

The Jaipur Literature Festival – A Report*

Major General VK Singh (Retd)**

The Seventh DSC Jaipur Literature Festival (JLF) was held at Jaipur from 20th to 24th January 2012. The five day festival has now become one of the largest such events in the world, earning epithets such as the Indian Woodstock and the *Maha Kumbh* of literature. Now in its seventh year, the JLF is held each year during the month of January, in the Durbar Hall and gardens of the Diggi Palace in the city centre. The 2012 event was truly an extravaganza of art, literature and culture, attracting over 75,000 visitors and over five thousand media stories on Google News.

For the first time ever, the military was represented at the JLF through a United Service Institution of India (USI) initiative. A session on military history was held from 1000-1100 hours on 24th January at the Durbar Hall. In the session titled '*Indian Military History: The Missing Links*', the discussants were Major General VK Singh (Retd), a member of the USI; Shri Chandrashekhar Dasgupta, IFS (Retd), a member of the USI Council; Squadron Leader RTS Chhina (Retd), Secretary and Editor, CAFHR, USI; and Major Anit Mukherjee (Retd), a member of USI. The session was moderated by Manoj Joshi, the current comment editor of Mail Today. As would be obvious, USI was well represented. In fact, the entire credit for getting a slot in the JLF should go to the Director, USI and his team.

Many of us were sceptical about the interest and response that a mundane subject like Military History would elicit from the audience. Due to bitter cold, the first session usually has very thin crowd. Entry to the JLF has always been free and unrestricted. This year, due to perceived terror threats to Salman Rushdie, who was expected to attend, the organisers had introduced the system of issuing an ID card to every visitor. This naturally took a lot of time, and led to long queues. As a result, very few could get an

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entry before the beginning of the first session at 10 AM. One can imagine our surprise when we found that the Durbar Hall had been filled up even before the session started. Most of the visitors were not retired army officers, but young people, from schools and colleges.

It is not intended to give details of the points made by the discussants. The theme was the current policy on declassification of military records and its impact on Indian Military History after Independence. Because of the refusal of the Government to make public the Henderson Brooks Report that examined the reasons for the 1962 debacle, all war records of subsequent operations have also not been declassified. As a result, there are no official histories of the 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars. Of course, there are accounts written by officers who have taken part in these operations, but these are not based on authentic records such as war diaries, after action reports, etc. Hence they cannot be termed official histories. As is well known, Military History is an essential ingredient of the training of young officers. Due to a virtual drought in this field, after 1961, officers in training institutions such as the Indian Military Academy, Defence Services Staff College and the War Colleges are still studying World War II campaigns.

The History Division of the Ministry of Defence, which is responsible for production of official military histories, has already written the official histories of 1962, 1965 and 1971 wars. These are available on the website of Bharat Rakshak.com. As Manoj Joshi interjected during the discussion, he was himself instrumental in first putting them on the website of the Times of India. In a way, they have already been published. The history of the 1965 war has also been published in 2011 by Natraj Publishers, Dehradun. This is a reproduction of the India-Pakistan War of 1965, produced by the History Division in 1992, which quotes extensively from war diaries held by it. This was made possible by a declassification board held in 2005, which 'downgraded' the war diaries of 1965 which were intended to be used for publication of the book. Similar boards have been held in respect of 1962 and 1971 wars, and one can expect a similar history to be published soon. Surprisingly, although produced by the Ministry of Defence, this is not an "official" history. Lieutenant General Satish Nambiar (Retd), has gone on record to state that when he was the DGMO, they had cleared the official histories of 1962, 1965 and 1971 for publication without any caveats. These recommendations have either been 'misplaced' or

gathering dust in some dingy basement in South Block. Meanwhile, the 'official' history still has to see the light of the day.

Shortly after we returned from the JLF, there was another interesting development. In October-December 2011 issue of the USI Journal, an account of the 1962 war has been published based on material obtained from Chinese sources. The article clearly brings out that the Chinese had made a deep study of the battle of Chosin Reservoir during the Korean War of 1950-53, in which they were pitted against the US Army in conditions similar to what they had to face in 1962. As a result they avoided the mistakes they had made earlier and gave a better account in 1962. By denying Indian officers the opportunity to study our past campaigns, the Government is inadvertently ensuring that our performance in future wars with China and Pakistan would not be at optimum levels. One hopes that someone in the Ministry of Defence and Army Headquarters realises what grave damage we are doing to our present and future generations of soldiers, sailors and airmen. A conflict with China in the same areas, where we fought in 1962, is not unlikely in the near future. No one will tell them the mistakes made by their forbearers 50 years ago. Neither will they know the tactics of the enemy that gave them a free run to the Assam plains in 1962. Should we send our men to fight and die with blindfolds on their eyes?

The pitfalls of keeping the war records classified even after fifty years was brought out by each of the four speakers. It was also reinforced by several veterans in the audience, as well as some young people. In fact, one young lady floored us by asking why we were all talking only of the impact of the non-availability of records for research and training etc. As a citizen, she wanted to know how and why our soldiers fought and died during the many wars India had fought. A video recording of each session can be seen or downloaded from the Archives Section of the website www.jaipurliteraturefestival.org. Those who wish to see the session on Military History should go to the 'Archives for 2012', and look for the session from 10 AM to 11 AM in the Durbar Hall on 24th January (Day 5).

A brief note on the JLF and some vignettes would not be out of place. The festival is an initiative of the Jaipur Virasat Foundation founded by Faith Singh nee Hardy, an English/Irish Christian brought up in the UK, who married Tony Singh, a cousin of the

Maharaja, and settled down in Jaipur more than 40 years ago. Looking for a means of livelihood they founded Anokhi in 1970, which has become a global brand for traditional Rajasthani textiles. In 2002, she established the Jaipur Virasat Foundation to promote values of sustainable development, social inclusiveness, and cultural conservation in its local context. They also started the Jaipur Heritage International Festival, a two-week annual event that exhibits Rajasthani crafts, arts and folk traditions. The First Jaipur Literature Festival or JLF was held in 2006 as a segment of the Jaipur Heritage International Festival. By 2008, it had developed into a free-standing festival of literature standing on its own feet. The festival directors are the writers Namita Gokhale and William Dalrymple. The event is managed by Teamwork Productions, headed by Sanjoy Roy, the producer and managing director, and Sheuli Sethi, the executive producer.

The inaugural 2006 festival had 18 writers including Hari Kunzru, William Dalrymple, Shobha De and Namita Gokhale and about 100 visitors, some of which “appeared to be tourists who had simply got lost,” according to Dalrymple. In 2007 the festival grew in size and featured Salman Rushdie, Kiran Desai, Suketu Mehta and Shashi Deshpande. In 2008 the festival continued to expand with about 2,500 attendees and several well known authors and speakers, such as Ian McEwan, Donna Tartt, John Berendt, Paul Zacharia, Miranda Seymour and Nayantara Sahgal among others. The evenings were enlivened by music and dance performances by Paban Das Baul, Susheela Raman, Karsh Kale and Anoushka Shankar. Since then, the festival has gone from strength to strength, and hosts a veritable ‘who’s who’ of the literary world, including Nobel laureates and famous media personalities.

The 2012 festival ran into a controversy even before it began. Among the prominent speakers announced in advance were the talk show host Oprah Winfrey and author Salman Rushdie. A section of the Muslim community asked the organisers to cancel the invitation to Rushdie, which they declined. The local authorities in Jaipur announced that they had received intelligence reports that Rushdie might be assassinated if he came to the festival. In view of this, Rushdie cancelled his complete tour of India citing possible threats to his life as the primary reason. He later announced that he had found that the police may have exaggerated the

potential danger, leading to conjectures that this had been done due to political reasons, in view of the Assembly elections to be held in UP after a month. Several writers such as Ruchir Joshi, Jeet Thayil, Hari Kunzru and Amitava Kumar protested by reading out from Rushdie's controversial book *The Satanic Verses*, which is banned in India. In order to avoid aggravating the situation further, the organisers asked the concerned authors to leave. A proposed video link session between Rushdie and the Jaipur Literature Festival also had to be cancelled under Government pressure and protests at the festival site by local leaders of the Muslim community.

As mentioned earlier, entry to the JLF is free. Over the years, the format of the festival has been standardised. Five sessions are conducted simultaneously at venues such as *Durbar Hall*, *Mughal Tent*, *Baithak*, *Front Lawns* and *Samvad* within the Diggi Palace and its grounds. Each session lasts about an hour, including interaction with the audience. There is a gap of 15 minutes between sessions, to enable attendees to move between venues, and an hour's break for lunch from 1.30 to 2.30. The first session starts at 10 AM and the last ends at 7.30 PM. This is followed by a stage performance of about an hour and a half, followed by dinner. In true democratic style, there are no reserved seats, even for VIPs. Often, the hall or tent overflows, and people have to sit on the ground in the aisle or on the sides. Of course, there are many innovative ways to reserve a seat, if one has the time and resources.

The logistics for the festival were mind boggling. To handle the 200 plus authors and several hundred delegates, there was a large team of volunteers, who were stationed at the airport, railway stations, hotels and the main venue. These were mostly students from local colleges, who were keen as mustard and did everything on a run. After talking to a couple of young men in our hotel I found that the entire English Literature class of St Xavier's College had been given a week off, and drafted for this chore. Their duties were changed after a day or two, so that they got a chance to attend some sessions and meet a few authors and celebrities. Among the visitors, the largest number were school and college students, many from cities as far away as Ahmedabad, Mumbai and Kolkata. Their enthusiasm was infectious – armed with autograph books, cameras and voice recorders, they waylaid every author and speaker as soon as a session got over. Some even

spent their pocket money buying books and stood in line outside the signing tent after every session, to get them autographed by their favourite author. Looking at them, one could never imagine that this is the TV generation, hooked to I phones, Facebook and Twitter, with little time for the written word.

According to best-selling novelist Chetan Bhagat, the JLF has given India far better PR worldwide than another similar initiative of the Government – the Commonwealth Games. What is striking is the difference between the JLF's budget – Rs 5 crore, raised through private sponsorship – and that of the Games which cost Rs. 70,000 crore almost entirely funded by the State. Even after spending so much money, most of the Games news was related to the scam or the shoddiness of the work. Bhagat lists six reasons for the success of the JLF phenomenon, which the Government would do well to emulate while organising similar mega events. First, every festival had a few world renowned authors, which gave the event enormous credibility. Second, the JLF's range of sessions made it relevant for a wide variety of audiences, making them connect to the festival. Third, Jaipur is a beautiful city, with warm and hospitable residents, enhancing the experience of the visitor, who hankers to come back. Fourth, was the humility in the organisers' approach. The JLF manages to be classy without being snooty. School children arriving in droves in trains stayed overnight on railway platforms to attend the festival. Fifth, the festival had more than enough media friendly content, including informal chats with authors and visitors, all making for good stories. Sixth, the execution was flawless, with almost no hiccups. Sessions always start and end on time, no mean achievement in India. I attended the talk show between Barkha Dutt and Oprah Winfrey. The crowd was so huge that the gates had to be closed to prevent the ones already inside from getting crushed. Anywhere else there would have been a stampede, but the JLF managed to get it over, without any mishap. Concluding his piece in the Times of India of Saturday, January 28, 2012, Bhagat wrote;

"As a writer, and as an Indian citizen, I feel immensely proud about this celebration of books. Those who say India is all about Bollywood and Cricket should pay a visit to the JLF. Silly controversies come and go. Let us rejoice that India, once known as the land of scholars and knowledge, still has the best literary festival in the world."