

Speech by Brig. R. B. Sharma, seminar on “ Remembering Chushul Martyrs”
organized by Dr. Syama Prasad Mookerjee Research Foundation and Conclave of
Defence Services Veterans at New Delhi on 18 Nov. 2008

India-China War of 1962: The Battle of Rezangla, A Saga of Heroism.

Introduction

The India-China conflict of 1962 has been variously described by the military historians and lay writers as a debacle, a disaster, or a national shame. The apologists amongst them call it an act of betrayal on the part of China. With hindsight one may surmise that the outbreak of hostilities between India and China in 1962 and its outcome were foretold by the uneasy diplomatic exchanges between the two countries as also by the fast changing ground situation in Tibet since the Communist-takeover of mainland China in 1948. The withdrawal of British power from the Indian sub-continent and the overthrow of Koumintang government by the communist forces in China almost simultaneously had shaken the power equilibrium between the two Asian giants. For the first time ever, India and China were going to become next-door neighbours without the luxury of having a buffer in between. By belief and ideology the communists are atheists and expansionists. Therefore, ruled by a peace-loving monastic system and headed by a god-king, Tibet stood like the sacrificial lamb for a greedy wolf. Internationally, the Cold War had divided the victors of World War-II into two power-blocs wherein China found a natural ally in the Communist USSR. On the other hand, India really did not know on which side of the hedge her eggs were safe. Even on the domestic front we were passing through the most challenging years of our existence. The unfortunate partition of the country, the exodus of millions of people from Pakistan to India creating daunting problems of their resettlement, accession of almost 600 states to the Union of India, the ship-to-mouth situation on food front, and the vacuum at governance level were some of the many problems that confronted our nation. Such circumstances demanded a firm, resolute, and practical leadership to guide the destiny of the nascent state, Alas! We were not so fortunate. Unlike the rulers in India who as freedom fighters had bravely withstood the baton charges of the colonial police or valiantly gone to the gallows, the Chinese Communists to come to power had given a bloody nose to the Chiang Kai Shek's army. We had forgotten the age old dictum 'Veer bhogya vasundhara' which the Chinese had translated as the power flows

through the barrel of the gun. The Chinese leadership of the time was blooded in war over a long period,

Ladies & Gentlemen, much has been said and written about the contemporary state of affairs in India both at the strategic and tactical levels. For constraint of time need not recount all that. But for the sake of authentic recall, kindly permit me to quote the Iron Man of India, Sardar Patel, at some length. In his letter of 7 November 1950 addressed to Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru the Sardar wrote,(Quote) “.....I have been anxiously thinking over the problem of Tibet and thought I should share with you what is passing through my mind. I have carefully gone through the correspondence between the external affairs ministry and our Ambassador in Peking and through him the Chinese Government. I have tried to peruse this correspondence as favourably to our Ambassador and the Chinese government as possible but I regret to say that neither of them comes out well as a result of this study. The Chinese Government has tried to delude us by professions of peaceful intentions. My own feeling is that at a crucial period they managed to instill into our Ambassador a false sense of confidence in their so called desire to settle the Tibetan problem by peaceful means. There can be no doubt that during the period covered by this correspondence the Chinese must have been concentrating for an onslaught on Tibet. The final action of the Chinese, in my judgment, is little short of perfidy. The tragedy of it is that the Tibetans put faith in us; they chose to be guided by us; and we have been unable to get them out of the meshes of Chinese diplomacy or Chinese malevolence.”

“...we have done everything we could to assuage Chinese feelings, to allay its apprehensions and to defend its legitimate claims in our discussions and correspondence with America and British and in the UNO. In spite of this, China is not convinced about our disinterestedness; it continues to regard us with suspicion and the whole psychology is one, at least outwardly, of perhaps mixed with a little hostility.”

“ In the background of this, we have to consider what new situation now faces us as a result of the disappearance of Tibet, as we knew it and the expansion of China almost up to our gates. - China is no longer divided. It is united and strong, the danger from the north and north-east, therefore, becomes both communist and imperialist. While our western and north-western threat to security is still as prominent as before, a new threat has developed from the north and north-east. Thus, for the first time after centuries, India's defence has to concentrate itself on two fronts simultaneously. Our defence measures have so far been based on the calculations of superiority

over Pakistan. In our calculations we shall now have to reckon with Communist China in the north and in the north-east, a Communist China which has definite ambitions and aims and which does not, in any way, seem friendly disposed towards us.

“ I am, however, giving below some of the problems which, in my opinion, require early solution and around which we have to build our administrative or military policies and measures to implement them.

- a) A military and intelligence appreciation of the Chinese threat to India both on the frontier and to internal security.
- b) An examination of our military position and such redistribution of our forces as might be necessary, particularly with the idea of guarding important routes or areas which are likely to be the subject of dispute.
- c) An appraisal of the strength of our forces and, if necessary, reconsideration of our retrenchment plans for the Army in the light of these threats.
- d) A long time consideration of our defence needs. My own feeling is that, unless we assure our supplies of arms, ammunition and armour, we should be making our defence position perpetually weak and we would not be able to stand up to the double threat of difficulties both from the west and north-west and north and the north-east.
- e) The question of Chinese entry into UNO. In view of rebuff which China has given us and the method which it has followed in dealing with Tibet, I am doubtful whether we can advocate its claim any longer. There would probably be a threat in the UNO virtually to outlaw China in view of its active participation in the Korean war. We must determine our attitude to this question also.
- f) The political and administrative steps which we should take to strengthen our northern and north-eastern frontiers. This would include the whole of the border, i.e. Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling and the tribal territory in Assam.
- g) Measures of internal security in the border areas as well as the States flanking those areas, such as U.P., Bihar, Bengal and Assam.
- h) Improvement of our communications, road, rail, air and wireless, in these areas and with the frontier outposts.
- i) The future of our mission at Lhasa and the trade posts at Gyantse and Yatung and the forces which we have in operation in Tibet to guard the trade routes.
- j) The policy in regard to the McMahon Line

“ I suggest that we meet early to have a general discussion on these problems and decide on such steps as we might think to be immediately necessary and direct quick examination of other problems with a view to taking early measures to deal with them.” (Unquote) Unfortunately, that discussion seems to have never happened. How prophetic was the Sardar!. Not even an astute crystal gazer could have the future more clearly.

During the next 12 years i.e. from 1950 to 1962 while China was building roads to Tibet, mobilising troops close to the borders, training them hard either in the Korean theatre or in situ against the Tibetan freedom fighters, compelling the Dalai Lama and his government to surrender, making claims and counter claims for more and more of Indian territories by publishing series of new maps, the Indian side was busy in reducing its Armed Forces to insignificance, organizing meets at Bandung and elsewhere to establish China centrestage in the comity of nations and persuading the Chinese to be friend through song and dance including singing the rhyme ‘Hindi Chini bhai bhai’.

With the vanishing of Tibet as an independent entity the border between India and China stretched from the India-Afghanistan China tri-junction in the Northwest to the India-Burma – China tri-junction in the Northeast with an exception of a small stretch covering Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Since the Ladakh segment of the border alone is the focus of the story today, I leave the Northeast for some other day.

By the middle of 1962, China had seized in Ladakh a corridor to reach Sinkiang from Tibet directly by acquiring about 12000 sq miles of Indian territory and had gobbled up another 2000 square miles of our land, courtesy Pakistan.

By then, India had constructed a road from Kashmir valley to Leh via Zozila Pass, Dras and Kargil and some feeder roads to the operational areas. As many as 43 out posts had been established within our own territory mainly to mark our possession for purposes of negotiations. Shri Nehru was more than convinced that China would never go to war to settle the dispute. With the passing away of Patel no one was left in country to make him see reason. Gradually, his belief had turned into an obsession. His Defence Minister, Krishna Menon was instrumental in creating this psyche, no less.

The Ladakh Sector at that time came under Headquarters Western Command located at a remote and an isolated place like Simla which exercised control through XV Corps Headquarters

located at Udham Pur. The troops strength in the entire sector was approximately that of a brigade plus.

A proposal for raising a Division with four Brigades to meet the Chinese threat in Ladakh put up by the Army was being examined in Delhi when on 20 October 1962 the Chinese launched a massive attack on our post at Daulat Beg Oldi in the Chip Chap valley near the Kara Korum Pass. By 24th Oct, when the first phase of the encounter ended, all our posts in northern and middle sectors of Ladakh had fallen. The southern sector, the plot of the saga of today, alone stood like a rock. This was followed a by lull in the war for about 3 weeks. During the lull period a Mountain Division with two Brigades had been raised at Leh and the Tactical Headquarters XV Corps had moved from Udham Pur to Srinagar.

The second phase of the Chinese attack in Ladakh opened on 18 November. By then HQ 114 Infantry Brigade with 4 Battalions under Command 7 Brig. TN Raina, who later rose to be the Army Chief, had reached Chushul which dominates the Spanggur gap at a height of 14230 feet above and MSL possesse the highest airstrip in the world. 13 Kumaon, one of the battalions of the 114 Infantry Brigade had taken positions at Rezagla, 14500 feet, on 06 November No engineer support was available to the battalion to raise defences. Since mules could not operate at that height and yawks were not available, every thing lock stock and barrel had to be carried manpack by the troops. How they met the challenge and how they denied a superior Chinese force to move further will be described by General Kathpalia, a little later. Before that a collage of slides showing the Chushul area and its people will be presented by Shri Tarun Vijay, a well known journalist and a diehard nationalist.