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FAILED TO STITCH IN TIME A- RETROSPECTIVE ON INDIA CHINA STANDOFF IN 1959

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Abstract: India, after two centuries of British occupation, managed to wriggle out of their yoke in 1947. The infant nation, led by inexperienced political leadership, army top-brass and administrators had just begun to take their first steps in international relations. Maybe, the already soured relations with the neighbour Pakistan prompted the immature leadership to lean towards China and build up a very cosy relationship with that country. Throwing caution to the winds, the leadership implicitly believed “all that glitters is gold”. India had to pay a very heavy price for the immaturity of the leadership. The wily neighbour, China, while showing always a smiling face towards India, had been encroaching on the territory of India. A major portion of Ladakh, which we show as ours in maps, was encroached upon and swallowed by China. They constructed a very strategic road from Sinkiang to Tibet. Once the Chinese became confident that the areas up to Khunark Fort in the West and Pangong Lake in the South had come totally under their control, they published maps showing the area as Chinese territory. They occupied the area without any challenge from Indian forces. When India finally woke up and sent some ill-equipped forces, they were either massacred or captured by the Chinese forces. The captured forces were subjected to inhuman treatment by the Chinese forces. The day the Indian forces were massacred is observed as Commemoration Day in Police Lines.

Index Terms - Blind faith, inefficiency, Inaction, cheating, India, China, army, Aksai Chin, Hindi Chini, Tibet, government, international, political leadership, massacre, border, Ladakh, Chushul, martyrs, commemoration day.

I. INTRODUCTION

India had to swallow a very bitter pill on account of its immature political leadership, inefficiency and blind faith in the neighbouring country. The episode started unfolding in the 1950s. Army received news from the locals in 1952 that the Chinese were planning to build a road linking Sinkiang and Tibet through Aksai Chin, an Indian territory. This was promptly reported to the Army top brass. But no positive action was taken. By and by Chinese armed forces started occupying the area and penetrated deep into Indian Territory. By 1957 Aksai Chin came under the absolute control of the Chinese. The several reports sent by the army patrolling parties never evoked any interest in the top political leadership, who were blindly believing the Chinese leadership and vying to please them. The army men could no longer patrol the area since the Chinese indulged in capturing them and subjecting them to inhuman treatment. When the administration finally woke up and directed a team of 60 ITBF and CRPF men to proceed to Hot Springs in Laddakh and prepare a line of new posts right opposite to the Chinese forces, it was too late. These men were ill-prepared and had to face heavy firing from well-equipped and well-entrenched Chinese forces. 10 men lost their lives; several were wounded and the others were captured. After one month's brutal and inhuman treatment, the policemen were returned to India. The dead were laid to rest at Hot Springs. Had India acted promptly and posted its own army men at Aksai Chin, the outcome of the border dispute between the two countries would have been different.

II. PROGRESS OF EVENTS

There is a wise old saying “There are no permanent friends and no permanent foes”. This old adage is equally good in international relations. India needed a very bitter experience to learn this lesson. It was a great betrayal by a nation pretending to be India's friend. The inexperienced administrators of the infant nation had to learn it the hard way. The country needed the Aksai Chin incident to learn the big lesson “Never believe any one beyond a certain limit”. The Aksai Chin incident was an event that changed the course of history in the sub-continent. But it brought together the nation as few other things could. China, the grinning murderer, whom we hailed with “Hindi-Chini Bhai Bhai” slogan, stabbed the nation in the back. The incident was a slap on the face of India.

The events started unfurling in the late 1950s. China had discreetly engineered and constructed a very strategically important road through the traditional caravan route that passed from Sinkiang to Tibet. The road passed through Aksai Chin, an Indian territory. The construction process progressed virtually unnoticed. It is very surprising that the construction process progressed smoothly and unobstructed though several Indian Army reconnaissance parties, as far back as 1952 (four years before the actual construction of the road began), had come across incriminating pieces of evidence that suggested the Chinese had intentions of construction activities in the region. In fact, in

1952 itself, the locals had informed the army men that the Chinese were planning to build a road through the region. The army men reported about the Chinese intentions, as well as the lean presence of Chinese forces in the area, to the army headquarters.

At that point of time the army men had encountered only very few Chinese Engineers while no contact was made with any PLA (Peoples Liberation Army) unit. From this time in 1952 to around 1955, PLA presence in the region was minimal. Astonishingly, both army headquarters and political leadership did not rise to the occasion. They gave scant respect for the reports and kept the matter very confidential. This proved to be a very costly mistake. Had India acted during this period of time, when the PLA presence in the region was minimal, and posted troops in the Aksai Chin area, the outcome of the border dispute between the two countries would have been totally different. The PLA forces of China moved into the region by 1955 only.

The Indian Government was going through a phase of friendly relations with the Chinese. In the process the Indian political leadership was blindly treading the path of “friendly relations” that led to China. Major decision makers from Nehru downwards were unaware of the cunning plans that were being drafted for the Indians. China, the cunning jackal, was stealthily crawling under the bushes ready to ambush the inexperienced Indian political leadership. The first warning signs of increasing Chinese presence in the region were the increased “bumping” of Indian and Chinese troops in the region, though no exchange of fire took place. New Delhi, however, ignored these new pieces of evidence in the name of maintaining friendly relations with China. By 1955, the PLA moved into the region and brought the area under their control. The fact that the Army Command and the Ministry of Defence knew of the Chinese intentions to build a road as far back as in 1952, when no Chinese troops were present in the region, and yet chose not to act on it suggests that both the army command and the Ministry of Defence cannot be exonerated from the guilt of the events that were to follow in the Aksai Chin region. The political leadership also was equally responsible since it refused to be woken from its deep slumber. Whenever it opened its eyes wearily, it was enticed by the cosy picture of warm friendly relations with China.

Emboldened by the lazy attitude of the political leadership of the infant democratic nation, China increased its military presence in the region and by 1957, it was in total control of the area. Indian Army presence was minimal, almost next to “no presence”. Construction of the road was completed by 1957. Once the Chinese were confident that they were in total control of the area, they started declaring that the region, including Aksai Chin, was Chinese territory and that the road they were constructing through this territory will be commissioned shortly. They also published a map of the region showing Aksai Chin as Chinese territory. The political leadership now only saw the dirty face of reality yawning at them. The situation could no longer be ignored by New Delhi. But the strategic window to create an unopposed military presence in the region by India had now passed years ago. It was made clear to the Indians when one of the two reconnaissance patrols sent out in June 1958, to determine the Chinese presence in the Aksai Chin area, was captured by the Chinese as they neared the road. After a lot of intimidation and inhuman treatment, these army men were finally released. The picture became more and more clear. The PLA had not only moved into the Aksai Chin, they had secured vast regions of the plain west of the strategic Sinkiang –Tibet road they had constructed. They had penetrated up to Khunark Fort in the west and Pangong lake in the south. The Indian patrol teams were not even able to go anywhere near the territory clandestinely occupied by the Chinese. The embarrassed political leadership suppressed the news about the developments. Even the narrations given by the captured Indian soldiers, about the inhuman treatment meted out to them, were not made public. It reflects the complete fantasy that the Indian leaders had created around themselves regarding the military situation at the border. The maximum the Indian public knew was that “all is not well in the frontier sector” or the Sino- Indian relations were going through a rough patch but nothing more.

By the middle of 1959, Prime Minister Nehru finally began to realise that the Chinese had been exploiting his genuine feeling of friendship with them. Still, his response was to ensure that further deterioration of the Sino-Indian relations did not take place. The Tibetan revolt and the consequential flight of Dalai Lama to India rang the alarm bells for the Indian leadership. The moods changed remarkably within different sections of the Indian Government. By September 1959, the personnel of ITBF deployed in the region began feeling the heat of Chinese presence in the region. One patrol party of Indian soldiers was captured near the Chushul air base. Nearly after a month they were released. Stark realities forced the Government to direct DSP Karam Singh, an ITBF officer, to establish new posts right at the Chinese occupation line in Laddakh. His first out post was supposed to be at a place called Hot Springs. Full seven years had rolled past since Capt. R. Nath and Capt. Suri had travelled through the same terrain and gone past Hot Springs all the way to Lanak La. Indian Government's order was to deploy light - armed police forces to defend the border from a vastly experienced and battle-hardened enemy army. It is worthwhile to remember in this context that by this time there was sufficient evidence with the Government that heavily armed Chinese forces were roaming deep inside Indian Territory in Laddakh. Why the Indian Government chose to deploy lightly armed police units to face this massive military force rather than the Indian Army is intriguing even today. It was at par with “David taking on Goliath”. To add insult to injury, Nehru had prohibited all forward patrolling in the Laddakh sector.

The Picture was far from pitiable. India wasted valuable seven years. By this time the Chinese were too far down the line in terms of deployment for the Indians to even begin to think about catching up. The nearest garrison was at Leh. The readily available forces were police men of ITBF and CRPF units. These ill-equipped and under-prepared policemen were expected to take on the well-entrenched and well- deployed Chinese forces. Yet, orders for DSP Karam Singh were to head east from Leh and set up posts just opposite to the Chinese forces. For all intents and purposes, the jurisdiction over the operation was given to the ITBF units under DSP Karam Singh and a force of forty CRPF personnel deputed to the ITBF under DSP.S. P Thyagi. This combined force of sixty men started their arduous journey from Leh through high mountains on foot. Eventually, after a week's hazardous trek, they reached their destination at Hot Springs on 19th October. They set up a temporary camp here, a few kilometres west of the first known Chinese position. This area was more than 15000 feet above sea level with subzero temperature, frigid climate, snow- cladden terrain, frequent blizzards and lack of oxygen. The low oxygen level made breathing and cooking very difficult. So also, execution of tasks like building defense works, setting up posts and even walking was very difficult. Sometimes, because of the strong winds in the passes there was no way to set up tents. The policemen had to dig snow-caves and pits to hold fast to posts. Because of lack of oxygen, boiling point of water was very low and this made cooking very difficult. They had to survive on frozen food and drink water from snow. The tents they pitched were blown away by strong winds. The policemen were now fighting against very adverse weather conditions for their very survival. The extreme climatic conditions rendered the hapless policemen very weak. Even in the wildest of imaginations, these policemen were not good enough to face a group of able-bodied men, leave alone a

well-trained, well equipped and well-entrenched army. To fight an army, which is fully armed and ready for anything, was a big thing of bravery.

On the morning of 20th, Karam Singh sent a small reconnaissance party consisting of two constables and a porter to patrol the area; return to camp at a specified time and report on the activities of the Chinese camped a few kilometres away. When the patrol party did not return, Karam Singh sent a bigger team of 10 policemen to look for the three men who have not returned. This team returned by eleven in the night without being able to locate the three missing men. They, however, came across large number of foot prints suggesting that Chinese soldiers had been in the area. At dawn the next day, Karam Singh and Thyagi led a team of about twenty policemen, armed with bolt action rifles, on ponies in search of the disappeared men. The rest of the force was ordered to follow them at a distance on foot. Karam Singh and Thyagi reached the area where the earlier team saw the foot-prints. The foot prints were still there. Karam Singh and Thyagi waited there for the arrival of the main team. When the main party arrived, it was decided that Thyagi would stay behind and command this larger force while Karam Singh and his small group of twenty would follow tracks to see if it led to the Chinese intruders in that area. When Singh and his team reached a hill side, a Chinese officer sprang up and ordered Karam Singh and his men to surrender. The Chinese had ambushed the entire force of Indian policemen. Now; the Chinese were at an elevated position, in fortified bunkers and trenches and armed with mortars and heavy machine guns, looking down on an exposed Indian police force. But the brave Indian policemen were not ruffled by this show of strength though they were no match for the Chinese forces, who were armed to their teeth with very sophisticated weaponry. Karam Singh lifted a handful of mud from the ground to gesture that this was Indian soil. The Chinese officer also did the same. A verbal battle ensued and this lasted for about three hours. Thereafter the Chinese officer disappeared from the scene. Soon a boulder rolled down from one of the Chinese bunkers high up on the hill. This was followed by a volley of fire from the hill above forcing the Indian policemen below to scramble for cover. From the nearby hill heavy machine gun fire joined the fray. The Indian policemen, armed with mere bolt action rifles, could not hope to survive this onslaught, ten of the hapless policemen, caught in the cross fire, were killed and the rest were badly wounded. By evening, Karam Singh was forced to surrender along with his nine wounded survivors. The main force under Thyagi was forced to retreat and their attempts to retrieve the bodies of the dead late in the night proved to be futile since many of the forty men under his command had also been wounded to some degree or another and the Chinese still dominated the hills.

As prisoners, it was hell let loose for Karam Singh and his men. They were made to carry the body of the Chinese soldier who was killed. They were also made to carry the body of the Indian policeman who was seriously injured in the stomach. After carrying him for two miles, the Chinese ordered them to leave the body of the Indian policeman on the bank of the river. From this place onwards Karam Singh and another policeman were made to carry heavy loads. When they were exhausted and finding it difficult to walk with the heavy loads, they were repeatedly prodded by rifle butt to move on. When they finally reached Chinese post (above 16000 ft) at about 2 am on the 22nd of October 1959, they were all put together in a pit six feet deep, seven feet wide and fifteen feet long, normally used for storing vegetables. It was covered with tarpaulin, which left several openings through which ice-cold breeze penetrated. The frozen ground had no covering. No drinking water was given. For the first three or four days they were given only dry bread to eat. The intensity of the cold was unbearable. They were not even allowed to ease themselves in the pit. Karam Singh and three constables began suffering from frostbite and repeated request for medical attention and hot water were ignored. The conditions of living were more than sufficient torture to demoralise the Indian force.

The gates of real hell were opened for them. For the next fortnight Karam Singh and his men were tortured brutally to make Karam Singh confess that the Indians had opened fire and precipitated the skirmish. At the end of repeated tortures Karam Singh was made to say that he is unable to judge as to who fired first. The Chinese also wanted Karam Singh to confess that he had knowingly intruded into Chinese territory. When he refused to state like that, the statement claimed to have been given by Karam Singh was forged to mean "I have now come to know that the area where the encounter had taken place is under Chinese occupation". The Chinese also wanted to extract statements from the Indian men to the extent that the Indian soldiers knowingly trespassed into Chinese territory. The interrogation lasted from 4.am to about 4. pm. By this time Karam Singh was frozen. The coldness, persistent interrogation, intimidation, threats, angry shoutings and lack of sleep left Karam Singh mentally and physically exhausted. In this dazed condition Karam Singh was compelled to sign a statement purported to have been given by him. On the 28th, all the policemen were taken to the bank of the river and made to wash the bodies of the dead comrades in accordance with custom and photographs were taken by the Chinese. Photos were also taken of warm clothes being provided to the Indian policemen. Karam Singh and his men were then taken to the original scene of battle and forced to re-enact the events, according to the Chinese version, and photographs were taken as evidence. On 4th November 1959, the Chinese returned the three Indian policemen captured on 20th October along with Karam Singh and his surviving men. Bodies of ten policemen martyred were returned by the Chinese at the India-China border. The body of Constable Makhani Lal, who was seriously injured in the stomach and left at the river bank, was never returned. The Chinese never acknowledged the existence of Makhani Lal. Even the handing over ceremony was made as humiliating as possible by the Chinese.

News of the surrender of Karam Singh and his men and the martyrdom of several policemen began to filter out. This raised lot of hue and cry. As usual, feeble and insipid explanations were offered by the political leadership. But, everyone was aware that something more grotesque had happened. Protracted discussions were held, each wing blaming the other. China was accused of expansionism and causing provocation at the frontier. The army demanded that no further movements of armed police should take place on the frontier without their clearance. Ultimately, protection of the frontier was handed over to the Army and all operations of the armed police were to be subjected to prior approval of the army command. The Chinese declared in a threatening note that should Indian Army enter Laddakh, it would make a "fresh entry" south of the Macmohan Line. Nehru continued the rhetoric "India would defend herself with all her might", although most members of the Indian Military took this with a grain of salt. Nehru also attempted to explain to the Indian public why the border in Laddakh had not been defended with more forces with a feeble response. "We thought that the Chinese would not resort to force in the Laddakh area..."

On 4th November, 1959, the bodies of the CRPF men were laid to rest with full police honours at Hot Springs in Laddakh. The annual conference of Inspectors General of Police of States and Union Territories held in January 1960 decided that October 21 would, hence forth, be observed as Commemoration Day in all Police Lines throughout India to mark the memory of these gallant men who were killed in

Laddakh and all other police personnel killed on duty during the year. It was also decided to erect a memorial at Hot Springs. Every year members of police forces from different parts of the country trek to Hot Springs to pay homage to those gallant martyrs.

III. CONCLUSION

There are no permanent friends or permanent foes. Never believe anyone beyond a certain point. There is a German saying, “Be a good neighbour, but let the fences remain as they are”. We can maintain very good relationships with our neighbouring nations. But, we should keep our eyes and ears open always. Any slight deviation from the normal should be viewed suspiciously and interpreted critically. We should not be caught napping. There should not be any laxity in our defence preparedness. Defending our border should be our prime concern.

