

# Battle of Nathu La

## **Introduction**

Nathu La at 14200 feet is an important pass on the Tibet-Sikkim border through which passes the old Gangtok-Yatung-Lhasa Trade Route. Although the Sikkim-Tibet boundary is well defined by the Anglo-Chinese Convention of 17 March 1890, the Chinese were not comfortable with Sikkim being an Indian protectorate and with the deployment of the Indian Army at that time. During the 1965 War between India and Pakistan, the Chinese gave an ultimatum to India to vacate both Nathu La and Jelep La passes on the Sikkim-Tibet border. The Mountain Division, under whose jurisdiction Jelep La was at that time, vacated the pass. It remains under Chinese possession till date.<sup>1</sup> However, Major General (later Lieutenant General) Sagat Singh refused to vacate Nathu La, which was a Border Out Post (BOP), while the main defences were at Changgu. Two dominating features South and North of Nathu La namely Sebu La and Camel's back were held by the Indians. Artillery Observation Post officers deployed on these two features had an excellent observation into Chinese depth areas whereas from Northern shoulder, Chinese have very little observations into Indian depth areas. This factor proved crucial in the clash that ensued. The entire complex was under 112 Mountain Brigade, which was commanded by an Armoured Corps officer, Brigadier MMS Bakshi, a Maha Vir Chakra awardee from the Battle of Shakargarh in the 1965 war. Nathu La was defended by the 2 GRENADIERS under the command of Lieutenant Colonel (later Brigadier) Rai Singh. Across the border was the PLA's 11 Division. PLA intrusions increased in late July 1967, prompting the move of an additional Battalion, 18 RAJPUT, to Nathu La in August.

Lieutenant General (later Field Marshal) Sam Manekshaw was the Eastern Army Commander. Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora had recently taken over command of 33 Corps and had under his command 17 Division which was entrusted with the defence of large parts of Sikkim including Nathu La. Comprising the passes of Nathu La, Cho La and Sabu La, Major General (later Lieutenant General) Sagat Singh was the Divisional Commander of 17 Mountain Division and knew his area of operation.

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1. "The Nathu La Skirmish: When Chinese Were given a Bloody Nose." 2019. Claws.in. 2019.  
<https://archive.claws.in/595/the-nathu-la-skirmish-when-chinese-were-given-a-bloody-nose-sheru-thapliyal.html>.



*The wire fence being built at Nathu La while a Chinese soldier watches.*

Source: Watershed 1967 India's Forgotten Victory Over China

### **Planning and Preparation**

The daily routine at Nathu La used to start with patrolling by both sides along the perceived border which almost always resulted in arguments. The only one on the Chinese side who could converse in broken English was the Political Commissar who could be recognised by a red patch on his cap. Sentries of both the forces used to stand barely one meter apart in the centre of the Pass which was marked by Nehru Stone, commemorating Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru's trek to Bhutan through Nathu La and Chumbi Valley in 1959.

India believed that the watershed line marked the boundary. But the Chinese, on the other hand, even contested the mere presence of the Indian Army in Sikkim. The situation on the Watershed continued to aggravate throughout 1966 and the beginning of 1967. The Indian and Chinese troops were now eyeball to eyeball. Any patrol sent to the watershed was immediately paralleled by a Chinese patrol moving in close proximity. In early 1967, fed up of continuous Chinese provocation and their attempts to occupy the Watershed, Sagat decided to demarcate the boundary at Nathu La with a barbed wire fence and obtained clearance from his superiors. Brigadier (then Lt Col) Rai Singh recalls that when he moved into the Division Sector in May 1967, en route to Nathu La with his battalion, he was met by Sagat

who told him to train his unit to lay a barbed wire fence along the watershed regardless of any interference by the Chinese. <sup>2</sup>

General Sagat Singh believed he was right to have started the project of marking out the border according to the watershed principle. The line that separated China and Sikkim would have to be marked out explicitly, once and for all.



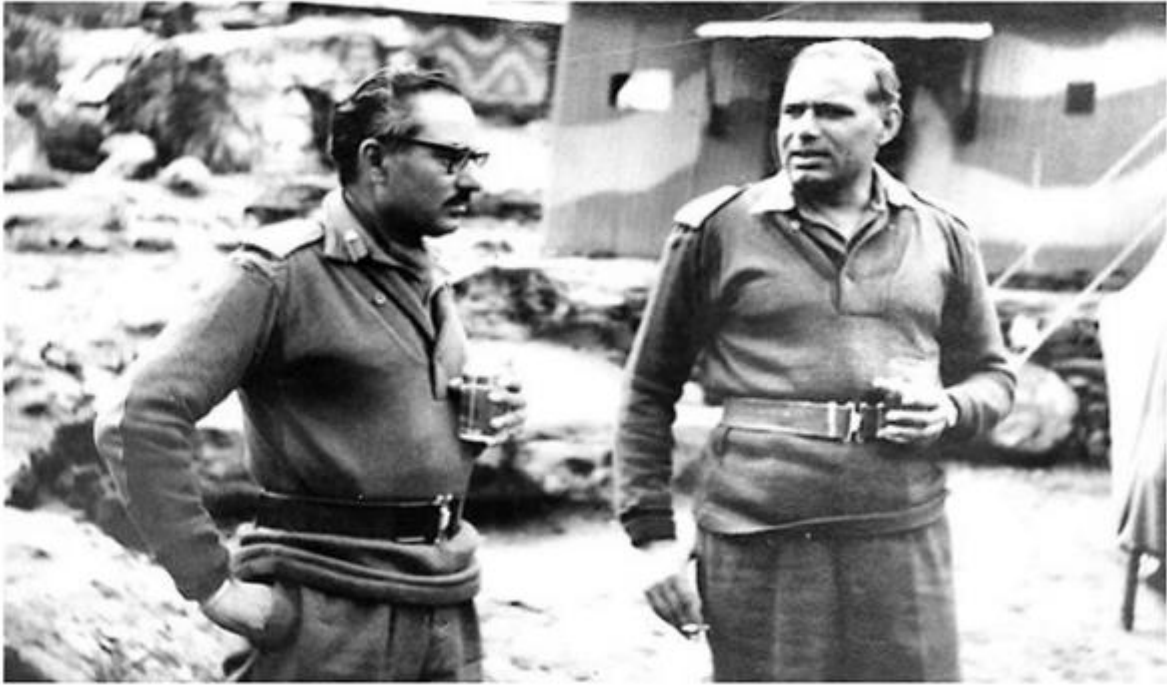
*Soldiers from both sides facing off during the arguments over the fence.*

Source: Watershed 1967 India's Forgotten Victory Over China

This decision resulted in a series of heated exchanges between the English-speaking political officer of the Chinese military and Colonel Rai Singh. The conflict reached its peak on 07 September when around 100 Chinese soldiers appeared at the location of the fence. What started as a heated argument quickly turned into a physical fight, with both sides exchanging blows and insults, even though they couldn't understand each other's language. The Chinese Political Officer, who was a senior figure, stepped in, hoping his presence would calm the Indian soldiers. However, his continued interference and arrogant attitude only made things worse. One of the Indian soldiers, frustrated by the officer's actions, grabbed him by the collar and shoved him hard. The officer fell to the ground, suffering a broken nose and damaged glasses. By the time the fighting stopped, both sides had a few soldiers who were injured and bruised.

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<sup>2</sup> Randhir Singh, *A Talent for War: The Military Biography of LT Gen Sagat Singh*, VIJ Books, 2015



*Major General Sagat Singh (right) with Brigadier Bakshi, the Brigade Commander in Sikkim*

Source: Watershed 1967 India's Forgotten Victory Over China

On the night of 10 September 1967, the Division Commander General Sagat Singh called an urgent meeting at the Headquarters of the 112 Mountain Brigade, which was led by Brigadier MMS Bakshi, in Chhangu. The officers were instructed to be prepared in case the situation worsened. Major Bishan Singh from the 2 GRENADIERS was given the responsibility of overseeing the installation of the wire fence, with Captain PS Dagar assisting him. Additional personnel, including members of the Engineers Regiment, were brought in along with the necessary materials. The Artillery, which had already been positioned earlier, was also put on standby, ready to respond if needed.



*Major General Sagat Singh (front row, third from right) with officers and troops at Nathu La, 1967.*

Source: Watershed 1967 India's Forgotten Victory Over China

### **The Battle**

That morning was bright and sunny, a stark contrast to the usual foggy days. The Engineers and soldiers began setting up long iron pickets from Nathu La to Sebu La, marking the border line. Additional supplies were also moved to Nathu La in preparation for laying the fence the following morning. Major Bishan Singh and Captain PS Dagar oversaw the operation, with oversight from Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh, the Commanding Officer of 2 GRENADIERS. Meanwhile, the Artillery Observation Posts at Sebu La and Camel's Back were put on high alert, ready for any developments.



*Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh, Commanding Officer, the 2nd Grenadiers, and Adjutant Captain B S Koshal explaining to agitated Chinese soldiers the alignment of barbed wire along the watershed.*

Source: Watershed 1967 India's Forgotten Victory Over China

General Sagat Singh, in his briefing, had instructed his commanders not to expose themselves to the enemy. As the wire-laying party headed by Major Bishan Singh and Captain Dagar walked out in the open to continue the fencing work. Despite General Sagat's explicit instructions to stay inside his bunker at Nathu La, Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh instinctively stepped out from the trenches along with an armed escort and joined them. Now the three of them and the other designated boys were out in the open.

A group of Chinese soldiers, eager for the Indians to show up, strode up angrily to the fence. The PLA men stood in front of the soldiers laying the wire. The Chinese Commander was leading the argument and the Political Commissar stood next to him facing Lieutenant Colonel Rai Singh and the others including Major Bishan and his men. The Indians were asked to stop work immediately. A scuffle erupted and the Commissar got roughed up once again. The Chinese soldiers disengaged and went back to their side.



*Indian soldiers during the Nathu La Skirmish*

Source: <https://morungexpress.com/1967-nathu-la-skirmishes-deserve-to-be-remembered-with-pride>

Soon after, the PLA opened fire with MMGs accompanied by Mortar and Artillery fire. Colonel Rai Singh was hit by a Chinese bullet and fell down. With their Commanding Officer Colonel Rai Singh shot at the start, the Indian troops took cover.

The Indian forces, led by Captain Dagar, then attempted to attack the Chinese Post. A Company of 18 RAJPUT, commanded by Major Harbhajan Singh, along with the Sappers and Pioneers working on the fence, found themselves exposed and took heavy casualties from Chinese gunfire. Realizing that the only way to stop the Chinese fire was with a direct assault, Major Harbhajan urged his men forward and led them in a charge against the Chinese position. Although many Indian soldiers were killed and wounded by the Chinese Machine Gun fire, those who reached the Chinese bunkers fought fiercely with their bayonets, killing many of the enemy troops. Both Major Harbhajan and Captain Dagar lost their lives during the attack. Several of the Indian troops were mowed down by Chinese machine-guns, but those who reached the Chinese bunkers used their bayonets, and accounted for many of the enemy.



*Nathu La skirmish*

Source: <https://www.defencexp.com/nathu-la-when-indian-army-gave-bloody-nose-to-the-chinese/>

Staying calm, Brigadier Bakshi felt that charging at the Chinese bunkers would result in more casualties. Brigadier Bakshi moved out from his position at Central Bump and went around exhorting the men to keep fighting. The signal line was re-laid at Sherathang, which had broken due to intense firing. General Sagat had moved to Sherathang. He had asked his superiors for permission to use Artillery support and the two Artillery Officers at the Observation Posts on Sebu La and Camel's Back had been asked by him to be ready. General Sagat needed approval from the Army Headquarters, which in turn needed the consent of the Defence Ministry. Such permission could take more than five hours to arrive. By then, the Chinese would gain an early advantage.

The Grenadiers had suffered large numbers of casualties at the start, but the officers and men refused to back down and responded with Machine Guns and rifles. The melee continued amidst a gritty fightback from the Grenadiers. Artillery officers sitting atop Sebu La and Camel's Back could see deep into the Yatung valley. The dominant position overlooking Chinese territory provided them a clear line of sight.





*Chinese soldiers guard the border on the Nathu La*

Source: <https://swarajyamag.com/defence/nathu-la-and-cho-la-clashes-of-1967-how-the-indian-army-dealt-with-chinese-trouble>

General Sagat, in his capacity as a Division Commander, did not have the authority to use Artillery and neither did the Corps Commander, Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora. The Army Chief was travelling abroad, and Lieutenant General Sam Manekshaw, the Eastern Army Commander, who was officiating in his place in Delhi, wasn't immediately available to give the orders. Due to these circumstances, General Sagat Singh decided to order the artillery fire himself. Sagat asked for some medium guns, which were moved up to Kyangnosa La, at a height of over 10,000 feet. The artillery observation posts, which Sagat had sited earlier, proved their worth in bringing down effective fire on the Chinese.

The Artillery Officers in the Observation Posts, including Captain (later Major General) Sheru Thapliyal, rose to the occasion. The Medium Guns boomed, supported by the Machine Guns and Mortars from the forward Posts. Sheru called up his guns to unleash an uninterrupted torrent of bombardment on the Chinese, the shells crashing down on the Chinese bunkers. The road from the Yatung Valley that brought supplies and reinforcements to the Chinese bunkers was shelled, causing immense damage to trucks and support elements. The Chinese soldiers, their bunkers, the support lines and communication had been wiped out. By the time the bombardment ended, the casualties on the Chinese side were enormous. Because of lack of observation, and the steep incline west of Nathu La, most Chinese shells fell behind the forward defences and did not harm the Indians. The Artillery Observation Posts proved their worth in bringing down effective fire on the Chinese.

## **Conclusion**

On 14 September, the Chinese government threatened to use its Air Force if India continued with any more artillery shelling. The lesson, though, had been driven home: the Chinese were beaten back. Fighting stopped thereafter at Nathu La.

The Battle of Nathu La raged from 11 to 14 September 1967. On 16 September, the bodies were handed over in a ceremony covered by the media and attended by Lieutenant General (later Field Marshal) Sam Manekshaw, Lieutenant General Jagjit Singh Aurora and Major General (later Lieutenant General) Sagat Singh.

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