

THE HISTORY OF LADAKH'S INDEPENDENCE 1947

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Abstract

As everyone is aware of the after effects of partition of the country in 1947 which created devastation in both the countries of India and Pakistan destroying innumerable lives, wealth and witnessed brutality against women that left a lasting impact on every sphere of life. Amidst the larger spectrum of India, one such region who suffered no less was Ladakh, whose voices and traumas were left unheard by the masses. Ladakh, situated in the north western region of India, has been served as a strategic location both in its history and in the contemporary times. Consequently, Ladakh since its ancient times fell prey to many invasions from its neighbouring countries. In the contemporary times, the people of this land not only witnessed the wars that fought on this land but they also have sacrificed their lives in order to save their mother land. One such war that fought on this land was the war of Independence in 1947, when the people of Ladakh with their bold and courageous attitude emerged as victorious and were able to save their land from being fallen into its rival hands. Therefore, this paper will discuss about the scenario and difficulties of Ladakhis during the war of Independence. How they were able to save their land despite of being geographically isolated by the rest of the world.

Keywords:

Introduction; Unification of Ladakh with Indian Union; Scenario of Ladakh in 1947; The war of Independence 1947 in Ladakh and Conclusion.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Ladakh, situated in the northern most region of Indian Himalaya is one of the sparsely populated regions of Jammu and Kashmir. It lies at an altitude ranging from 2300 meters to 5000 meters above sea level. Ladakh shares its border with Pakistan occupied Kashmir in the west, Chinese occupied Aksai Chin in the East and LahulSpiti in its southern direction. Geographically, the region is spread over in an area of 45,110 sq km, which makes it the largest district of India.

The term Ladakh came from the Tibetan word 'La' and 'dwags', 'La' means mountain pass and 'dwags' means grandiose, i.e. grandiose mountain passes. It is called as *Maryul* in ancient times because the area between the Karakoram and Mount Kailash are red in colour. It is also called as *Mangyul* on the pretext of it being the land of many races. Likewise, Ladakh has been known by many alternative names, like "it is called as Central Asian Diamond on account of its location in important trade route; Moon land on account of its resemblance to Lunar surface; Hermit Kingdom on account of its stony silence and surroundings ideal for Lamas to enter hermitage."¹

The four mountain ranges of great Himalaya, Zaskar, Ladakh, and Karakoram Pass through the region of Ladakh. It is also known for its numerous passes, the highest among them is the Khardongla which lies at an altitude of 18,380 above the sea level and is one of the highest passes in the world connecting Leh and Nubra. The Zojila (3528 meters), serves as the only motorable means to connect Leh and Srinagar which was opened up in 1963 post-India China war of 1962. Like that, the Rotangla (3978 meters) connects Leh with Manali during the summer season, while in winter, both the link gets closed due to the heavy snowfall which in ancient times proved as a means to safeguard this land from foreign invaders.

2. UNIFICATION OF LADAKH WITH INDIAN UNION

Unlike other regions of India, the post-colonial period for Ladakh means dual freedom: one from the indirect suzerainty of Colonial rule and second from the clutches of Dogra authorities who ruled Ladakh for almost 105 years from 1842 to 1947. Ladakh at the time of Independence, as over shadowed by Muslim majority state, caught itself under the blaze of disputed territory. Since then, it has been serving as a battle ground for India and Pakistan where many historic wars have been recorded between the two countries in 1947,

1965, 1971, 1999 and is still an unresolved issue where news of encounters makes headlines frequently.

Like the other sub-continent of India, Ladakh, under the state of Jammu and Kashmir is one of the victims who had suffered great loss in terms of their family and property that left a deep psychologically impact on their lives. 'Ladakh has more divided families than Kashmir valley' said by prof. Sidiq Wahid while delivering a lecture at the International Habitat Centre on "The Great Partition – Effects on Ladakh".

With the partition of the two nations that is India and Pakistan on the communal ground, the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir which then included the areas of Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Gilgit, Baltistan and Hunza was ruled by a Hindu ruler, Maharaja Hari Singh. Since the Maharaja was ruling over a Muslim majority state, Mohammad Ali Jinnah (founder of Pakistan), assumed that the Maharaja will come their way. Both India and Pakistan tried to persuade the Maharaja to accede to their respective nations. However, Maharaja, on the other hand, wanted to remain Independent and have a neutral relationship with both the countries. Consequently, he sent a letter to the prospective governments of both India and Pakistan, inviting them to accept a 'Standstill Agreement' on 12th August 1947.²

However, the Maharaja Hari Singh's dream of remaining Independent soon shattered when Pakistani raiders accompanied by Gilgit scouts³ suddenly entered and started capturing the areas in Kashmir and Ladakh in 1947. The main attack came from Rawalpindi side to capture the Kashmir valley.⁴ Thus, this sudden attack led Maharaja to seek military assistance from India, as he did not have enough battalions to guard the large frontiers of his state that mostly shared its border with Pakistan. Taking the advantage of the situation, India agreed to provide its assistance but on a condition that, in return, the Maharaja should integrate the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir with Indian union.

Thus, Jammu and Kashmir recognizing the autonomy under much larger democratic, socialist and secular nation of India with some constitutional provisions, the Maharaja on 26th October 1947, signed the Instrument of Accession surrendering the Defence, External and communication matter to the central government of India. Thereafter, the very next day, Kashmir received the defence aid from India and engaged in a warfare that lasted till 1st January 1949.⁵ Thus, this marked the end of the first war between India and Pakistan in which the Gilgit Scouts along with Pakistani raiders got a remarkable victory over the Skardu region. Since then, there were frequent remarkable wars recorded in the history of two countries.

Today, Ladakh has become one of the vulnerable regions having disturbed borders with Pakistan and China. Time and again both sides keep claiming its authority over Ladakh. There were many operations recorded in the history in 1948, 1962 (with China), 1965, 1971 and 1999 and even now minor skirmishes are everyday affair on the border lands. In these wars, both the countries of China and Pakistan were able to illegally occupy 78,114 sq. Kms and 37,555 sq. Kms of the state respectively while the remaining part of the state acceded to India. Pakistan also illegally gifted 5,180 sq. Kms of this area to China (Source: District Census Hand book Leh, 2011).

SCENARIO OF LADAKH IN 1947

Generally, we all are aware of the casualties suffered by the people in the wake of Independence 1947, but there are regions in Indian subcontinent whose sacrifice and struggle were lost in the larger spectrum of Indian union, one such region who suffered no less was Ladakh, whose voices and traumas were left unheard by the masses. Till recently, the people of India have not even heard or were aware of the existence of such a place called Ladakh. This barren land under the state of Jammu and Kashmir became one of the major victims of the division of the country but unfortunately unlike Punjab, Bengal and Kashmir, their pain, struggle and sacrifices for protecting their motherland is not known by the people at large.

The condition of Ladakh at the time of Independence was destitute in every aspect be it social, political, economic or defence and was never highlighted. The geographical condition of the Ladakh was such that there was not even a single proper motorable road that can link Ladakh with other states or countries. Only the bridle paths and trade routes which were used by different traders, pilgrims and missionaries for centuries were in existence. The town's defences during the war of Independence consisted of a platoon of the State Force, a volunteer detachment from the 2nd Dogras, who had braved winter conditions to struggle across the Zojila in the March of 1947, and a battalion of the local militia, which had been hastily raised in response to the threat from downriver.⁶ Due to the courage and bravery, this local militia consisting of the volunteers from both Nubra and the Central Indus valley were later developed into the core of two local battalions of J&K militia and was named as 'Ladakh Scouts.'⁷ Thus, without the assistance of these local home guards, whose lungs were genetically conditioned to survive at the highest of altitudes, it could not have been easy for the Indian troops to pushed back their enemies and defend the territories of Ladakh from being over-run by the Pakistanis.

THE WAR OF INDEPENDENCE 1947 IN LADAKH

The year of 1947 is a milestone in the history of India so as in the history of Ladakh as well. The Ladakhis who till then were terrified by the Dogra administrators for centuries, rose once again like a lion under the leadership of Indian army and fought for their land being fallen into the clutches of Pakistani raiders. In fact, they even after being oblivious of all the war tactics were able to mark their imprint. Being a native of this hard land they had a clear route map of all the nook and corners of the place which proved to be an advantage in protecting the region and regaining the territories that had been annexed by their enemy. Ladakh, at the time of Independence was divided into three wazarats i.e., Skardu, Kargil and Ladakhwazarat under the regime of Dogra administration. Among this, Skardu was served as a winter capital and Ladakh and Kargil as the summer capital of Dogra administration. After the division of India and Pakistan, the Pakistani raiders along with many Scouts Battalion personnel who were Muslim from Gilgit area, took part in the battles to capture Ladakh in 1947/48.⁸Leh, Skardu and Kargil were at that time, held by garrisons from the 6th Jammu and Kashmir infantry under the overall command of Lieutenant Colonel Sher Jung Thapa, who had assumed command, with his headquarters at Leh.⁹

In the month of August 1947, the Gilgit scouts accompanied by Pakistani armies, invaded Skardu and created havoc in the area by killing the wazir of Ladakh, Lala Amarnath at his office in Skardu. Thus, this created chaos among the people who in order to save their lives ran around for shelters, among them Kajo Ali Sher Khan of Kargil and Tsetan Phuntsog of Ladakh reached Leh and conveyed the state situation which caused an alarm throughout Ladakh. On hearing the news, Colonel Sher Jung Thapa of Dogra battalion was asked to proceed towards Skardu with the maximum force from Leh and Kargil, thus, leaving only one platoon of his battalion in Leh, he set off to Skardu.

Meanwhile, guarding the whole frontiers of Ladakh with just one platoon was not possible therefore, an urgent message was then sent to Srinagar and New Delhi for reinforcements. In this regard, Ladakhi history mentions that Pandit Shridhar Kaul popularly known as Dullu Sahib among Ladakhis, a Kashmiri Pandit who at that time was an education inspector in Leh, was the one who perceiving the whole scenario sent an emergency messages to New Delhi and Srinagar. In fact, he himself took the pain and made his journey towards New Delhi where he met with Jawaharlal Nehru, then Prime minister and

discussed about the poor and helpless situation in Ladakh. In response to this request Major Prithvi Chand, Captain Khushal Chand and Subedar Bhim Chand from Karsha, Lahaul and 15 soldiers reached Ladakh by crossing the Zojila pass in the mid-winter of 12 March 1948.¹⁰ They along with many Ladakhis like Nubrapa Lama, Zanskar Tashi, Sabipa Sonam Tsering, Tundup Tashi Sheshan, Sonam Wangdu Yondak, Yeshi Rinchen Chushot, Yeshi Chospel etc. without caring or fearing for their lives played a significant role in this war of Independence.

For the first time, a militia was raised in Leh under the leadership of Kalon Tsewang Rigzin Bankapa. He along with his son Rigzin Namgyal played a vital role in instigating the local youths of Ladakh to come forward and defend their motherland. Therefore, around 950 volunteered local youths from upper and central Ladakh and 200 from Nubra region who in total formed 1150 volunteered to take up arms against the invaders. These young volunteers under the leadership of Major Prithvi Chand were then given the training at various places in handling of rifles, field craft and minor tactics of war for fifteen days and were named as National guards which in contemporary time are called as Ladakh Scouts. Today, they are deployed in the areas around Leh and its different borders and are often called as 'Snow Warriors' as well.

On rising of militia battalions by the state government, the Ladakh Home Guards were designated as the 7th Battalion of the Jammu and Kashmir Militia on 15 April 1948, with Major promoted to Lieutenant Colonel Prithvi Chand as its first commanding officer.¹¹ Post their training, these volunteers along with the Dogra forces of around 120 who were then stationed in Ladakh were immediately dispatched towards the areas of Sham and Nubra where Pakistani raiders started intruding. With the increasing numbers of soldiers an urgent need of arms and ammunition were felt which was to be supplied only through air due to the reasons like, firstly, it is the fastest means of transport and secondly, Kargil which falls on the way between Srinagar and Leh was already held by their adversary. Therefore, an immediate challenge was aroused in front of the Ladakhis which is to create an airstrip for that a Ladakhi native, Sonam Norbu,¹² an engineer then working in Srinagar, was specially assigned. All the members of every Ladakhi family without any remuneration came forward to assist him in doing all the labour work. Their hard work finally paid off on 24 May 1948, when for the first time a Dakota flown by Air Commander Mehar Singh was landed on the land of Ladakh, thus, generated a sense of relief among the people. Mehar Singh was accompanied by General Thimaya and D.P Dhar then home secretary, who had examined the whole situation and returned back. Later,

one Gorkha company via air and one company through Manali road reached to Ladakh. Amidst the leaders of Indian army Cornol Hari Chand, Bhim Chand and Khushal Chand had an outstanding contribution in this war of Ladakh Independence.

The Pakistani forces and the Gilgit scouts initially attacked Ladakh from Gilgit – Skardu area in the West which now forms the Pakistan held National part of Jammu and Kashmir¹³ and gradually marched towards the areas of Sham and Nubra. The Pakistani army in the Ladakh sector proceeded under the commandant of Lieutenant Colonel Mohiuddin Jilani and Lieutenant Babar. Subsequently, the two armies of India and Pakistan confronted each other at various places like Khalsi, Hemis-shukpachan, Nubra, Zanskar, Basgo, Nimu etc. in which the contribution of Indian army is known by all. The newly formed Ladakhi Home Guard were managed to mark their imprint and emerged as a strong warrior in this war of Independence. Amongst them TsewangRinchen, a 17-year boy from Nubra, brought glory to Ladakh by becoming a youngest recipient of MahaVir Chakra and became an inspiration and role model for many Ladakhi youngsters who wanted to serve the Indian Army.

Finally, the union of Indian army and Home guards were successful in withdrawing their Pakistani counterparts from Ladakh and on 1st January 1949, a ceasefire line was drawn between the two countries that led to the complete separation of the third sub-district i.e. Baltistan from Ladakh. Later in the war of 1971, Colonel TsewangRinchen, was able to add some villages of Turtuk, Tyakshi, Chalungka etc. to the Nubra valley that left many families and relatives of these villages divided by few miles. Unfortunately, the Pakistani counterparts have not maintained their status quo and kept on violating the ceasefire line again and again.

Hence, in this war of Ladakh's Independence, everyone had a significant part in some or the other way, while some of them acted as a volunteered army, some were engaged in arranging food and transport facilities and some acted as messenger from one place to another. Even, the monks from monasteries and the local families of Ladakh also extended their assistance by arranging grains supply to the army.

Similarly, during the war of 1999, popularly known as Kargil war, the native people also along with their domestic animals contributed their part in carrying food, arms and ammunitions to the armies where it was not possible to communicate through motor. Post this war, the Ladakh Scout due to their magnificent performance; it became a regular scout regiment in 2000. Recently, on 21st August 2017, this regiment was presented with the President's Colours by 14th President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, which is normally

offered to units that distinguish themselves consistently over decades. Hence, Ladakh Scouts have been guarding the borders in the high altitude of the country with vigour and since then were awarded with many gallantry awards like Ashok Chakra, Vir and Mahavir Chakra, Kirti Chakra, Shaurya Chakra and many more. Today, joining Ladakh scouts has become one of the career choices for most of the youngsters in Ladakh.

CONCLUSION

Thus, Ladakhis throughout their warfare, despite of all the challenges, walked shoulder to shoulder along with the Indian army and gave a tough fight to their enemies who planned to seize Ladakh and assigned it to Pakistan. The war of 1947, in a way, once again stimulated the Ladakhis to regain their bold and courageous attitude which was somehow broken by the cruel Dogras and fortunately they were able to shield their land and proved themselves as the conquerors of their land.

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- ¹¹ Ashok Malhotra, *Trishul Ladakh and Kargil 1947-1993*, New Delhi: Lancer Publishers & Distributors, 2003, p. 8.
- ¹² Sonam Norbu's was the first Ladakhi to go overseas to study Civil Engineering in Sheffield University. Later, as an Engineer, some remarkable jobs were commenced under his supervision like the construction of first airstrip in Leh, construction of Stakna Hydel Project and Srinagar-Leh highway. He was also conferred with prestigious Padma Shri Award by the Government of India for his distinguished services in the region.
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