

Vignettes from 1947-48

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Introduction

The years 1947-48 were perhaps the most turbulent in India's history. There was widespread jubilation when the Country became free after 200 years of British rule. The joy of liberty was blighted by Partition, which resulted in a mass migration of millions of people across the newly created borders. Barely two months after Independence, the Armed Forces were called upon to repel an invasion in the State of Jammu and Kashmir, becoming embroiled in a war that lasted well over a year and a conflict that continues to date. The history of those turbulent times has been documented by many historians. However, many stories remain untold. The vignettes recounted in this article have been collated from various documents, some hitherto unpublished.

The Sacking of Mirpur

One of the saddest events of the Jammu & Kashmir operations in 1947-48 concerns Mirpur, which was sacked by the Pathans after being evacuated by the State Force garrison on 26 November 1947. Mirpur could have been saved – it was just a day's march from Jhangar, which 50 Para Brigade had occupied on 19 November. Brigadier YS Paranjape, Commander 50 Para Brigade wanted to do exactly this, but was ordered to proceed to Kotli instead. Why did Major General Kalwant Singh, GOC JAK Division, decide to forsake Mirpur, against the advice of his subordinate as well as his superior? More importantly, why did the Mirpur garrison, comprising 600 troops, pull out without a fight? A much smaller force at Skardu withstood sustained attacks for six months. Punch was besieged for a year before it was relieved. Was it poor leadership, or the fighting quality of the troops that made the difference? Probably both played a part. Colonel Puran Singh, the commander of the Mirpur garrison, was not made of the same mettle as Brigadier Pritam Singh and Lieutenant Colonel Sher Jung Thapa. Also, Mirpur was garrisoned entirely by State Force troops, while Punch and Skardu both had a fair number of regular Indian Army soldiers.

On 13 November 1947, elements of 50 Para Brigade consisting of 1 Patiala and a troop of 7 Light Cavalry had reached Akhnur. On 16 November Major General Kalwant Singh, GOC JAK Division, issued orders for the relief of Naushera, Jhangar, Mirpur, Kotli and Punch. According to his plan, 50 Para Brigade was to relieve Naushera by 16th, Jhangar by 17th, Kotli by 18th, and Mirpur by 20th November. Another column from Uri, consisting of two battalions of 161 Infantry Brigade under Brigadier LP Sen, was to move on the Uri-Punch axis on 16 November, reaching Punch the same day.

The plan was ambitious and had several flaws. The officiating C-in-C, Lieutenant General FRR Bucher, felt that the advance of two columns was 'positively dangerous', and the despatch of a column from Uri to Punch, with the enemy still in position, was 'almost foolhardy'. Brigadier YS Paranjape, Commander 50 Para Brigade, had several objections. Apart from the dates being unrealistic, he felt that after establishing a firm base at Jhangar, Mirpur should be relieved first, so that the advance to Kotli was not interfered with by the raiders. Both his battalions, 1 Punjab and 3 Rajput were below strength, with 350 to 400 men in each. However, he was overruled by the GOC and the operations commenced on 16 November 1947.¹

Naushera was occupied on 18 November, after a brief engagement. Paranjape had just three companies with him, and wanted to wait till the rest of the column fetched up. However, Kalwant ordered him to continue and capture Kotli. The advance was resumed on 19 November and Jhangar occupied the same day. From Jhangar, two roads forked out, one leading to Mirpur, and the other to Kotli. Paranjape was in favour of relieving Mirpur before going for Kotli, so that his flank was secure. However, Kalwant did not agree and ordered him to head for Kotli. The advance from Jhangar was resumed on 20 November and Kotli was relieved only on 26 November, after negotiating 47 road blocks. By this time the fate of Mirpur had been sealed - it was torched by the raiders the same day. About 400 soldiers and 10,000 refugees managed to escape, and reached Jhangar. The Pathans killed several hundred soldiers and civilians, and captured hundreds of women who were taken away as war booty. Many of them were sold for 150 rupees after being paraded naked through the streets of Jhelum by the exultant Pathan tribesmen.

On 27 November, the day after it had been relieved, Kalwant ordered Paranjape to fall back on Jhangar. This was

accomplished on 28 November. Soon after this, Brigadier Paranjape was hospitalised, and Brigadier Mohammad Usman took over command of 50 Para Brigade. If Kalwant's decision to rush to Kotli without securing his open flank by securing Mirpur was surprising, even stranger was his decision to fall back to Jhangar, immediately after its capture. In the event, Mirpur was lost. Why was Kalwant in such a tearing hurry to reach Kotli? It is said that the wife of one of Maharaja Hari Singh's ADCs, who was rumoured to be one of his many mistresses, lived in Kotli. Reportedly, a large treasure belonging to the Kashmir State was also kept in Kotli. Was Kalwant's haste to relieve Kotli attributable to these two factors, rather than tactical reasons? The lady and the treasure were probably saved, but the lives of several thousand men and the honour of several hundred women were lost. 2

Why was Mirpur evacuated, even before it was attacked? The report submitted by the garrison commander, Colonel Puran Singh, states:

“The original Mirpur Grn consisted of 600 S.F. tps approx 12,000 non-Muslims. On the night 25/26 Nov, the enemy with a force of approx 3 Bns attacked on all sides, sp by Mtn Arty. Own cas due to shelling were 50 to 100 killed. The cas among the refugees amounted to approx 100 to 1000. The refugees were pouring into the mil camp and it was decided to withdraw. The camp site with the tents and army vehs incl the dead were left, lest any suspicion should be raised. About 500 OR and the refugees withdrew Eastwards after last Lt on 26 Nov through the mountains and not by rd. The party was attacked en route once during the night; own cas estimated were 30 IOR and 500 refugees. Eventually approx 400 IORs and 10,000 Civ got back to Jhangar safely. The rear gd of 100 IORs and 1000 refugees have not yet reached. (this rear gd with refugees is reported to be hiding in the jungles at Puna 15 miles South West of Jhangar)”³

The story of the sack of Mirpur is best told by one of the survivors. Given below are extracts from the statement of Mr Inder Singh Bali, son of Sardar Tehil Singh, State Jagirdar and Chief of the Punjab, aged 24 years, of Mirpur proper:-.

“On 25th Nov 1947 our town (Mirpur) was bombarded and what looked like canon and mortar fire was opened on the town resulting in the complete blowing up of the roofs of the houses and causing lots of casualties among the civilians. The state troops did not put tough fight and the raiders occupied the town at 2 pm and set the entire town on fire. There were about 350 men of the state troops in the town itself and had placed pqts around the town and about 200 men were in the Cantt. When the posn became hopeless the troops in the town decided to surrender and run away and placed themselves in touch with the Offr commanding in the Cantt, and with the concerted action of troops both in the town and the Cantt, the civilians from the town managed to reach the Cantt.

Out of our party about 300 girls were forcibly taken away and when we reached Thatala camp we heard from the Hindus that had already reached there that their 500 girls had also been taken away. At Thatala we found that not less than 2,000 Pathans all with 303 rifles were present.

The concentration at Thatala swelled up to about 5000. Here again the Pathans sorted out young girls and carried them away. Thatala is about 15 miles from Jhelum city. Among these Offrs there were one Lt Col, one Capt and a few JCOs and men in all numbering 50. These officers and men were not wearing Regtl Signs. All these offers and men were wearing black caps and from their uniform I would see that they belonged to the Punjab Regt. We spent two nights at this camp. Out of the raiders three men who belonged to my town and were very well-known to me took pity on me and managed to deliver me at Jhelum camp (at the house of Lt. Avtar Narain) after they had relieved me of all my belongings. I am the only survivor from Mirpur.”⁴

The Abduction and Sale of Captured Women

The two major incentives for the tribesmen who invaded Jammu & Kashmir in 1947 were money and women. Instances of rape and looting occurred at almost all towns and villages that came in the way of the tribal lashkars, including Uri, Baramula, Rajauri and Mirpur. However, Mirpur seems to have come in for special attention, its fall being accompanied by the town being set on fire and the abduction of a large number of women who were sold like cattle in Jhelum and other towns. This engaged the attention of the highest in the land, including Prime Minister Nehru, who took up the matter with the authorities in Pakistan almost on a daily basis. In a telegram dated 1 December 1947, shortly after the fall of Mirpur, he wrote:

For Prime Minister, Pakistan, from Prime Minister, India.

I have also been informed that 3,000 abducted Hindu women have been brought to Gujarat from the Bhimbar area and they are being sold like cattle at Rs.150 each. I am asking an Offr on the staff of the Deputy High Commissioner at Lahore to go personally to make enquiries to Gujarat district and I hope you will ask West Punjab Govt to give him all facilities.⁵

The next day, on 2 December 1947, the Prime Minister sent another telegram:

For Mr. Liaquat Ali Khan from Jawaharlal Nehru.

I have recd info that Mirpur town has been completely destroyed and out of 13,000 (half of 26,000) non – Muslims only 2,000 (half of 4,000) have reached within 15 miles of Jhelum. The fate of these refugees as well as of about 3,000 (half of 6,000) from the rest of Mirpur area is not known, but there are reports that large numbers of abducted Hindu women have been brought into Jhelum district by Pathans. The Pathans are causing panic among non-Muslims refugee pockets in that district, are firing indiscriminately and shot dead a Mahratta soldier the other day.

I am gravely concerned about the fate of the non-Muslims pockets in Jhelum district and of the Hindu refugees in particular the abducted women who have been brought from Jammu by the raiders. I shall be grateful if you will give all facilities to our MEO org to evacuate them to India.⁶

The very next day, i.e. 3 December 1947, Nehru sent yet another telegram to Pakistan:

I have been drawing your attention to large concentrations of tribesmen and others in West Punjab near the border of Kashmir State and to the abduction of large numbers of women from Kashmir who are being offered for sale in West Punjab....⁷

The report of the sale of abducted girls in Jhelum is corroborated from several other sources. An extract from a report forwarded by a civil intelligence officer of the Government of India in Pakistan says:

In Jhelum no Hindu except our staff is left. The district liaison officer, who has to depend either on the information received from the high district officials or from some of his Muslim friends reports that in Jhelum girls abducted from Mirpur side are sold in Jhelum city at Rs 20/- each. The local police refuse to interfere on the ground that the girls were not removed from the Punjab and also they express their helplessness because of the attitude of the armed Pathans possessing these girls.⁸

The Capture of Zoji La

The capture of Zoji La in November 1948 was a spectacular feat of Indian arms, paving the way for the relief of Leh. Though innovative use of armour and bold leadership were the decisive factors in the battle, the state of morale of the enemy also played a part. It was reported that in the Ladakh Valley the enemy morale was very low on account of shortage of rations, clothing and the fast approaching winter. About 400 bodyguards of the Mehtar of Chitral in Skardu refused to go to Leh, and the matter was reported to Burhan-ud-Din in Gilgit for necessary action by Mata-ul-Mulk. Burhan-ud-Din not only berated his nephew Mata-ul-Mulk, but told him that he would be reaching Skardu shortly to sort out the matter. (Burhan-ud-Din was the brother and Mata-ul-Mulk the son of the Mehtar of Chitral).

The low state of morale of the enemy is obvious from intercepted messages that were exchanged between enemy commanders. One such message from the enemy commander at Dras – Zoji La to the Supreme Commander at Gilgit is given below:

“From Jamil (XOB) to George (QLC) RPT JAL (.) A 174 (.) Secret (.) Ref your D 255 (.) My men are underfed and underclothed (.) For days they go without food (.) Believe me they will not sit if after fortnight on the highest peaks of Zojila if nothing will be done for their rations and clothing since now (.) Rations and clothing so far received from rear usual to nothing for A C D wings (.) Tps have frankly told us that they will not work if they will not be properly fed and clothed (.) Please realise the coming winter at highest peaks of Zojila and send rations and clothing otherwise it will be too difficult for us to make our men to fight (.)”⁹

An intercepted message from Burhan-ud-Din to Mata-ul-Mulk not only brings out the deteriorating relations between them but gives an indication of the extent of involvement of the Government of Pakistan in the operations. (Shortly after this, Burhan-ud-Din himself took over from Mata-ul-Mulk).

“From QLC to XOD (.) S – 89 (.) Secret (.) Following from Nasim in reply to your.....to end very disappointed after all that I have done for you and your men (.) Is only for me that you have not been sent under escort to Chitral in spite of Governor NWFP instructions to this effect (.) What ever men do will reflect on you (.) Warn you not to get yourself in trouble and ruin the men also (.) Islam is in danger (.) Your recalling of your men from Nubra highly enraged all Pak officials (.) Defence Secretary especially coming for purpose of looking into your conduct (.) Send some one and have them immediately recalled (.) They should get back by forced marches (.) I will reach (.)” 10

Nehru and Zoji La

The first Prime Minister of India, Jawaharlal Nehru, was a Kashmiri. His attachment to the land of his forbears is well known. What is not known is his extensive knowledge of the terrain in Kashmir and the interest he took in operational matters. By inclination, he was adventurous and fond of the outdoors. He had trekked extensively in the hills of Kashmir, Himachal, Garhwal and Kumaon and is said to have spent his honeymoon in a travellers' hut at Baltal. It was no surprise that he took a special interest in the plans being made by Thimayya and Cariappa to capture Zoji La. This is brought out by the two letters reproduced below, one from SS Khera, the Commissioner at Meerut, addressed to Nehru and the other from Nehru to Major General Kalwant Singh, who had recently moved to Delhi as the CGS. Significantly, Nehru wrote to the CGS and not the C-in-C, who was then a British officer.¹¹

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DO No 200/L&OG
Commissioner's Office,
Meerut
July 8, 1948

Dear JAWAHAR Lal Ji

- (1) 1. I take the liberty of sending this bit of information in case it is of any use.
- (2) In the MAHCHHOI area beyond the ZOJILA there are certain rather obscure routes which have not been traversed either by me or to my knowledge within the last three or four years. I have marked them on the attached Map. The routes in each case are difficult and not possible for animals, but men with loads can traverse them. The one from the telegraph hut just beyond the high point of the ZOJILA pass is fairly easy and gives access to the head of the AMARNATH valley and so down towards BALTAL and also through PANCH-TARNI towards SHESHNAG. The snag about this route is that unless care is taken to keep right under the shoulder of the AMARNATH peak, the party will find itself on the edge of impracticable precipices. There is another route which goes up the long nala between MAHCHHOI and MATAYAN. It is a long nala about ten miles to the head, with many bends and apparently leads nowhere; but there is a way over the top down into the PANCH-TARNI plain.
- (3) Both these routes provide access between PAHALGAM and the MAHCHHOI-MATAYAN area.

- (4) There are other routes over the ridge of the main HIMALAYAN Range between ZOJILA and NUN-KUN, but these are fairly obvious and well known.
- (5) Incidentally, as I have trekked a fair deal over the area between the ROHTANG pass at the head of KULU valley and the SASERLA which is about 60 miles NORTH OF LEH, and also in the ZASKAR valley from its head down through DRAS to the ZOJILA, I would be happy to answer any questions, although of course probably our Army knows all the answers themselves by now.

Kind regards,
Yours sincerely,
Sd/-x-x-x (SS KHERA)

PRIME MINISTER
New Delhi
INDIA
July 10, 1948
My dear KALWANT SINGH,

I am sending you a letter I have received from the Commissioner of MEERUT Division, also a map which he has sent me.

I might mention that in 1916 I crossed the ZOJILA, went to MATAYAN, and then tried to go to AMARNATH cave from MATAYAN across the high mountains. We climbed some glaciers, reached the top of a huge ice field and were only about 3 or 4 miles from AMARNATH cave. It started snowing then which made it very difficult to cross the crevasses. Indeed I slipped into one and had to be pulled out by the rope which was tied around me. So I did not succeed in reaching AMARNATH and had to come back to MATAYAN.

I rather doubt if we can take much advantage of these difficult mountain routes which KHERA has pointed out. But if you wish to enquire further into this matter, please write to KHERA or even ask him to come up here for a day.

Yours sincerely
Sd/-x-x-x-x (JAWAHARLAL NEHRU)

Major General KALWANT SINGH
Chief of the General Staff
Army Headquarters,
New Delhi

The two letters along with the map were sent the very next day to HQ Western Command with copies endorsed to the Director of Military Intelligence. It is not known whether the maps were found useful or the services of SS Khera were utilised in the plan for the capture of Zoji La. However, they bring out the personal interest that our first Prime Minister took in matters military. Soon after Zoji la was captured, Nehru visited Kashmir to personally congratulate the troops who had taken part in the operation. Exactly a year earlier, he had visited Kashmir immediately after the recapture of Baramula accompanied by Indira Gandhi.

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