
Baramulla Revisited

Raunaq Rathore

Nestled in the narrow Jhelum Valley, Baramulla is a historic town. In the Puranic scriptures, it is known as Vermul — derived from the word Varaha (the wild boar). Mythology has it that the present day Kashmir Valley was earlier a huge lake. The Varaha churned it and the lake broke its banks, forming the Jhelum river and the Kashmir Valley. Colloquially, Baramulla is still referred to as Vermul.

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The town was in the news (and in flames too) on October 27, 1947, when hordes of wild, bloodthirsty tribals from Pakistan's Northwest Frontier Province (NWFP), led by Pakistan Army personnel, descended from the nearby hills on the terrified townspeople. Baramulla was then crawling with Hindu and Sikh refugees displaced from the areas already sacked by these marauders. Soon, predatory bands let loose a reign of terror, murder, loot and rape, which didn't even spare the local Muslims. October 27, 1947, has a special significance in Indian history. On this day, when the capture of Srinagar by the Pakistani raiders looked imminent, the Indian Army undertook the uphill task of inducting troops into the Valley by air and thwarted their advance towards the capital city. For a nation still coming to terms with the pangs of partition, it was a firm display of its resilience and resolve. The Indian Army accomplished the task with great élan and valour. October 27 is also celebrated as Infantry Day, as on this day, the first infantryman had landed in Srinagar to herald the commencement of operations in Jammu and Kashmir (J&K).

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At the time of partition, the Order of Franciscan Missionaries of Mary had churches in Rawalpindi and Baramulla. Baramulla church was founded in 1921 and around the same time, a dispensary was also started to provide much-needed medical help to the locals. Later, it became a modern hospital having an X-ray machine – then a rarity. The doctors and the sisters of the hospital have always been a committed lot. In fact, till 1968, they used to go on horseback to conduct deliveries in the villages. Such a philanthropic institution which had served the local population for over two decades was looted and its inmates were murdered in cold blood on October 27, 1947. “There was uneasiness amongst the religious staff and the patients after they learnt about the horrific tales of violence from the refugees, who had flocked to the hospital. Father Shanks and Mother Superior Aldetrude allayed such apprehensions, as they were sanguine that no harm would come to the hospital, church or the convent,” says Mother Superior Elaine Nazareth, whom I met during my visit to the town.

Elaine Nazareth added, “That morning, gunshots could be heard in the town and in the hills overlooking it. Some of the town’s population, in order to escape the wrath of the marauders, had taken shelter in the forests or was migrating to adjoining towns of Sopur and Pattan. Yet a large number of them remained, thinking that they will be spared. At about 1015 hours, many armed and bedraggled tribals jumped across the boundary wall and entered the hospital ward. They were firing in the air and frisking everyone for any valuables. They stabbed two lady patients, Mota Devi and Mrs Dykes, to death in their beds. The latter was the wife of Colonel Dykes of the Sikh Regiment and had delivered a baby boy a few days ago. Colonel Dykes, who was present in the vicinity, rushed to stop the attackers; they shot him too. Three minor sons of Dykes’ including the newborn were orphaned in the first wave of murderous assault.”

On hearing the commotion, Mother Superior Aldetrude and her assistant Sister Teresalina rushed from the convent towards the hospital block. The tribals seized them, frisked them and shot them along with a nurse, Philomena, killing the latter on the spot. By now, more tribals had poured into the premises and were busy pillaging the hospital, church and the convent. They carried axes and tore open the doors, drawers and cupboards looking for the valuables. All the brassware and door knobs were looted by them as they thought these were made of gold. “Their lust for gold, however, saved some lives too. Near the hospital ward they had shot dead Mr. Barretto, the husband of a lady doctor, and had ordered all the sisters, nurses and the grieving lady doctor to be lined

up and shot. Meanwhile, a tribal noticed the gold tooth of Sister Lucis Esther and halted the execution as he wanted to extract the tooth while she was alive. The interlude was followed by pleading, wailing and confusion, till Major Saurab, a Pakistani Army officer appeared on the scene. He ordered the tribals to spare them,” narrates Mother Superior Nazareth. The presence of the Pakistani major had some salutary effect as no more people were killed, but the pillaging went on unabated. It also exposed the Pakistani claim that the invasion into J&K was a *jihad*, and its army had nothing to do with it.

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For the next seven or eight days the convent and hospital were cut off from the rest of the world and about 70-80 inmates were interned in a small ward. Sister Teresalina and Colonel Dykes died of their wounds. Mother Superior Aldetrude survived as she was evacuated to Rawalpindi in an army truck. The lady doctor Barretto, despite the murder of her husband; salvaged medicines from the debris of the sacked hospital to treat her patients. All the dead, irrespective of their religion and gender, were buried in a common grave in the hospital compound. Later, the remains of Sister Teresalina were shifted to the convent's cemetery in the same compound. Mother Superior led me to a ladies ward and pointed at a tiny cross engraved on the floor, “It was here that Sister Teresalina breathed her last.”

“The tribals did not leave the convent; in fact, Peer Manki Shah an influential cleric from NWFP, who had organised the tribal bands for Pakistan to raid J&K, camped in the premises for quite some time,” says Ghulam Rasool Kar an octogenarian politician of the Valley. Andrew Whitehead in his book *A Mission in Kashmir* describes Peer Manki Shah meeting the two orphaned sons of Colonel Dykes and offering them thirty rupees – perhaps a just compensation in the eyes of tribal justice. The town fared no better. The tribals helped themselves to everything it had to offer – wealth, women and hapless Hindus and Sikhs for slaughter. For two days, Baramulla was looted and burnt. Lorries laden with booty and women were dispatched to Rawalpindi by the respective tribal chiefs for safekeeping. Historians attribute this self-imposed lull in the operations as one of the main reasons that saved Srinagar from falling into the enemy hands.

On October 27, about the same time when Baramulla was being looted, 1 Sikh, the first infantry battalion to land in Kashmir, reached the eastern extremity of Baramulla and took up defences astride the road in village Kanispora. Next day, 1 Sikh position was attacked and it was decided to withdraw further eastward towards Pattan. While executing withdrawal, Lt. Col Dewan Ranjit Rai, the commanding officer was killed by enemy fire. "He was a brave officer and died in my arms," says Ghulam Rasool Kar, who had accompanied the Sikhs to Kanispora the previous day. The Sikhs have built an impressive memorial near the spot where they fought their first engagement. A plaque in the memorial reads, "In the evergreen memory of the brave soldiers of the Sikh Regiment, who gave their lives so that the Kashmiris *might* (emphasis added) live in freedom. They were the first Indian troops to come to their rescue on 27 Oct 47. On this fateful hill, was fought their first engagement." How prophetic these words are, one might say.