctrine of the Indian Army, will probably remain synonymous with the tenure of General J.J. Singh as COAS. His very first interaction with the media on 1 February 2005, outlined his thought process on the subject. The decision to ban the word

'kills', directions to point weapons downwards, project the humane face of the Army, and enforce 'zero tolerance' for custodial deaths became the basis of tactical and doctrinal thinking on the subject. This was also one of the few doctrines that the armed forces brought into public domain. It not only helped the people understand the role of the Army better in sub-conventional operations, but it also gave a broad-based feedback to enable further improvements of the strategy.

Taking forward this thought process, the author gives his perspective of the way forward in Jammu and Kashmir. He emphasises on the need for a political dialogue with all sections of the state, including those in PoK, given the heterogeneous nature of the state. He reinforces the need to seek the opinion of the local people while resolving outstanding issues. The General underlines the need to take forward socio-economic development and the political process, given the achievement of the mandated military role. He also stresses on addressing the traumatized people through a humane approach after years of violence. The need to reduce the signature of security force presence and increasing people-to-people contact on both sides of the LoC are some of the other suggestions offered to find a solution to the vexed problem of Kashmir.

The book also addresses the often debated issue of Chief of Defence Staff (CDS). Putting the issue in perspective, the author makes a case for CDS only in the long term, and that too not merely as an upgraded Chief of Integrated Defence Staff, but as the head of a truly integrated force, which includes the Ministry of Defence and other ministries which form a part of the national security architecture. He also argues for a distinct defence structure based on the peculiar circumstances of India and not merely an imported model functioning in other countries. He makes a case for integration at the policy planning and formulation level, going right down to theatre levels, with staff not only from the three services but also from relevant ministries. As part of this integration process, a system of exposure at higher levels to officers in an inter-service environment and theatres of operations is recommended to enable a holistic outlook to national security.

Military and diplomacy have often been seen as two distinct aspects which require specific domain expertise. However, lately, there has been enhanced emphasis on employing the military for furthering the diplomatic objectives of the country. Calling this aspect a 'key result area', the former COAS rightly points out that 'Well-orchestrated military diplomacy can help in the achievement of our foreign policy goals and

in addressing the security concerns in our region.’ With reference to countries both in Asia and Africa, he adds, ‘This is particularly true in the case of countries where the military has an overarching role in policy-making or governance.’

The importance of military diplomacy is illustrated by the author through his own experience. One instance which stands out is the interaction with the Chinese hierarchy during one of the rare visits by an Indian COAS to China. This visit led to the formalization of military-to-military contacts between India and China, and has undoubtedly helped both countries understand each other better. This, in turn, has helped improve the prevailing atmospherics. It is also evident from the General’s statement that the desire to extend a hand of friendship to China did not imply lowering of guard on the borders. In his own words, the categorical statement that ‘1962 will not be repeated’ says it all.

The General also suggested military-to-military engagement with the Pakistan Army in an attempt to build trust and reduce irritants at the level of the two armies. Given the excellent bonhomie experienced by officers of the two armies on all UN missions, this suggestion could take the same further.

The book has an interesting comparison between the author and General Musharraf. A number of commonalities have been pointed out in this chapter, though with distinct differences with regard to the circumstances in which the two were elevated from their positions of COAS to President and Governor in their respective countries. The comparison probably could be summarized with the description of Musharraf as a ‘political general’ and General J.J. as ‘A Soldier’s General’!

The last section of the book provides a view of Arunachal Pradesh as the author sees it. The feeling of nostalgia and purpose is evident in the narrative and is visible through some of the initiatives undertaken in the state. It is not often that former governors complete their tenures in what is considered the final eastern frontier of the country. However, the section reveals why someone who had been at the helm of affairs in the South Block, blends so easily into the region, both as the constitutional head and as the first citizen of the state along with his wife.

Right through the course of the General’s journey, his close family linkages, deep bonds with those he served with, and faith and reliance on the ‘team’ that he led is evident. This trait, finds resonance in the chapter on leadership. This facet of his personality was also seen during his tenure as the Chairman Chiefs of Staff Committee, when on a number

of instances the three services united on inter-linked issues. For the common soldier, the pay commission recommendations were probably the foremost amongst these.

The book also deals with the allegations of fixing the 'succession plan' during the tenure of the General. The issue is clarified in some detail, highlighting the facts of the case. The former COAS correctly states that such incidents 'can play havoc with the secular and apolitical fabric of the great institution' and 'cause incalculable harm to the nation'. The incident is undoubtedly best forgotten, though its lessons should be remembered and learnt if the Army intends to remain firm on its cherished principles of secularism and service before self.

This book is undoubtedly an account straight from the heart. Does it tell all? Certainly not! And it is not difficult to understand why. The author probably had a choice of writing what he could, despite the constraints of knowing an endless list of state secrets and being in a constitutional appointment, or allowing memory to fade with increasing consistency over the years. He chose the former and should be complimented for the same. He has not failed to acknowledge comments and descriptions, positive as well as negative, used by media to describe him, which most would have cringed to reproduce. These include, 'odd ball', 'maverick', and 'who shoots both from the hip and lip'!

One hopes that this trend will finally establish a tradition in the pursuit of sharing personal experiences, views, ideas, historical events, and policy recommendations in the future as well. However, the spirit of this tradition should not be marred by exploiting the platform for merely carrying forward personal tirades against individuals and the system. This is where the book under review sets forth a model worthy of emulation. For soldiers, there is a thin line between being 'candid' and 'cribbing'. While General Singh has done well to remain candid, it is hoped that this remains the guiding principle for future writers as well.

Finally, the book sets a very high standard of production. The maps, photographs and layout is indeed of international quality. Unfortunately, most publications are unable to produce similar quality, which takes away from otherwise excellent accounts by authors. The easy availability of the book in major bookstores is also welcome. Hopefully a cheaper paperback could be considered by the publishers to make it more accessible to individuals, especially young officers from the armed forces.