

A Personal Experience in Aid to Civil Authority - The Telangana Agitation of 1972

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Andhra Pradesh was created on 1 October 1953 from the Telugu speaking northern districts of Madras State now called Tamil Nadu. On 1 November 1956 the Telangana region (Medak and Warangal divisions) of the erstwhile Hyderabad State was merged with it to form the Telugu-speaking state of Andhra Pradesh. The people of Telangana always felt neglected and six long decades struggle led to creation of the 29th State of the Union on 02 June 2014. I and my Battalion 13 KUMAON have a bit of role in this evolution process as narrated below in this piece.

During 1971 India-Pakistan War, I was posted on the staff of HQ 62 Mountain Brigade that took part in Bangladesh liberation war, while my unit 13 KUMAON took part in operations in the Jaisalmer Sector. I was posted back to the Battalion immediately after the cease fire and made commander of the screen position almost in eye ball to eye ball contact with the Pakistanis in the wilderness of the desert with temperatures soaring to around 50 degrees Celsius. The Battalion finally moved to its new peace station Udaipur - the lake city in Rajasthan and we looked forward to living with our families for a while. I got a short 10 days leave to get my family that was staying in Kanpur where my previous formation was located prior to the 1971 war.

We quickly packed our baggage and left Kanpur for Udaipur. My wife was very excited to join the Paltan along with our three years old daughter for the first time and we looked forward to enjoying a peace tenure after the 1971 War. But things were to unfold differently for all of us. As our train arrived at Udaipur station, I alighted on the platform looking for my Sahayak and some battalion representative earmarked to receive us. To my utter surprise I saw our men in battle fatigues loading a train on the adjacent platform that apparently looked like a military special. Major Bandopadhyay, a few months junior to me saw me and saluting smartly uttered, "thank God, Nini you have come." I was the officiating Commanding Officer (CO) as Lieutenant Colonel (Later Brigadier) RV Jatar, Major Wakhle, Second in Command, and Major Misra the senior most Company Commander were away and that the Battalion was moving on 'red hot priority' to Secunderabad in Andhra Pradesh as 'Telangana agitation' had taken an ugly turn and our Brigade had been ordered to move forthwith to defuse the situation. Since the unruly agitators had been fired upon and perhaps treated harshly by the CRPF, the mobs everywhere in the Telangana region were anti-CRPF and were shouting slogans like 'CRPF Go Back, CRPF Hai Hai' and so on.

Needless to say, since military special was almost ready to move, I left my wife and our little child at the Udaipur Railway Station itself to be taken care of by the low medical category Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO)-in-charge of the battalion rear party who was directed to take them safely to my single room Officers Mess accommodation. He was also directed by the Quarter Master (QM) to provide them langar meals from the langar (soldiers' cook house) as Officers Mess was moving with the Battalion and our luggage was yet to fetch up. Other officers' wives who had come to the Railway Station to bid 'good bye' assured me that they would look after my wife and daughter till the Battalion returned. In the Armed Forces we graduate with 'service before self' and military families too realise the predicament and commitment of the service personnel and thus their support and sacrifices indeed are real motivators and force multipliers so very necessary for combat effectiveness.

Since we moved from desert terrain, obviously our uniform was in Khakis. During our train journey, I sent 'Emergency' (a category indicating precedence for clearing) signals to my formation and the Army HQ to issue us Olive Green popularly called OG uniforms so that the agitators do not mistake Army units for the CRPF. In those days, Rajasthan had only metre gauge railway lines and our train moved to Ahmedabad with a lunch distribution break around Himmat Nagar. At Ahmedabad we hauled in broad gauge train and after nearly 30 hours we reached Secunderabad. The Station Commander, Secunderabad met us at the railway station and briefed me that the new Andhra State buses had been mustered to take our company columns to Guntur, Vijayawada, Tenali and Machhlipatnam. The conductors of the buses would act as interpreters as our troops being North Indians did not know Telugu. The Battalion HQ was to be located in Guntur with a company column. I asked him about my two demands - OG uniforms for troops and a magistrate with each column. He replied that he had got my signal, and Ordnance Maintenance Company (OMC) had been tasked to deliver the OG uniforms at the earliest in location of each column; and that during this agitation not many magistrates were available as being locals they feared reprisals. He also told me that the unit's Imprest Account (an account to draw salaries from) had been opened and we could draw men's salary on the last of the month that was a week away, from Secunderabad. We were told, since all schools and colleges were closed, our columns would be located in the institutions earmarked for each column. The Battalion HQ along with one company was to be located in Guntur Medical College complex.

While our columns moved, the agitators mostly young men and women in thousands were squatting on the roads all over in villages and small towns and as I had apprehended, mistook us for the CRPF and violently agitated and gheraoed our buses chanting 'CRPF Go Back and CRPF Hai Hai' slogans. When our column commanders told them on loud hailers that they were army troops and the columns were from 13 KUMAON they did not believe this fact and, continuously and aggressively kept shouting 'Liars...Liars, GO Back, Go Back'; often pelted stones and squatted in front of our vehicles. I again sent a Special Situation Report (SITREP) requesting for OG uniforms immediately to our superior authorities, lest matter took an ugly turn.

Within the next few days of our arrival in the Telangana region agitating for a separate state, Lieutenant Colonel RV Jatar, the CO, Major PM Wakhle, the Second-in-Command and Major Misra, arrived back in the Battalion from leave and I joined my Bravo Company located in the VV Giri Degree College complex in a small town Tenali, often called by the locals as the Paris of Andhra Pradesh. We did regular flag marches but agitators always thought we were CRPF personnel in Khaki uniforms and booed and jeered us as liars whenever we told them that we were the Regular Army in khaki uniforms from the desert region. They also questioned that if these were military columns, why were they not moving in military trucks?

On the last day of the month, Captain PV Singh (a short statured officer but a live wire), Adjutant of the Battalion had collected the Regimental Imprest money for distribution of pay and allowances in the new Andhra State

Transport Corporation bus near Vijayawada with an escort of a few armed soldiers from the Battalion. The agitators in thousands squatting on a road crossing stopped the bus and started shouting 'CRPF Go Back' slogans. Through the interpreter and himself in Hindi and English, Captain PV Singh repeatedly told the crowd on loud hailer that they were a military column in Khaki uniforms as they had come from Rajasthan desert on a very short notice. The agitators refused to believe them and charged the bus and tried to torch the same by sprinkling petrol. Also, some miscreant(s) threw a crude bomb or two inside the bus through a window and one of the escort jawan's two fingers were blown off. Captain PV Singh coolly announced to the agitators time and again to disperse or else he would be forced to fire. The mob in awful frenzy and with a wrong apprehension thought that military personnel could never be in khaki dresses and were in fact CRPF personnel lying to them, attacked the bus. So as not to endanger lives of the troops and also ensuring security of the large sum of imprest money that he was carrying, Captain PV Singh fired two rounds from his sten machine carbine aiming below the waistline of the front ranking violent agitators. Two agitators unfortunately lost their lives in the firing but the bus, troops and Imprest money were saved though two fingers of the Jawan in crude bomb attack were lost and agitators dispersed peacefully and quickly. The next day Times of India, published from Vijayawada had front page news item 'Army Commander fires, two agitators dead' that incidentally let the agitators realise that it was indeed the Army in khaki uniforms and started respecting and applauding Army columns for their humane attitude and fair play.

Needless to say, after this unfortunate incident, in the next 24 hours, the Battalion was supplied with two pairs of the OG uniforms for each soldier. Thereafter, we started operating in OG uniforms. Over the next few months, when the Battalion was deployed in various locations, the locals and agitators would salute, clap and appreciate Army's impartial role with compassion and for using minimum force in bringing the situation under control. The same students of the VV Giri College, Tenali who used to agitate against the CRPF gave us a grand emotional farewell, praising our troops a lot and many of them with emotional fervour requested us not to go back to Udaipur!

There were many lessons learnt from our deployment in aid to civil authorities during those tumultuous days that are not taught in the Army institutions or manuals. the major lessons could be summarised as under:-

- (a) In rural and semi-urban areas, except in Rajasthan and parts of Gujarat, OG uniform is synonymous with the Army and, khaki for the Police and Home Guards. Therefore, Army columns must always be in their OG uniforms when deployed in aid of civil authority.
- (b) Likewise, Army columns moving about in military trucks/vehicles with camouflaged nets in maintenance of law and order situations /disturbed areas are psychologically considered more potent. Miscreants and locals understand that army means business and acts with impartiality and fairness.
- (c) Positioning of magistrates with each column is essential and very important.
- (d) Those were the days without mobile phones, Internet and TV. Local vernacular media must inform the populace that the Army was being deployed to restore the situation. If Army is operating in Khaki uniforms and in civilian vehicles due to any constraints that must be repeatedly televised, printed and broadcast.
- (e) Army columns also need to be provided with crowd control weapons like rubber bullets, sten grenades etc. which can be used in most situations without causing fatal casualties. The necessity to use live ammunition would arise only when a frenzied mob threatens lives, property and acting in self defence using minimum force, with impartiality and in good faith. However, this needs to be weighed against diluting the psychological impact of the Army's appearance in such situations.

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