

## INDIAN EXPRESS

### Outside RBI: Soldier back from Siachen to man who found old notes his father left in locker

Fortnight to go before deadline ends, people struggle to exchange demonetised currency one last time

Written by Sarah Hafeez | New Delhi | Updated: March 15, 2017 4:33 pm



**Mahendra Singh outside the RBI building. Prem Nath Pandey**

NAIK MAHENDRA Singh, 30, was serving at roughly 20,000 feet above sea level in Siachen when Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced the demonetisation of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 notes on November 8 last year. Singh, who had Rs 6,000 in old notes in his pocket, heard the PM's address only a few days later, when the weather improved and radio transmission became clear. The soldier, who had applied for leave in November, was granted a 10-day holiday only this month. He first went home to Paota village in Rajasthan, and then took a bus to the RBI headquarters in the Capital — under the impression that anyone could exchange old notes there until March 31.

But on Tuesday, Singh found that the option only exists for NRIs and those who were outside the country between November 8 and December 30 last year. In his November 8 speech, the PM had said: "There may be some who, for some reason, are not able to deposit their old Rs 500 or 1,000 notes by December 30, 2016... They can go to specified offices of the RBI up to March 31, 2017 and deposit the notes after submitting a declaration form." But the decision was later modified.

"I did not know that the March 31 deadline had been changed. I would not have come all this way, spending another Rs 1,000 on bus fares, if I had known," said Singh. To prove that he was stationed in Siachen, Singh even showed proof of troop movement to guards at the RBI office, only to be turned away.

Also outside the RBI office was Pankaj Singh, a soldier posted at the Army headquarters in Maoist-hit Jharkhand. Carrying Rs 19,000 in old notes, he said, "I was stationed in the forests, where phones and radio communication don't reach us. Our rations are supplied by choppers.

There are no banks there; how are we supposed to get news and take leave to get old notes exchanged?"

Rajesh, another CRPF officer, whose wife suffered two miscarriages while he was training in Coimbatore, tried to reason with policemen stationed outside the gates. "How could the government not put in place guidelines for us? At least they should make an exception for those who can furnish proof of movement orders. Is this fair? NRIs deal in lakhs of rupees, losing Rs 10,000 or Rs 20,000 is not going to pinch them. But we earn less than Rs 30,000. The Rs 9,000 which has become useless now is the money I earned while I was training at Coimbatore," he said.

Others said they had found money inside quilts, pillows, behind old photographs and wall hangings during pre-Holi clean-up. Pankaj Singh travelled to Delhi from Haldwani so that he could exchange the over Rs 20,000 left behind by his late father in a Central Bank of India locker. Pankaj found the money last year, but needed a certificate of succession to get it transferred to himself last month. Carrying a copy of the bank statement, his father's death certificate and identity proof, Singh said, "Why do I have to plead with the RBI to claim what's rightfully mine?"

Among the others outside the RBI building were NRIs and those who were out of the country over the last few months. They alleged that immigration and customs officials had refused to give documents for old currency declared at the airport. "Nobody answers the helpline number and the rules are not clearly laid out on the RBI website. Every day, they demand a new set of documents at the RBI gate. We have been coming for three days now," said Ashu Ranjan, an NRI from Bahrain.

Some alleged that they had been approached by touts who were offering Rs 100 for every old Rs 500 note. "About five touts approached me in the last two hours. How are they taking back old notes," said Pratik Ranjan, a college student with Rs 2,000 in old notes.