

Forty Years of Operation Meghdoot: A Saga of Unparalleled Valour

Introduction

13 Apr an auspicious day forty years ago was chosen for pre-empting Pakistan in Siachen. Since that date in 1984, Operation Meghdoot, remains an unparalleled saga of valour, determination and sacrifice on the highest and harshest battle field in the world, holding all the passes and preventing any kind of Pakistani intrusion along the Actual Ground Position Line (AGPL). With temperatures ranging below minus 50°C and at an altitude of over 6,400 meters, Siachen which means ‘abundance of wild roses’ in Balti language is the second longest glacier in the world,

The root cause of the Siachen dispute can be traced back to the Karachi Agreement of 1949. The representatives of both the nations drew the ‘Ceasefire Line’ across maps of Jammu and Kashmir from Manawar in the South, to Khor in the North and thence ‘North to the Glaciers’ through NJ 9842. Post the 1971 War, the line running North of NJ 9842, was the point mentioned when the talks between India and Pakistan took place in Suchetgarh to delineate the Line of Control. Presumably when the discussion came up on the glaciated wilderness of snow and ice, the representatives stopped at grid Point NJ 9842 on the presumption that neither side would be interested in contesting an area where not a blade of grass grows and even breathing is a problem.

Beneath the veneer of this bleak beauty lie menacing hazards that snatch away human lives if one is not careful. The Glacier, is of strategic importance to India, Pakistan and China as it is a hub for Shaksgam Valley and Karakoram Pass*[i]*.

In 1963, Pakistan illegally ceded some 5180 sq km of Indian territory to China in the area where the boundaries of India, Pakistan and China meet thereby altering the geo-strategic importance of this area. Further, the Glacier is the source for the Nubra River that eventually feeds the Indus River, which is the major water source that irrigates the plains of Punjab in Pakistan. The problem started when Pakistan decided to further their ambitions by permitting and assisting foreign mountaineering and scientific expeditions in the area and raised the issue of ‘rights’ in an area that did not belong to them.

Throughout the 1970s, a number of mountaineering expeditions were sponsored from the Pakistan side, many of which included foreign participants with the aim of laying claim to this area. These crossed the Saltoro Ridge and the Siachen Glacier.

The Build Up

It was only on 24 Jan 1978; that the Indian authorities became aware of the implications of joining NJ9842 to the Karakoram Pass and Pakistan’s mountaineering expeditions. While due Northwards meant along the Saltoro Ridge to K2, Pakistan in a cartographic aggression joined the line with Karakoram Pass thereby including both Siachen and Shaksgam Valley in their area.

In 1978, Col Narinder Kumar led a significant military mountaineering expedition to climb peaks around the Siachen Glacier. This expedition was followed by further climbs in 1980 and 1981, including Saltoro Kangri I and Apsarasas*[ii]*. Colonel Kumar, a highly decorated mountaineer, detected Pakistan's cartographic aggression in Siachen during these expeditions. Additionally,

evidence of other incursions into Siachen from the west was discovered. Subsequently, the Indian Army deployed Long Range Patrols to the area.

Col Kumar notified Lt Gen ML Chibber, PVSM, AVSM, initially as the Director General of Military Operations and later as the Northern Army Commander, regarding Pakistan's mountaineering expeditions in Siachen. He proposed establishing a post during the summer to prevent Pakistani intrusion, earning him the nickname 'Saviour of Siachen'^[iii]. The Indian Air Force played a crucial role by providing logistical support and fresh rations. A strategy to counter Pakistan's advances and retain India's rightful territory was deliberated at Army Headquarters and approved by Chief Gen Arun Vaidya, PVSM, MVC**, AVSM, subsequently endorsed by the Cabinet Committee of Security. This led to the implementation of a pre-emptive counter-operation, resulting in the occupation of the Saltoro Range by the Indian Army.

The Indian Army launched Operation Meghdoot on 13 Apr 1984 under the leadership of Lt Gen Manohar Lal Chibber, Lt gen PN Hoon and Maj Gen Shiv Sharma. The primary objective of the operation was to pre-empt the seizure of Sia La, and Bilafond La passes by the Pakistan Army. Bilafond La had been used as a traditional Pass for climbing from the West. From the North to South, there were four important passes on the Saltoro Ridge: Sia La, Bilafond La, Gyong La and Chulung La.

Commencement of the Operations

Brig VN Channa's 26 Sector was tasked with establishing the Indian Army's presence on the Siachen Glacier. 4 KUMAON, supported by Ladakh Scouts and two Companies of 19 KUMAON under Lt Col DK Khanna, were assigned to occupy the Glacier Complex. Before the mission, the Task Force underwent extensive training. Major RS Sandhu led the initial troops of the Zorawar Task Force, with Captain (Later Lt Gen) Sanjay Kulkarni commanding the first wave. Despite initial setbacks due to severe snowstorms, they successfully raised the Indian Tricolour on Bilafond La four days later.^[iv]

He recalls approaching the pass only to find a Pakistani helicopter hovering overhead and it was at that time Pakistan realised they had lost the race to occupy the Saltoro Ridge which they had planned to occupy as part of Operation Ababeel.

The foot column led by Major VS Salaria of Ladakh Scouts and Capt (later Lt Col) PV Yadav, SM, reached the Glacier subsequently, after an extremely strenuous four-day march over extremely inhospitable terrain. The column set up Camps I, II and III for maintenance of newly established Posts on the Glacier.

Pakistani troops soon occupied a location West of Bilafond La and commenced firing on 27 Apr and thereafter launched their first attack on 23 Jun. But in the mountains once the heights are held by trained and acclimatised soldiers who are logistically sustained it is nearly impossible to dislodge them.

In Feb 1985, the adversary attempted an attack to occupy the height overlooking Sia La; this attempt too met with failure. By 1987, the Indian Army managed to control all major mountain passes of Sia La, Bilafond La, Gyong La and all the commanding heights of the Saltoro Ridge West of the Siachen Glacier.

The next major effort to change the situation on the ground took place in 1987, when the Pakistani Special Services Group (SSG) occupied a position overlooking the Bilafond La area in Mar-Apr named as Quaid Post after Quaid-e-Azam Mohammad Ali Jinnah. The Post was a

strategically important area in Siachen that was infiltrated by Pakistani forces was located at a height of 6,500 m on the highest peak in the Siachen Glacier and threatened Indian movement on the Western Siachen Glacier.

The Battle of Bana Post

In order to take control of the Quaid Post, located at an altitude of 21,153 ft, India launched Operation RAJIV under which on the night of 25 Jun 1987, a team led by Nb Sub (now Honorary Capt) Bana Singh of 8 JAK LI moved forward to capture the post. Nb Sub Bana Singh and his team as a part of a Task Force constituted in Jun 1987 slowly climbed and clawed their way up the steep wall of ice. Taking advantage of the poor visibility, he and his group managed to reach close to the enemy Post.^[v]

Nearing the objective, Nb Sub Bana Singh further divided his men into small group and rushed in using grenades. Lobbing grenades into the bunkers and finishing off the occupants with the bayonet, seven Pakistani SSG Commandos were killed on the spot and the remainder fled^[vi]. He was soon joined by others from his unit and the post was safe in Indian hands. The Quaid Post was later renamed as Bana Top as a tribute to his gallant actions. For displaying conspicuous courage and devotion beyond the call of duty, Naib Subedar Bana Singh was awarded Param Vir Chakra. Displaying exemplary valour Indian Army and Indian Airforce took control of all the commanding heights on the Saltoro Ridge by 1987.

In Sep 1987, Pakistan again launched a major attack to capture the areas around Bilafond La. This attack ended up as a major defeat for Pakistan. In this operation Major KG Chatterjee, Lance Havildar NB Ale and Naik PB Gurung of 3rd Battalion 4th GORKHA RIFLES displayed raw courage in the face of enemy and were awarded the Maha Vir Chakra.

The Kargil War of 1999

During Operation VIJAY in 1999, while the Kargil Sector bore the main brunt, Siachen Glacier too was the scene of a spectacular military action^[vii]. In which a handful of brave men overcame tremendous odds and captured what was considered to be an unassailable Pakistani Army Post- Point 5770 and Point 5590. Two of our brave Indian officers Capt Haneef Uddin and Capt Shyamal Sinha were awarded the Vir Chakra^[viii].

Conclusion

The illustrious history of Op MEGHDOOT is a testament of grit, determination and valour of the Indian Armed Forces. The unimaginable heights were secured not only by those soldiers who have occupied the defences but also by those who supported them over the decades which range from logistic supplies, medical assistance by the doctors and the Border Roads Organization who have developed the infrastructure in this inhospitable terrain.

Apart from being one of the most challenging operations in the history of the world, Operation Meghdoot is distinguished by being one of the greatest examples of jointness and synergy between the Indian Army and Indian Airforce. The Army and IAF have been fighting shoulder to shoulder at the world's highest battlefield that is distinctive for its combat, gallantry in the longest joint operation undertaken by India. It has once again proven the fighting spirit of Indian soldiers and Siachen will undoubtedly remain firmly planted in the rich lexicon of India's Military History.

The scroll of honour at the Siachen Base Camp reads, “Quartered in snow, silent to remain. When the bugle calls, they shall rise and march again.” Forty years later we must pay homage to those extra ordinary personnel who laid down their lives in the highest traditions of the services as well as Salute those who have served there over the years and whose legacy inspires future generations.

End Notes

[i] Op Meghdoot, Indian Army. (Accessed on 06 February 2023) <https://indianarmy.nic.in/Site/FormTemplate/frmTempSimple.aspx?MnId=0gmQNtAjbJivMiPVgCWpSA==&ParentID=7Tmz9XdTOibFXDXSjbBynw==>

- Kulkarni, Ramesh, and Anjali Karpe. Siachen 1987: Battle for the frozen frontier. Gurugram, Haryana: HarperCollins Publishers India, 2022.
- Valour and Honour: Indian Army through the Ages. Edited by CMHCS, United Service Institution of India. 2023.
- ibid

[v] The Story of Bana Singh, The hero who helped Win the 1987 Siachen Standoff. The Better India. (Accessed on 06 February 2023)

<https://www.thebetterindia.com/123693/bana-singh-indian-army-param-vir-chakra-hero-1987-siachen/>

[vi] Baghel, Ravi, and Marcus Nüsser. “Securing the Heights: The Vertical Dimension of the Siachen Conflict between India and Pakistan in the Eastern Karakoram.” Political Geography 48

[vii] Kargil War 1999: Capture of Point 5770 -'Navdeep Top' (Accessed on 02 April 2024)

<https://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/kargil-war-1999-capture-of-point-5770-navdeep-top/>

[viii] Kargil War in Retrospect: The Battle of Point 5590 and Captain Haneef Uddin’s Supreme Sacrifice (Accessed on 02 April 2024)<https://www.usiofindia.org/strategic-perspective/Kargil-War-in-Retrospect-The-Battle-of-Point-5590-and-Captain-Haneef-Uddin-Supreme-Sacrifice.html#:~:text=On the night of 06,Officer and twelve other ranks>

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