

June 15, 2012

## Valour and verse



•

The Hindu

Frame from the Frontier Saragarhi Memorial, Ferozepur Photo: Deepa Alexander



•

Frame from the Frontier The tower over the Sutlej bridge that was shelled by Pakistani tanks during the 1971 war Photo: Deepa Alexander



• Frame from the Frontier Sukhdev, Bhagat Singh and Rajguru remembered Photo: Deepa Alexander

## Tales of adventure are retold in forgotten memorials that dot Ferozpur, the 'land of martyrs'

Nirvair slows down to a back-thumping trot. The woodlands are in bloom and loud with the plaintive call of the hawk cuckoo. I draw in the reins and guide the mare up a knoll. The countryside is an expanse of dun wheat fields, punctuated with green sugarcane and grassy plumes. As a dust devil spirals along a ribbon of nearly empty road, the incongruity of the situation strikes me: a stanza in a long-forgotten book has brought me here.

“Poetry makes nothing happen,” wrote W.H. Auden. But here I was in this border town in Punjab — finding my way to Hussainiwala 10 km away, worried I wouldn't be on time before the gates clang shut for the Beating Retreat ceremony — because of six lines of verse.

*On Saragarhi's ramparts died, The bravest of the brave, Beneath Saragarhi's ruined walls, They found a fitting grave, For Saragarhi bears the fame, They gave their lives to save* eulogises the last brave stand of 21 soldiers of the 4th battalion (then 36th Sikhs), Sikh regiment of the British Indian Army who defended their outpost in the North-West Frontier Province against thousands of Orakzai tribesmen. Their valour earned the homage of British Parliament — all 21 Sikhs were awarded the Indian Order of Merit, and the Battle of Saragarhi was compared to the Battle of Thermopylae.

The story has stayed with me since I chanced upon it and the fact that many of the men had hailed from this district led me to Ferozpur and the discovery that this town, founded by Feroz Shah Tughlaq, echoes with a litany of war, martyrdom, the rise and fall of empires, and profiles in courage. On an overcast morning, when I drove from Kapurthala — through the pilgrim town of Sultanpur Lodhi, Lohian Khas, Makhu and Zira — Ferozpur ceased to exist as a place one might discover in the distance as one journeys elsewhere.

Crowds of peasants, townspeople and old *koi hais* wind their way to Hussainiwala across the dark, oily waters of the Sutlej on horse, cart and foot, vehicles having been abandoned on roads resembling moonscape. The Beating Retreat here is filled with as much pageantry as the one at Attari-Wagah. Moustachioed BSF jawans and Pakistan Rangers match step for step in a show of

supposed belligerence and the audience cheers their precise footwork and rifle drill before the flags are lowered.

I leave Nirvair in a clump of trees and saunter off to the National Martyrs Memorial adjoining the razor-wire fence at the border crossing. The memorial marks the spot where Bhagat Singh, Rajguru and Sukhdev were cremated secretly on the night of March 23, 1931. Their faces are etched in copper on a sandstone wall, and their bravery and sacrifice recounted in songs that rent the air. A statue of the three young men towers over a pool that reflects a crimson sky and a eucalyptus tree seeking the first star. As the strains of the Last Post fade away, I make my way past the brass board that reads “Inq̄lab Zindabad”, down to the rose garden that flanks the memorial. Here lie the towers of the bridge over the Sutlej ravaged by Pakistani shells. The bridge was blasted by Indian Army Engineers during the 1971 War to prevent entry of Pakistani tanks. A simple, eloquent memorial honours the officers and men of 15 Punjab who died holding this bank during the Battle of Hussainiwala.

It's way past dusk, and I bid farewell to Nirvair at Toori bazaar, one of whose buildings was the secret headquarters of the revolutionary trio. Across the Mall Road in the cantonment — one of the biggest during the Raj — lies the Barki Memorial commemorating the victory of an infantry division during the 1965 War. A captured Patton tank and a milestone from the Pakistani town stand outlined against a starry night. Behind it stand the stark white contours of the Saragarhi Gurudwara, opened in 1904 by Sir Charles Revz, then Lieutenant-Governor of the Punjab, to forever remember the courage of the Sikh soldier. Inside the gurudwara are paintings of the siege of Saragarhi. Outside, are etched the names of the 21 soldiers and their story.

The next day, urged by that irrepressible Victorian soldier Harry Flashman's adventures in *Flashman and the Mountain of Light*, I set off to explore Ferozeshah and Mudki, where the pennants of Sikh chiefs were lowered by the British in the First Anglo Sikh War (1845-46). I ford the Rajasthan and Ferozepur feeder canals to arrive at the Anglo-Sikh War Memorial at Ferozeshah. If the weapons here could tell you their story, what an epic that would be! The paintings of the battles of Mudki, Ferozeshah, Sobraon and Chillianwala are full of British red coats, turbaned Sikhs, upturned gun carriages and parched grasslands.

“Midnight at Mudki” changed the course of the war, but now, the fort where the British spent an uncomfortable night is almost in ruins and contiguous with the flatlands stretching beyond it. The sky murmurs with thunder, and clouds and sunbeams contend for dominion. The setting sun fires the landscape in red and purple, and in that quietude I hear the battle cries of long-forgotten armies call out to me across the centuries, weaving a tale of Independence and Empire.