CEASE-FIRE J&K OPS 1947-48 – THE INSIDE STORY – II

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Even as the British were working for a cease-fire in Kashmir for arranging a UN sponsored plebiscite there, they seem to have made concerted efforts to influence the operations of the Indian Army in such a way as not to let India drive Pakistan out of Kashmir totally before the Security Council could enforce the Cease-fire. That was the time when India had just then gained independence and the Indian leaders lacked the expertise in handling the Armed Forces. The Indian Government at that time was, therefore, very vulnerable to being misled in military matters by known military experts masquerading as friends but with their hearts else where. The Governor General Lord Louis Mountbatten of Burma fame was one such expert and General Robert Lock-hart, the English Commander-in-Chief of the Indian Army was the other. There was enough evidence to show that both played a dubious role in slowing down the India's military operations in J&K – the former by restraining the Government and the later by straining the reins of the Indian Army.

The military situation in January 1948 was not too good, which became a matter of grave concern to every right thinking Indian. Maharaja Hari Singh complained bitterly about this "depressing" military situation to Sardar Patel. That was the time when the advance towards Kohala had been halted after the capture of Uri in the first week of November '47, without any further intention of ever continuing it, and the State troops that had been holding on to their various posts in the Poonch Jagir and Mirpur districts had had to abandon most of them for want of ammunition and rations which the Indian Army had not been able to provide to them even so long after taking over operational control in J&K. But what had probably caused the greatest distress to the Maharaja, and every one else in the State, was the fall of Mirpur at the end of November. In the hope of receiving reinforcements from the Indian Army, the State Force garrison there had held on to the town valiantly right up to the time that its ammunition was totally exhausted and it was over-whelmed by the enemy. Consequently its withdrawal had not been orderly and while it still managed to escort thousands of Hindu/Sikh refugees out of the town to Jhangar, many more were left behind at the mercy of the barbarians. The tragedy was heightened by the fact that a Brigade of the Indian Army, even after losing some precious time because of undue caution during its advance from Jammu, had reached the scene a week earlier but had, unfortunately, till then not been able to do any thing beyond helping in the evacuation of Kotli next door. All military experts are agreed that after reaching Jhangar if the Indian Brigade Commander had reinforced Mirpur along with Kotli, instead of deciding to go for them one by one, both could have been saved. All these happenings had sullied the fair name of the Indian Army, but were they really to blame? Many old officers of the period would vouch that the undue caution exercised by the Indian Brigade Commander was because of the official briefing that he had received at the Army Headquarters, which was till then still dominated by British officers. As a matter of fact even the GOC in C Delhi and East Punjab Command, under which the J&K operations were being conducted, was a British at that time. On going through the official history of the J&K operations, published by the Ministry of Defence in 1987, it would appear that the suspicion of the old timer with regard to the malevolent role played by the British officers in the Indian Army, is not unfounded. There are numerous instances of the GOC in C Delhi and East Punjab Command, Lieutenant General Dudley Russell, and the Commander in Chief Indian Army, General Robert Lock-hart, (and subsequently Sir Roy Bucher), obstructing despatch of reinforcements to the J&K theatre of war by exaggerating Pakistani threat from West

Punjab, and of curbing the initiative of local commanders by turning down any of their bold plans that might have led to an early end to operations, by terming them too risky and impracticable.

The attitude of the Army Headquarters was most puzzling for the local field commanders in J&K. Lieutenant General LP Sen, who was a Brigadier then and commanding a Brigade on the Uri front, has described the inexplicable attitude of the Army Headquarters thus: -

"The spring offensive had to be launched without teeth to it because of the denial of reinforcements necessary to provide the punch for effecting a break-through … Army HQ handling of the operations in Kashmir in 1947-48 leaves more than a little room for speculation whether the formations deployed were really intended to score a decisive success, which they could and would have achieved had reinforcements been moved in, or whether it was the intention that their capacity should be limited to a strength where only a stale-mate could result. From the attitude adopted by AHQ the second would appear to be the correct assessment".

Apparently the questionable role being played by the British officers in the Indian Army was a matter of British Policy and executed under the patronage of the Supreme Commander Field Marshal Auchinleck. This appears to have become quite evident to the discerning members of the Indian Government. As a matter of fact Sardar Patel minced no words as he openly charged Field Marshal Auchinleck with throttling the initiative of the Indian Army and allowing his headquarters in Delhi to act "as the advanced post of Pakistan". He demanded immediate liquidation of the Supreme Command. This move of Sardar Patel was vehemently opposed by Pakistan and Mountbatten, but the Sardar persisted with his demand. Ultimately the British Government "reluctantly came to the conclusion that they had no option but to close down the Supreme Command HQ on 30 November". Sardar Patel also seems to have suspected the role being played by the Commander in Chief, General Lock-hart, and it was, probably, because of his and Sardar Baldev Singh's insistence that Lock-hart was removed, but why he should have been replace by another British officer, General Bucher, is difficult to fathom.

What was, however, most detrimental to the Indian Army's operations was the authoritative advice that Mountbatten was continually rendering to his Government. With his tremendous influence over Nehru, the advice was, generally, going right home. Mountbatten forcefully directed his advice against any advance beyond Uri. Apart from creating the general hoax regarding the dangers of extended lines of communications, Mountbatten expressed great concern over "the most serious news of concentration of another formidable enemy force, estimated at six thousand in Uri area". He feared that "any attempt by the Indian Army to up-stick from the Uri defences and advance towards Kohala, while six thousands of the enemy was waiting to pounce on it, entailed the risk of losing Uri and that a withdrawal from Uri would renew a threat to Baramulla, Srinagar and the Valley all over again". Mountbatten also advised the Government strongly against holding Poonch. Fortunately the advice was turned down, even if more on political grounds than military. And God be thanked for that.

Mountbatten's motives in advising caution in general and vacation of Poonch and no advance beyond Uri in particular, may appear to be his genuine concern for the security of the country of which he was the Governor General, but his advice would appear sinister when viewed in the light of Pakistan Army's objectives as formulated by its British Commander in Chief, General Gracey. In the concluding paragraph of his appreciation of the situation made in April 1948, General Gracey wrote as under: -

"It is quite obvious that a general offensive [by India] is about to start very soon now … If Pakistan is not to face another refugee problem with about 2,750,000 people uprooted from

their houses, if India is not to be allowed to sit on the door steps of Pakistan to the rear and on the flank, at liberty to enter at its will and pleasure, if the civilian and military morale is not to be effected to a dangerous extent, and if subversive political forces are not to be encouraged and let loose within Pakistan itself, **it is imperative that the Indian Army is not allowed to advance beyond the general line Uri – Poonch – Nowshera".**

It is, therefore, no coincidence that the Cease-fire line stood exactly where Pakistan wished it to.

It appears that the British influence on India's policy on Kashmir continued to be exercised through the friendly advice of Mountbatten long after he had left India, as a matter of his "continued responsibility". In a letter to Nehru dated 15 August 1948, Mountbatten used every trick up his sleeve – like flattery, appeal to idealism, assertion of his military authority to instil the fear of war, threat of action by the UN, and even ridicule heaped on India's capacity to wage war – to persuade Nehru to accept the cease-fire and, so to say, not to do anything that might hurt Pakistan.

All circumstantial evidence, undoubtedly, points towards a British conspiracy in bringing about a cease-fire to the J&K operations 1947-48. Any suggestion that the cease-fire came about at the behest of Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah for keeping the non-Kashmiri Muslims out of his "Sheikhdom", as being propounded by some, would, therefore, to be quite unfounded – the opinion expressed by General Kulwant Singh in support of this contention, at one stage or the other, notwithstanding.