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**MAJ CHINT SINGH AND THE ENDURING SPIRIT:
SURVIVAL, SACRIFICE, AND RESOLVE OF INDIAN
POWS IN WWII- A FORGOTTEN CHAPTER IN INDIAN
MILITARY HISTORY**

**BY
MR NARINDER SINGH PARMAR**

**ORGANISED BY CENJOWS
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Introduction: Unveiling a Tragedy

The lecturer, Narinder Singh Parmar, commenced the presentation by extending a warm welcome to the distinguished audience, comprising scholars, senior fellows, and researchers. He introduced the day's subject as one of the most harrowing, yet least recognised, chapters in Indian Military History: the survival stories of 3,000 Indian Prisoners of War (POWs) in the jungles of Papua New Guinea during the Second World War. Mr Parmar highlighted the grim statistics that framed this narrative, noting that of the 3,000 soldiers taken from Singapore and forced into labour between 1943 and 1945, only approximately 201 survived to tell the tale.

The speaker specified that the presentation would focus on the resilience and leadership of Major Chint Singh (then a Jamedar in the 2/12 Frontier Force Regiment), who was one of those few survivors. Mr Parmar described Chint Singh's memoir, *The Man Who Should Have Died*, as a rare eyewitness account that offers a window into the brutality of the era while serving as a case study in resourcefulness, leadership, and the emotional psychology of survival.

The Descent into Darkness

Setting the historical context, the lecturer recounted Chint Singh's deployment in 1941. Posted at the Army Signal Training Centre at Jabalpur, Singh received orders for overseas deployment and boarded the ship *Ashanthia* on 11th April 1941, bidding a poignant farewell to his mother country. Following the fall of Singapore on 15th February 1942, where 130,000 Allied troops were taken as POWs, the narrative shifted to the transport of these prisoners to New Guinea on 5th May 1943.

Mr Parmar described the horrific conditions aboard the Japanese cargo boats, where POWs were packed without space to lie down. Dysentery spread rapidly, and requests for fresh air or water were denied. Upon arriving at Wewak on 16th May 1943, rather

than finding a functional camp, the men were met with swamps and jungles unfit for human habitation. The speaker detailed the "Mechanics of Dehumanisation" employed by the captors. The daily life of the prisoners descended into a routine of forced labour, starvation, and violence.

The lecturer shared a particularly chilling anecdote regarding a Japanese colonel. When inspecting the sick prisoners, the colonel would slap those with fever or ulcers, dismissing them as useless. When the Indian medical officer requested treatment in accordance with international law, the colonel coldly responded, "I do not know any international laws, so therefore your requests cannot be granted. If you speak in this manner again, we will shoot you".

Resistance and the Price of Leadership

Transitioning to the theme of "Resistance Through Resourcefulness," Mr Parmar explained how survival depended on ingenuity. With rations insufficient for even a single meal a day, hundreds developed acute beri-beri. The speaker noted a turning point when a Formosan labourer advised the prisoners that the Japanese would give them nothing, and they must steal to live. This sparked an organised system of theft where stealth parties stole rice, dried fish, and medicine, hiding their gains in swamps the Japanese feared to enter.

The lecture then honoured the memory of Captain Nirpal Chand. In April 1944, during a forced march to Hollandia, Captain Chand guided the men through terror and deprivation. Mr Parmar recounted the moment Captain Chand stood up to Lieutenant Mitsuba, refusing to march his sick men further, demanding transport and medical aid. For this refusal to bend, Captain Chand was taken into the bush and executed, his final words to his men being a resolute, "Don't worry, there are good times ahead".

The Struggle in the Jungle

Following Captain Chand's martyrdom, the burden of leadership fell upon Chint Singh, who inherited a shattered and starving group. The lecturer described the "Jungle Exile," a year of starvation where rations ceased, and men were forced to survive on "sac-sac," a fibrous starch extracted from the sago palm. This process was laborious, and the food was virtually indigestible. The environment itself became an adversary;

torrential rains collapsed huts, and without medical supplies, maggots infested the open wounds of the soldiers.

Mr Parmar highlighted that amidst this cruelty, there were moments of humanity from the indigenous population. New Guinea villagers risked their lives to provide pumpkins, bananas, and pork to the prisoners. The speaker mentioned a native woman who travelled miles daily to deliver food to Chint Singh, enabling him to maintain the strength to support his men.

The lecturer delved into the psychological aspect of Singh's leadership. It required "emotional stamina and moral imagination". Mr Parmar described how Singh, often overwhelmed and contemplating suicide, would rekindle his resolve by looking at the men who depended on him. He would reassure dying soldiers that the Americans were coming soon, even when he doubted it himself. These "well-intentioned falsehoods" became lifelines for men whose bodies were failing, allowing them to pass away with hope rather than terror.

Liberation and Heartbreak

As the war neared its end in mid-1945, Japanese brutality intensified, with executions becoming common for those too weak to walk. In September 1945, following Japan's capitulation, a Japanese officer announced the end of the war. Mr Parmar noted Singh's cautious reaction, praising the Japanese to avoid giving them any last-minute reason to execute the survivors.

The speaker then narrated the heartbreaking events of 28th September. As the survivors were being transported to Marienburg, two men, Sepoy Jai Ram and Sepoy Abraham, died just an hour apart. Mr Parmar quoted the dying words of Sepoy Jai Ram: "Sir, I know I will not see India and the new world, but I am happy now to know we are no longer prisoners of war... tell my parents Jai Ram died a peaceful death".

The breakthrough came two days later with a letter from Lieutenant F.O. Monk of the Australian forces. The lecturer described the emotional scene when the eleven surviving Indians reached the Australian camp. Chint Singh, despite his skeletal condition, stood at attention and saluted, reporting, "Sir, one officer, two NCOs and eight other ranks reporting for whatever duty the King and the Australian Army requires of us". Lieutenant Monk later recalled finding it hard to reply due to the overwhelming

emotion of the moment. Mr Parmar termed this "leadership distilled to its purest essence".

Under Australian care at the 2/15 Field Ambulance, the POWs experienced a "rebirth," receiving food, medicine, and dignity. The speaker paid special tribute to Sergeant Ron Bader, a member of the nursing staff who showed remarkable kindness, writing to the families of the soldiers and eventually taking the men to the cinema once they grew stronger.

A Tragic Twist of Fate

Mr Parmar then moved to a tragic post-script titled "Destiny Played its role again." On 15th November 1945, the survivors were ready to fly to Rabaul to catch a ship home. However, Chint Singh was ordered to remain behind as a chief witness for the Australian War Crimes Commission. The lecturer described the tearful farewell at the aerodrome, where his men told him, "You have guided us magnificently... we will miss you very much".

That evening, Sergeant Ron Bader arrived at Singh's tent, exhausted and distressed. He delivered the devastating news that the plane carrying Singh's ten comrades had crashed, killing all passengers. The crash was confirmed the next morning in the paper *Guinea Gold* under the headline "28 Believed Killed in New Britain Crash". The speaker conveyed Singh's immense grief, quoting his memoir: "They have left a black spot on my mind forever".

Legacy and Mateship

In the final segment of the lecture, Mr Parmar discussed the enduring bond between Chint Singh and the Australians, termed "Aussie Mateship". Detained as a witness, Singh shared a tent with Australian officers and later wrote a farewell letter expressing hope that the friendship between the two countries would continue forever.

The lecturer highlighted that in 1970, the Returned and Services League (RSL) invited Major Chint Singh to Papua New Guinea for the 25th Anniversary of the war's end. He received wide media coverage and visited the war cemetery in Lae. The speaker also mentioned that in 1971, the RSL erected three monuments to honour Chint Singh and the Indian POWs.

Major Chint Singh passed away in 1983 while working on his memoir. Mr Parmar read an excerpt from a condolence letter sent by Mr Marsden Hordern, an Australian friend, which described Singh as "disciplined, intelligent, and courageous," noting that he was never defeated by the terrible cruelties of men.

Conclusion: Lest We Forget

Concluding the lecture, Mr Parmar reflected on the legacy of these events. Of the 3,000 Indian POWs sent to New Guinea, 2,800 paid the ultimate sacrifice. He asserted that Major Chint Singh's story illuminates the profound impact of leadership not as a title, but as behaviour forged under fire.

The lecturer ended by reminding the audience of their moral responsibility to keep these narratives alive and ensuring that such acts of silent heroism are never forgotten. He requested the audience to stand for a one-minute silent prayer for the Indian soldiers who never saw their loved ones again, closing with the words "Lest We Forget" and "Jai Hind".