

Rajouri and Poonch

Identifying Early Warning Signals and Addressing New Challenges

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The twin districts of Rajouri and Poonch fall in the Pir Panchal belt of Jammu province. This is an important mountainous range which separates the valley of Kashmir from Jammu province. Stein, the well-regarded commentator on Raj Tarangini described the Pir Panchal track as a region located between the rivers Jehlum and Chenab in the southern and south-western slopes of this region, which starts from Banihal Pass and comprises Rajouri, Budhal, and Poonch on the Indian side of the LoC and Kotli, Rawalakote and Bagh on the other side of the LoC. The 223km-long LoC touches the boundaries of Sunderbani, Nowshera, Rajouri, and Manjakote blocks of Rajouri district, and Balakote, Mendhar, Poonch, and Mandi blocks of Poonch district. Presently, these twin districts of the Pir Panchal track, are comprised of one municipal council at Poonch, six notified area committees, 13 community development blocks and 563 villages.

II

RAJOURI & POONCH A PROFILE

Most of the area is cut off, mountainous, and inaccessible with very meager infrastructural facilities available in this belt. Due to the disadvantages caused by geographical conditions, existence on the line of actual control, continuous cross-firing and shelling across the border for about eight years, far away from power centres and negligible representation in the political scenario and administrative setup of the J&K state, the people of these border districts have become economically backward with 46 per cent of the population living below the poverty line. 49 per cent families are without power, 23 per cent without drinking water facilities, 73 per cent families continue to reside in Kachha houses, 79 per cent make do without flush latrines, 29 per cent villages are yet to be connected through roads, and nearly 43000 educated unemployed wander in search of jobs. Further, there are no medium- or large-scale industrial units, no hydel power projects, and limited commercial avenues available to the people. There is less than 1 per cent representation of the region in the Secretariat. No air link, ATM or rail link services are available along this track; the condition of the only road link leading towards Jammu has worsened in about the last ten years. There are 62 per cent Muslim families which have remained divided ever since the establishment of the Line of Control. This scenario had pushed the people of this district into economic and educational backwardness.

As per the revenue records, the total area of Poonch-Rajouri districts is 4304 square kilometers while the projected population for the year 2009 was 10.63 lakh. As per the 2001 census, the population of Rajouri district was 4.83 lakh, out of which 4.49 lakh people were residing in rural areas while 0.34 lakh people lived in urban areas.

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developing an alternative framework for peace and security in the region



Further, there were 0.38 lakh Scheduled Caste and 1.67 lakh Schedule Tribe people in the district. The district was represented by 60.23 per cent Muslims, 37.28 per cent Hindus, 2.24 per cent Sikhs, 0.02 per cent Buddhists, 0.04 per cent Christians and 0.03 per cent others. The total population of Poonch district was 3.73 lakh of which 41 per cent were Schedule Tribes, 52 per cent Paharis and 7 per cent Kashmiris while 87 per cent were Muslims, 7 per cent Hindus and 6 per cent Sikhs. Hindus were dominant in Tehsil Nowshera, Sunderbani and Kalakote in district Rajouri while Muslims were in majority in all the tehsils of Poonch district apart from tehsil Thanamandi, Budhal and Rajouri of Rajouri district. In Poonch district, before independence, almost all the villages had some minority population. However, due to the events of 1947, 1965, 1971 and the proxy war from 1989, the minority population gradually migrated to other parts of the country and presently, Hindus and Sikhs are concentrated in Poonch, Surankote and Mendhar towns and eleven surrounding villages.

The twin districts are dominated by 93 per cent Gujjar-Bakerwal tribes and Pahari-speaking people, including Hindus and Sikhs, while 7 per cent Kashmiri-speaking people inhabit villages closer to the Kashmir Valley. The historical background, cultural aspects, dresses, diets, languages, habits, lifestyles, economic conditions, and problems of the people of this belt are very distinct compared to the other districts of Jammu province. In spite of their sufferings and the repeated disturbances, surprisingly, the people of this region have continued to maintain communal harmony and a peaceful atmosphere. The traditions of a composite cultural heritage and secular outlook have traveled through history. The brotherhood of the people of Poonch and Rajouri is more robust than the mountains surrounding this belt. The ties of communal harmony, friendly relations and tolerance



Poonch Fort

have survived even through the odd events of history. The people of various religions, races and sections have had a long tradition of restraint and respect for each other.

II

A SHORT HISTORY OF HARMONY

Prior to 26 October 1846, Rajouri had been the principality of Jaral Muslim Rajas for about 700 years. These Rajas were secular and accommodative, reflected for instance, in the fact that the forces of the Jaral Rajas were comprised of Hindu Rajputs apart from Muslims and the Prime Minister's post was always retained by the Hindu Mehta family. As per Tuzk-e-Jhangir,ⁱ there was a custom of inter-religious marriages between the royal Muslim Jaral Rajas and the Hindu Rajputs which was later banned by Emperor Jahangir during his visit to Rajouri in 1616. After the creation of the new J&K state in 1846, following the Amritsar Pact signed between Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu and the British, the Rajouri principality was taken over by Maharaja Gulab Singh. Even though the Muslim population of Rajouri had been strongly opposed to the Maharaja's rule, there was no communal tension in this area. It is a fact that a large number of minorities was killed in 1947 by the Sudan rebels under the leadership of Sakhi Daler and a deserter Colonel Rehmatullah of the Maharaja's forces, but the local Muslims had not taken part in this brutal act. At this crucial stage, there were hundreds of instances when local Muslims gave shelter to Hindus in the villages thereby, protecting their lives.

In the Poonch principality, there had always existed an atmosphere of brotherhood and communal harmony. WC Archer, the author of Indian Paintings of Punjab Hills writes that during the rule of Raja Rustam Khan Rathore from 1760-1787, Poonch town was dominated by Hindu traders. Raja Rustam Khan was a disciple of a Hindu hermit. It was during this period that Dashnami Akhara Poonch was constructed by Raja Rustam Khan on the request of the hermit. Further, a number of Hindu traders, hakims, munshis and artists had shifted from other parts to the Poonch principality.

As far as the Raja was concerned, they were all entitled to equal rights and were also accommodated by the Muslim natives in their villages. There was no official protection provided to the minorities. The local Muslims were not only protective, but also attentive to issues and affectionate in nature. Therefore, with the passage of time, the original identities of the minorities became diluted as they became part of the composite culture of this area. During the Gujjar-

dominant rule of Raja Ruallah Khan Sangu in Poonch from 1798-1819, a great Sikh saint Thakur Bhai Mela Singh came to Poonch from Rawalakote in 1802 and established Gurudwara Dera Santpura Nangali Sahib, the largest Sikh shrine in J&K at present. During the rule of the local Dogra Hindu Rajas from 1852-1947, there was complete communal harmony in the region. A majority of the ministers and officials appointed by these Rajas were Muslims including the first and the last Prime Minister of Poonch, Mian Nizam-ud-Din.

Since independence, the people of all communities have lived in an amiable manner in the twin districts of Poonch and Rajouri. There are villages where 90 per cent of the population belongs to one community and 10 per cent to another, yet the minority community has never been made to feel that they are outsiders or different, rather they have been given more affection and respect by the majority Muslim population which has always protected the minority population due to which the latter have always had complete faith and confidence in the former.

During the militancy, when a large section of the minority population was brutally killed, neither the Hindus nor Sikhs blamed the local Muslim community because they were aware that the killings had been engineered by Pak-sponsored terrorists. Accordingly, hundreds of nationalists and patriotic Muslims were beheaded, their houses burnt and nearly 21,000 thousand Muslims compelled to migrate from their native places to more secure areas because they were regarded as patriotic and secular and were opposed to the radical views of the militants. Therefore, the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs jointly faced and suffered the militancy from 1989 to 2003.

III

EARLY WARNING SIGNALS EMERGING CONFLICT IN RAJOURI & POONCH

The above facts reveal that the habitants of the twin districts were secular, moderate and accommodative and that the cordial relations among the communities had given birth to a composite cultural heritage. The most important factor behind this brotherhood was the impact of Sufism on the life of the people of this region who taught love for humankind, tolerance and respect for all religions. Almost every village has a Sufi Dargah, Asthan or Ziarat. These Sufi centres continue to attract and inspire people of all communities. The shrine of Shahdara Sharief Rajouri and Sain Miran Bakash Guntrian Poonch is respected equally by Hindus and Sikhs alike. The Urs of Sain Ellahi Bakash of Battlekote Mandi is organized by a Non-Muslim



organization, the Pritam Spiritual Trust. On the eve of Rakshabandan festival, the Chari Mubarakh Yatra which starts from Dashnami Akhara Poonch and leads towards Swami Budha Amarnath Mandi is received by Suni Muslims at Chandak and Shia Muslims in Mandi Bazar. The Muslims and Hindus jointly participate in the Baisakhi mela at Gurudwara Nangali Sahib. The oldest Ramkund Temple of Raja Lalita Ditya's time is located in village Narol of Mendhar tehsil which is hundred per cent Muslim populated. The Muslim natives have been looking after and protecting the temple for centuries now. Therefore, one can say that the habitants of Poonch and Rajouri have managed and maintained an atmosphere largely free from communal hostilities.

Given this background, it is vital to ask why communal conflicts of a very serious nature erupted in this region during August 2008 which tarnished the centuries-old image of the region's communal brotherhood. Immediately after the happenings in Jammu and Srinagar during the Amarnath Shrine episode, the hardliners and fanatics of Kashmir Valley and Jammu city prevailed upon both the communities and managed to communalize the situation in this sensitive border track. Due to incitement by outsiders, small groups of local youth gathered in religious places, organized rallies, and raised unwarranted slogans along communal lines which resulted in communal outbursts in Thanamandi, Surankote, Mendhar, and Poonch town. The worst kind of communal riots were witnessed in Poonch town, Bhainch and Dalera villages in which 134 shops and houses belonging to people of both communities were either burnt or looted. In the midst of this turmoil, many cases came to light wherein people of either community acted with utmost concern and sympathy towards those victimized during the riots. The role of MR Qureshi, MLC Mendhar, PDP leader Hamid Manhas of Surankote and Yashpal Sharma of Poonch remain appreciable, in restoring the confidence of the people during this testing stage.

While those 16 months of turmoil have passed, the law and order situation has improved and the composite cultural heritage has been restored to some extent, doubts, confusion and a lack of trust and confidence due to the riots persist. Those belonging to the minority communities, both in rural and urban areas, are still frightened and upset. The mistrust and feeling of alienation have not been removed completely from their minds. This communal tension can be attributed to various factors. Pakistan-sponsored agencies are working in this sensitive area to disrupt normal life, destabilize the region and create communal tension to make it next to impossible for the minorities to live peacefully in the region. The contribution of hardliners and radical elements of Kashmir Valley is equally responsible in inciting the youth along communal lines. Certain Urdu newspapers published from Kashmir Valley have also exploited the situation in Poonch and Rajouri by propagating the idea of a separate region comprised of these twin districts.

People of Poonch and Rajouri have acute grievances which have largely remained unaddressed, especially since the leadership of Jammu has never represented the aspirations of the people of these districts, with their visits restricted to elections alone to seek the support and votes of the people. They have failed to establish any links with the majority Muslim community of this area, so much so that there is a complete vacuum of relations and understanding between the leadership of Jammu and Poonch-Rajouri. Therefore, they are ignorant about the problems, miseries and suffering of the people of this belt. It is this political callousness which has given birth to the idea of a separate region for Rajouri and Poonch so that development can take place. In spite of the above-mentioned facts, the majority of the population of Poonch and Rajouri is not in favour of being separated from Jammu province because of their social, cultural, and linguistic affinity with the people of Jammu vis-à-vis the other regions of the state. Therefore, it is time for the Jammu leadership to awaken and fulfill the aspirations of the people of these twin districts so that they can be pulled out of their economic backwardness. This is essential to ensure smooth relations between the communities within the Jammu province.

As stated above, Poonch and Rajouri districts are mostly comprised of Gujjar-Bakerwal tribes and Pahari-speaking people including Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. All these ethnic races have unique historical, cultural and linguistic identities, yet they have lived peacefully as neighbours for centuries, in the same belt, villages, dhoks and meadows.

However, the Gujjars and Bakerwals were given Schedule Tribe status in 1991 on the basis of 'vulnerable economic conditions'. The same demand, raised by the Pahari-speaking section of the region, however, is yet to be considered. Therefore, there is resentment among Paharis on this issue. Ethnically, these races have been polarized and severe rifts have emerged between those granted the Scheduled Tribe status and the remaining population especially during last twenty years. No efforts from the government have been forthcoming to bridge the differences between Paharis and Gujjar-Bakerwal communities. On the contrary, during election time, electoral candidates use this existing tension to strengthen their respective vote banks. There is a need therefore, to provide for some political-economic package or arrangement for the Pahari-speaking population and address their grievances without disturbing the Scheduled Tribe status of the Gujjar and Bakerwal communities, to prevent a further escalation of the rift between the ethnic groups.

IV THE ROAD AHEAD

The people of this region have always remained in the mainstream of national politics; there was no political alienation even during the militancy period. No voices advocating separatism or autonomy emerged in this belt until as recently as 2008. However, after the events of August 2008, the fundamentalists and radical elements from outside the region tried their best to set up a separatist political platform within the region. While there is no doubt that the mainstream leadership is very strong, active and dominates the politics of the area, recent times have witnessed the emergence of the scattered voices of separatists and radicals in Thanamandi, Surankote and Poonch area. While in this initial stage, these voices are not very strong, one must remain guarded against these sections of people who can create tension and chaos at any time in the districts, as was seen in 2008.

They must be dealt with in a political manner. It is essential to work for the restoration of old traditions of brotherhood on the basis of the sermons of Sufi saints and Darveshs who always preached love for humankind, tolerance, restraint and respect for every religion. There is a need for greater understanding and reconciliation among the religious communities. To this end, NGOs, human rights activists, religious figures and social workers could come forward and start the journey towards peace and reconciliation. On the part of the government, efforts will need to be made to strengthen ties between communities to restore peace, happiness and harmony in the region.