

Fauji Banta Singh

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I was disappointed not to see Banta Singh by the stairs in front of his house where he always was with his aged and slightly bent body, supporting the weight on to the cane in his hand. I never saw him without that cane. Banta Singh was known as Fauji, meaning soldier even though he retired from the army a long time ago.

I was off work for ten weeks due to a foot injury. I thought he might be sick or gone to live with his younger son in Williams Lake as he had done two years ago. When I saw his grandson, I asked him about Banta Singh. "Oh he died a month ago," he said without stopping or showing any emotion. I was annoyed at his behaviour. Banta Singh had made my working life colourful by simply being there.

I also knew his son Kartar Singh and I went to his house the same evening after work to convey my condolences. Kartar Singh was busy watching TV. His wife was in the kitchen preparing dinner. Naseeb Kaur, Banta Singh's wife, was sitting in a small sofa chair in one corner of the living room. With a string of beads in her hand, she was softly reciting gurbani, the verses from the Sikh scripture.

Kartar Singh and I exchanged a few customary words about Banta Singh and then there was complete silence. I was hoping to learn more about the circumstances of his death and ask Kartar Singh about Banta's favorite walking stick that he sometimes used as a stool to sit on. I wanted that stick as a memory of my friend. However, I didn't have the nerve to ask him because he seemed bored with my presence. I decided to leave when he said, "It was good to have him around the house and the hundred dollars that he paid for the little room."

Rain or shine, Banta would be outside the house waiting for me as I came around after delivering mail to other homes

on both sides of the street. He would be there even when it was snowing, which he hated with a passion. From September to the mid-April, he wore a heavy blue jacket with a hood showing its red lining underneath. In warm weather, he would wear the old black suit that he had brought from India years ago, or sometimes he simply wore his khaki kurta and pajama. He had an elegant face made larger by his gray beard. It became a habit for me to spend a few minutes chatting with him each morning, no matter how late or rushed I was. I often found myself running to get to his house so I could talk to him.

Due to the dramatic increase in the numbers of Punjabis living in Vancouver in the late sixties and early seventies, they became the target of racism from the local white community. In 1971, I was the only Punjabi postman in the area and many white residents did not hide their prejudice. They would complain to my superiors if I was late a few minutes or let their dogs loose in their front yards. To feel secure I always looked for familiar things and friendly people. About twenty homes, out of the four hundred on my route, belonged to Punjabis. The familiar smell of Punjabi cooking from these homes always gave me a sense of belonging. I had special feelings about Banta Singh and his house because he was the only one who came out to talk to me. The other well-kept homes and tidy green lawns held no more charm for me than did the sawmill, where I worked before I joined the Canada Post.

In his happier moods, Banta Singh would act like a child. Often he saluted me using his right hand as he had done with his superiors in the army and he did this quite solemnly. Once he was holding the cane in his right hand and he used the left hand to salute. He presented an amusing picture and I couldn't control my laughter. To my pleasant surprise, he didn't mind and actually laughed with me. Later, he would often use this as a trick to make me laugh.

One day he had a new stick in his hand. He was excited

like a six-year-old child with a new toy. This stick was actually an army field stool, its one end was sharp so it could push easily into the ground, and the other end opened up to make a small stool-top. He met me a few houses away from his home, happier than I had ever seen him. Pushing the sharp end into the ground he opened up the stool, sat on it with his legs opened wide and his hands on his knees. His white-bearded face glowed with joy.

Surprised, I stood in front of him.

Jerking his head up and down, he said to me, "What do you say now, Mister? Is this not the greatest thing in the world? This damn thing has been on my mind for the last fifty years. Our white officers used to have these, and they could sit anywhere with their asses supported comfortably, while we stood at full attention waiting for their orders. I finally found one in a downtown second-hand store yesterday."

One morning when I was still half a block away from his house, he came running towards me and said, "Saab ji, Saab ji, you are so late today. I have been waiting for more than an hour." He kept on calling me by this honorific, even though I requested him repeatedly to call me by my first name.

I looked at my watch a bit surprised and said, "I am on time, not late at all; you sure seem to be in some kind of a rush today." And I kept walking past him to drop the mail next door. He looked quite restless standing there.

"What is the matter"? I called back.

"Since you are an educated person, I thought you would know whether what I've heard is true or not," he said, walking hurriedly to catch up with me.

"What have you heard?"

"This letter came from the government yesterday." He showed me the letter and continued, "My grandson read it to me and he says that they are coming to check out how much money I spend on food and shelter, and how much I

have in the bank." He paused for a few seconds and motioned me to come closer to him where he was standing on the sidewalk in front of his house now.

In a lower, secretive voice he said, "Son, I have some money in the bank. I thought if there was any danger I could withdraw and hide it somewhere else." Fear written all over his face while he stiffly stood leaning over his cane, held firmly in both hands.

I didn't quite understand what he was trying to tell me, or the reason for his fear. To calm him down I said, "Oh they are probably doing some kind of survey to raise pensions for you old-timers. Nobody will touch your money. Don't worry about it."

My response didn't satisfy him at all. Again in a secretive tone which sounded unreal and comical, he said, "Son, you don't know about these white people, they must be thinking of stopping the pension for us immigrants. They know that we don't spend much money and they do not want to give us more than we need."

I started to laugh at what he had said. He looked at me strangely as if I was deliberately being unreasonable. He said with added seriousness and fear in his voice, "It is not a laughing matter, Saab ji; it has happened to me once before. I used to be in a cavalry regiment in Patiala. Oh, it must have been around 1932, three years before I retired. We Indian soldiers used to save all of our pay each month, and the white soldiers used to spend all of theirs. The English commander thought, 'These Indians don't spend much, so therefore they don't need any extra money.' Sure enough, they started to pay us less, and more to the white soldiers."

I was taken aback for a moment. Then I tried my best to reason with him that here in Canada, no one can look at your bank balance, and even if you were to tell them how much you had, they could not touch your money. Though he calmed down a little, the fear of losing the money and having his pension reduced still covered his face.

Banta Singh had served in the British Indian Army for sixteen years. Though it had been over thirty-five years since he retired, the way he talked and moved showed his army training. This led to problems with other older Punjabis who gathered in the local gurdwara, the Sikh temple, where Banta Singh went at least once a day. Most of them were village folks who had spent their lives working on family-owned farms. Banta Singh demanded special respect from them for being an ex-army man. The village elderly knew quite well how to read and handle a person like him. Often he became the butt of their collective ridicule for his snobbish attitude. Banta Singh would leave in frustration, muttering obscenities. He would continue to grumble until he arrived in his small basement room. I saw him on his way back from the gurdwara on one such occasion and asked him, "Baba, you seem to be in a bit of a bad mood today! What happened?"

"These bloody old people are really rotten. They sit in the home of God and aren't afraid of anything, but He watches all and will make them pay one day soon. God will cut out their dirty tongues soon enough." In his angry mood, he kept on walking towards his home.

Later I asked Teja Singh, "Baba ji, what happened today? Old Fauji Banta Singh was really mad."

Teja Singh, an old-time Canadian who always wore the small black turban, chuckled at my question. "What could be the matter, young man? Banta Singh doesn't let anybody else talk once he starts telling his tales of army days. He was doing the same thing today. And you know the type of person Bishna is - a real dirty-minded old man. He said to Banta Singh, 'You think you are such a big shot and treat us like we are a bunch of village idiots. Now tell me, has your son ever allowed your old wife to come down to the basement to see you?' Banta Singh is very sensitive about this issue - he started to hurl names at Bishna and just ran out of the place."

Teja Singh paused for a few seconds and added, "You know, all of these fellows get together and give the Fauji a hard time."

In fact, I knew that Banta Singh's marital situation had not been going smoothly. He was extremely touchy about the subject and very bitter about his son's behaviour. He once told me, "This son of mine is a real *maan choad*, mother fucker. He has ordered his mother, the old woman, to stay upstairs and never to come down to the basement where I live. He takes her cheque every month and keeps the whole amount. The poor soul sits in a chair chanting gurbani all day. I also used to hand him my entire cheque and as a result, I used to sit at the table and eat my roti with the rest of the family. Now, since I only give him a hundred dollars a month, he is always angry with me. He sends my roti downstairs. I used to sit in the bathtub upstairs once in a while. Now I can only take a shower if I get a chance at the right moment, since he has rented out the bigger part of the basement to white people. He owns two other homes in the city. I don't know what he is going to do with all this money."

Banta Singh lived with his younger son in Williams Lake for a few years. He couldn't get along with his daughter-in-law there and came to live with the older son here in Vancouver. When he saw me delivering mail on his street for the first time, he didn't speak to me right away. For a couple of days he just watched me from a distance. Then one day while I was climbing down the stairs of his house after delivering the mail, he hesitantly acknowledged me with a slight movement of his head, and then said 'hello' in English in a low, unsure voice.

Understanding his dilemma, I smiled and said in a loud voice, "Baba ji ki haal ai, how are you?" He was overjoyed at hearing me speak Punjabi. Excited, he came towards me, energetically shook my hand, and kept on shaking it for a few seconds. He happily tapped my shoulder and said, "I thought that you were probably from Fiji or something. But

you are really one of us - this is really great. Where is your village back home?"

"Baba ji, my village is close to Jalandhar," I told him, staring straight at him, wanting to know his reaction because I knew that he belonged to a different region of the Punjab. He seemed a bit disappointed, as I expected. Then he suddenly became cheerful again and exclaimed, "It doesn't matter. We are all in a foreign land anyway."

We became instant friends, forgetting the huge difference in our ages. Each day we met and talked about everything from the politics of India to the young generation of Punjabis growing up in Vancouver. He related stories about Punjabi people of his own age group that played cards in the local park. He knew all the important people and the inside politics of the Ross Street gurdwara, which was close to his house. It was considered the most important religious place for the Sikhs in all of Canada. Its management had ongoing conflicts, which often evolved into open fights. Banta Singh recounted these in-fights in detail and cursed the leaders for their conduct. I sensed that he was genuinely concerned about the damage that was being done to his Sikh religion.

Occasionally, he would have sudden outbursts of anger against the gurdwara leaders. He became terribly upset when he found out that a few years back the administration had sold Vancouver's oldest gurdwara that used to be on 2nd Avenue in order to build a new one on Ross Street. "Saab ji, only God can save a community that cannot look after the important places where their forefathers made history. That was the first religious place built in North America by the Sikhs in 1907. I can't understand how these idiots think. Do they have no sense, no shame?"

Once in a very secretive tone he invited me to come to the gurdwara, "Son, you must come to the guru-ghar this coming weekend." I thought there must be a wedding in the family, or perhaps his family had initiated an

Akhandpath, the non-stop readings of the scriptures. Just to make sure I asked him, "Is your family doing something special on the weekend, Baba ji?"

"No, it is not a family matter, it's much more important. You must come."

When I asked again, he looked around suspiciously and said, "There is big election on Sunday. It is rumored that the Communists are trying to take over the gurdwara. We must never let them take over the home of the Guru."

"Aren't you always criticizing the leadership? Now let there be change once and for all," I said to find out more from him.

"Son, I know that these leaders aren't ideal people, and one day they will surely suffer for their ill deeds but at least they have faith in the Guru Granth Sahib, while these Communists don't even believe in God. They will turn the gurdwara into their political headquarters." I felt like arguing with him, but looking at his sincere face, I decided to keep quiet.

At times Banta Singh irritated me by his pretentious tone and high tales of the army days. Reacting one day to his bragging ways, I said, "Baba, when the British massacred Punjabis in Amritsar in 1919, you were in the army; when they massacred the Sikhs during the Jaiton Morcha, you were in the army; when they hanged Bhagat Singh, you were in the army."

He stood there a bit hurt and speechless at my sudden turnaround. Feeling guilty, I quickly changed the topic. After that though, he never talked about his army days in the same tone with me.

He often complained about members of his family. He disliked the way his grandchildren behaved. One day his fourteen-year-old grandson walked by us while we stood chatting. Looking at his long flowing hair, Banta Singh said with displeasure in his voice, "Look at him. Look how he has grown his hair, and the style of his clothes, isn't he a

disgrace? He could be straightened out in a minute with a strap but it is a totally different game here, in this country." In his voice, there was a sense of real loss and defeat.

His loneliness became much more pronounced when he talked about his wife, which he did very rarely. "As long as I was in the army, she used to be happy with me; especially when I came home on my annual two months leave. That is when we had our kids - two boys and a girl. Since then, she has never spoken to me properly or shown any affection towards me. Now we live here in the same house, but she never speaks to me. She recites gurbani twenty-four hours a day. I sometimes wonder what sins she might have committed that she needs to pray all the time." He spoke about his wife as if he was talking about a total stranger.

One day I met him when he was coming from someone's home after doing a ritual reading of the Guru Granth Sahib, the Sikh scripture. He looked very tired, which was a bit unusual because he was always upbeat after reading gurbani. He said to me, "Son, I feel so homesick these days, here in this foreign land. I often wish that when I open my eyes in the morning I could get up in my village. Life was not so bad there in the fields, spending time with people that I had grown up with. I never felt like this even in the army when I was away from home for so long." I could see in his eyes the burning desire to go back to the village, and the love a birthplace holds for people.

"Go for a while - the airfare is cheap these days."

"I really would like to, but you have no idea of the situation, and the danger I face from close relatives. Everyone will have an evil eye on my money. You never know, some idiot could simply finish me off to steal my money. You can't trust people anymore. With God's will I am going to spend the rest of my days in this land now."

To cheer him up, I said, "How about if we find a white woman for you to have a good time with, Baba ji?"

Spontaneously, that child-like smile spread on his face. Almost blushing he said, "No sonny, why become sinners at this age? I have just a few more years now and I will spend them by singing the name of almighty God."

After a short pause he said, "Sometimes I do feel the desire to experience the touch of white skin at least once in my lifetime. You know, this country is really awful that way - it is so hard for a person to remain pious. Nobody hides anything. I just returned from reading the Guru Granth at Karnail Singh's house. His youngest son got married a couple of weeks ago - the bastard kept on making noises with his wife in the next room. You know how thin the walls are in these homes. It is hard not to have sinful thoughts, even while one is reciting the sacred text - forgive me, my dear God." He looked up to the sky as he always did when addressing God.

We both understood that we were only kidding; still he seemed to have enjoyed my suggestion. He said, "Come over to my basement after work some time and we will have a drink or two, and I'll tell you some stories of my younger days. I have not just saluted the English; I have done some wild things too, you know."

I accepted his invitation. I wanted to listen to his stories and see his small room in the basement, but I hurt myself during that week and our plan for a party never materialized.

Banta Singh did everything in his life that an Indian man is supposed to do. He worked hard all his life to raise his children. In his old days, he fulfilled his religious duties by reciting the holy book countless times and prayed for the well-being of his children and grandchildren. Now he was gone. I was filled with a strange sadness for my friend Fauji Banta Singh. "And how I wished I could have his stool-stick." I am convinced his son does not deserve to keep it.
