



Siege of Poonch and the Role of RSS in Kotli during the Invasion of 1947-1948 by Pakistan

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Abstract: The invasion of Jammu and Kashmir by the Pakistan backed tribals and regulars in 1947 was a major turning point in the history of South Asia. The effects of it are still felt today and is one of major source of tensions between the two nuclear weapon possessing nations India and Pakistan. During this Poonch came under the siege of the Pakistan backed tribals and it was only due to the great determination of the large Hindu and Sikh local population and J&K state forces and Indian army that the yearlong siege could not be broken. But on the other all other towns such as Kotli and Mirpur did not have the same luck and succumbed to barbarism of the invading Pakistan backed forces. This paper focus on these aspects and role of certain non-government organizations such as Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) in aid of the people.

Keywords: Poonch, J&K, Artillery, Aircraft, Vir Chakra, RSS, Operation, Forces, Colonel.

The region in and around Poonch was the first to feel the Pakistani invasion months before the invasion of Kashmir valley started. The Jammu and Kashmir State Forces were fighting valiantly against these forces with their meagre resources and in the face large scale defection by Muslim soldiers and officers. The Poonch Brigade Headquarters which was positioned there for its security under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Krishan Singh by early October. It included elements of 1st J&K, 8th J&K, 9th J&K, 7th J&K and one company of transport regiment and Garrison police respectively. The first three under the leadership of Lieutenant Colonel Hira Nand Dubey, Lieutenant Colonel Maluk Singh and Lieutenant Colonel Ram Lal respectively.ⁱ

The Poonch sector was important from the perspective of human rights of minorities as Poonch town consisted of majority on non-Muslims mainly Hindus as well as Sikhs. Out of the fifty thousand population of Poonch, forty thousand consisted of Hindus who were the prosperous portion of the population. Overjoyed with their success in the Baramulla sector the invading Pakistani forces sent eight to ten of the Lashkar invading groups towards the Poonch area. The Poonch Blockade completely resembled the Berlin blockade but a more brutal one. Only the 1 Kumaon Regiment under Lieutenant Colonel Pritham Singh (later promoted Brigadier) managed to get into Poonch by 22 November 1947 to a great relief of the heavily battered state forces and the large local population.ⁱⁱ

The town of Poonch had already become the last survival place for those coming from the towns of Bagh, Rawalkot, Hajira. Therefore, Poonch had to be saved at any price. For this to happen means of communication needed to be established. Since Poonch was under siege therefore, it was decided to construct an air strip capable of landing a Beechcraft type aircraft. This effort was undertaken under the leadership of Brigadier Pritham Singh in which local population in tune of six thousand numbers, volunteered shoulder to shoulder with the forces putting their life in danger.

At first a landing trial was conducted on 8 December 1947 flown by the legendary Air Commodore Mehar Singh or popular known as Baba Mehar Singh along with Air Vice Marshal Subroto Mukherjee on a Harvard Trainer. Few days later with the help of the local population, Brigadier Pritham Singh got

constructed a makeshift seven hundred fifty yards long airstrip which was makeshift in nature. On this was landed a fully loaded Dakota aircraft flown by Flying Officer Pushong. Between 10 December to 20 December 1947 almost 1954 tonnes of load were carried including light artillery guns. This included 25 pounder artillery guns and this air corridor continued its operation for next one year.ⁱⁱⁱ

Such was the important role played by the aircrafts in this conflict can gauged by the fact that a single transport squadron (12 Squadron) of Indian Air Force between September 1947 and April 1948 including previous months stood at:^{iv}

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| Flying Hours | Three Thousand Four Hundred Four |
| Troops Flown | Four Thousand |
| Refugees Evacuated | Ten Thousand |
| Casualties Flown Out | One Thousand |

As it is clear from the above that the siege took place for a year and between that period the large population had to be fed with food. Although, the food was being ferried through by air operation but it was still short of what was required. Therefore, Brigadier Pritham Singh launched a ‘grain operation’ to full fill the required numbers. Soldiers accompanied by refugees were sent by dusk to raid nearby villages and often the refugees provided accurate location of presence in the grains in those areas.^v The raiding parties filled with grains used to return by early morning. The Pakistani forces feeling threatened by the use of air corridor tried to disrupt the airfield by bringing in the 3-inch mortars and was able to damage a Dakota aircraft.

But successful operations led by A Company 9th J&K under Captain Jagdish Singh and C Company 8th J&K under Captain Kripal Singh managed to establish a picquet on pt. 5508 and thereby silencing the enemy gun positions. Similarly, many other important points were conquered so make position inside Poonch town safer. With the passing time further reinforcements were flown to Poonch and 3/9 Gorkha Rifles were completely inducted by mid-January. In one of the missions to conquer an important ridge led by Gorkha soldiers, 1st J&K played an important role capturing the southern ridge on 17/18 February 1948. In this operation for the first time ever in Poonch, ‘Spitfire’ attack aircrafts were used.^{vi}

In other important operation in which J&K State Forces had an important role to play was the capture of Pt. 5724 which was important enemy hideout. From this place the enemy used to send its sniper troops to harass the Brigade headquarters. To capture the important point soldiers of 1st J&K, 8th J&K and 9th J&K under command of Colonel Hira Nand Dubey took part. The troops of J&K State Forces after multiple fights were able to capture the point. However, they suffered multiple casualties including fourteen Other Ranks, officers including Colonel Hiranand Dubey and Captain Balwant Singh as well as a Junior Commissioned Officer (JCO) named Sarada Ram who was also awarded posthumously Vir Chakra for his bravery.^{vii}

In order to better mobilize the strength of the refugees, a Battalion named 11th J&K Militia was created which composed solely of Hindu and Sikh refugees. It was headed by Lieutenant Colonel KD Pachnanda and was utilized in the successful capture of pt. 7416 located north east of Poonch. With mid-October already approaching and with that also approached one year of Poonch siege. With enemy forces collecting in numbers at Bagh and Hazira an urgency was shown. In June a link was however created between 1 Kumaon of Poonch and ½ Punjab at Surankote on 17 June, from where they mounted attack to recapture Mendhar and did it on 20 June 1948. But while the soldier of Kumaon were coming, they suffered casualties as it was not a permanent link. So, a permanent link free of enemy harassment was required.^{viii}

An operation code named “Operation Easy” was launched. Both the Poonch Brigade and 19 Infantry Brigade (joined by 5th Indian Infantry Brigade on 20 October) were supposed to create a link securing the surrounding positions. The J&K State Forces also helped the “Operation Krishna Ghati” successfully capturing the eastern end of ridge from Dani Na Pir up to Krishna Ghati on 19 November. It was at Dani Na Pir that both the Brigade commander, Brigadier Pritham Singh and Brigadier

Yadunath Singh met on 20 November 1948, confirming a link up. Besides this other Column composed of J&K State Forces under Colonel Maluk Singh captured pt. 6160 without a fight and had to fight a fierce fight with two hundred Pathans on pt. 6005. During the latter battle Captain Jagdish Singh was awarded Vir Chakra for his gallant leadership. The same gallant Dogra Units also were successful in *Operation Salotri* to capture the Salotri Village so that the whole ridge opposite the enemy held positions at Madarpur to Dani Na Pir should be in Indian hands. After the capture of Salotri ridge by 25 November 1948 road construction between Rajouri and Poonch was started with no further events till the announcement of ceasefire.^{ix}

It was on 21 November 1948 that Brigadier Pritham Singh and Brigadier Yadunath Singh met and to commemorate it 21 November is celebrated by the Poonch Brigade every year. The Dogra soldiers showed unimaginable courage and strength by not only resisting the fall of Poonch until the help from Indian Army arrives. But it also saved up to forty thousand innocent refugees from brutal massacre. During the shortage of food, it even had to subsist of Horse meat to sustain but never led its guards down. As for Mirpur and Kotli was concerned, the Kotli was saved and its inhabitants and soldiers were brought back to a safe zone. The present Jammu and Kashmir Rifles proudly carries the battle honour of "Poonch". But unfortunately, Mirpur could not be saved which fell to one of the worst massacres of the whole Hindu and Sikh population recorded considering it was the second largest city of the Jammu region.

The role of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh since its inception in 1925 till today has been an issue of fierce debate between rival versions. For some in the liberal left caucuses, the RSS denotes emergence of new form of fascism and on other hand for the centre right the RSS depicts a disciplined and a scouts and guides type organization imparting discipline and morality with nation building among its members. In this chapter we shall briefly dwell upon the organization's role in the Kotli and surrounding areas. Kotli which was a flourishing town before the Pakistani forces forced the lively population of Hindus to leave it abruptly. Kotli town also had the presence of large number of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh volunteers, Arya Samaj volunteers and Sanatan Dharam Sabha volunteers. They contributed immensely to help the state forces and local population during the time when the Pakistani forces were coming close to lay siege of the town. During the period of violence throughout the state, RSS volunteers not only involved themselves in humanitarian relief efforts but also took up arms to protect the citizens of the town.^x

Kedar Nath Sahani, who later became Governor of Goa and Sikkim, was the Zila Pracharak of RSS in the Kotli-Mirpur area was instrumental in collaborating with the state forces to organize the defence of Kotli residents by getting the RSS volunteers weapons in close consultation with Colonel Baldev Singh Pathania. In fact, even during the migration of Hindus and Sikhs from Kotli towards their final destination of Jammu, where the newly formed government provided little or no help to these suffering people. A number of RSS leaders and volunteers including Jagdish Abrol, Kedar Nath Sahani and Durga Dass arranged food and shelter provisions as well as arranged up to thirty buses for the transportation from Jhangar to their Journey towards Jammu. Women, Children, Old aged and those suffering with diseases were especially given preference for their travel through buses.^{xi}

Certain interesting events during the hostilities at Kotli come to light in which the RSS volunteers, including one young volunteer named Dharamveer Khanna put his life in danger in order to retrieve the ammunition boxes dropped by Indian Air Force aircrafts. He faced barrage of enemy fire and ultimately succumbed to injuries while conducting such brave acts. Others RSS volunteers include Ved Prakash Chaddha who was the Nagar Karyavah and a young volunteer named Suraj Prakash who displayed immense bravery in face of the large and blood thirsty enemy.^{xii}

After the change of government in Jammu and Kashmir, there was a total indifference toward the refugees mainly Hindu and also Sikhs who were coming to Jammu. It was because of that organizations like Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, Arya Samaj and Maharaja Hari Singh associated had to come forward to help these refugees. In the refugee camps the situation was getting bad to worse and a large number of these refugees were made to accommodate in tents during the hot and

unbearable summers of Jammu. Their food was cooked in open conditions with cheap and low grade ingredients, surrounded by unhygienic conditions all around with foul smell enough to change someone mind. They only time situation improved in the refugee camps when some ministers arrived from Delhi to check the refugee camps.^{xiii}

The only thing Sheikh and his new administration had managed to done was spreading fake rumours in Delhi that Maharaja Hari Singh was hated in the whole of Jammu and Kashmir. In fact, that was completely false in regards to Jammu where he was still revered by the locals as well as refugee population. The reality being that the National Conference only derived its strength from Kashmir valley not from Jammu and Ladakh with the latter mourning the demise of its authority. With the passage of time the indifference from the new authority based in Kashmir towards refugees of Jammu only increased rather than decreasing.^{xiv}

ⁱ Palit, D.K, *Jammu and Kashmir Arms*, Palit and Dutt Publishers, Dehra Dun, 1972. p. 201.

ⁱⁱ Subramaniam, Arjun, *India's Wars*, Harper Collins Publishers, Noida, 2016, pp. 134-135.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*, pp. 135-136.

^{iv} *Ibid.*, p. 484.

^v Palit, D.K, *Op. Cit.*, p. 211.

^{vi} *Ibid.*, pp. 212-213.

^{vii} *Ibid.*, pp. 214-215.

^{viii} *Ibid.*, pp. 218-220.

^{ix} *Ibid.*, pp. 220-223.

^x Kumar, Devendra, *Sangarsh Leela*, Rohini Printing Press Limited, Jammu, 2008, pp. 15-16.

^{xi} *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18.

^{xii} *Ibid.*, p. 18.

^{xiii} Parasuram, T.V, *A Medal for Kashmir*, S. Chand and Company, Delhi, 1958, pp. 7-8.

^{xiv} *Ibid.*, p. 4-16.