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A Strategy to Integrate Border Regions in J&K

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POONCH FESTIVAL

A STRATEGY TO INTEGRATE BORDER REGIONS IN J&K

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The need for a Poonch festival and its implications for the society and nation cannot be underestimated or overlooked. How does one pursue the matter further? What needs to be done at the societal and state levels?

Such a festival needs support from both the state and society. Clearly, the local society cannot organize such an event on its own. The direction and funding support will have to come from the state, in the same manner that it has assisted the organization of the Ladakh and Jammu festivals. More than funding support to organize the event, for which the budget may not be significant, what is actually needed is for the state to provide additional infrastructure.

From travel to accommodation, there is a need to improve the basic infrastructure of the district. As mentioned above, the JKSRTC operates only a couple of services between Jammu and Poonch. There are hardly any accommodation facilities available in Poonch; and given the current infrastructure, the district headquarters, may not be able to accommodate even a 100 people in the government and private hotels and bungalows. The roads need to be developed urgently. .

An Overview

Come September and Ladakh, especially Leh and its immediate surroundings, become more colourful and vibrant than usual. The reason is the Ladakh festival, which now attracts global attention and tourists who visit to enjoy the culture, people and places of Ladakh. While Ladakh has its own set of loyal tourists, mostly with an adventurous streak; the Ladakh festival has expanded its tourism base, with an ever greater number from within J&K, elsewhere in India and across the world, especially Europe, interested in visiting the region, particularly during this period. For the last two years, there has been an increased emphasis on a Jammu festival as well. In 2007, the Jammu festival was celebrated for three days, which subsequently became a fortnightly festival, starting 2008. Although it attracted a huge crowd, especially since the performers at the festival came from all over the world, the fest itself remained confined to Jammu town.

There is a need for such festivals, especially in the border and interior districts of J&K, which seem to have become relics of an ancient past. While each district of J&K has its own unique history, culture, festivals and traditions (and in some cases, even language); the politics of violence and militancy within the state and New Delhi's obsession with J&K as a 'security state', unfortunately, have isolated the people and their proud culture in select regions.

While the primary focus of this essay is Poonch; the arguments made for a regional festival within J&K, the means/organization and implications of such an initiative, are

also applicable to other regions such as Uri, Kupwara, Kargil, Kishtwar, and Basholi. Bhandarwah, another region in J&K, also had its own festival recently. While none can deny the cultural and tourist importance of this beautiful valley; the festival seems to have been organized here not so much for its beauty, as for the fact that it is the constituency of the former Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad.

I POONCH: POLITICAL, RELIGIOUS AND STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Poonch, like the above mentioned regions, is located in one corner of the district, and perhaps, the country as well. To get from Jammu to Poonch, it takes a back-breaking eight-hour journey in private operator-run vehicles, most of which are tempo travellers or Tata sumos. Poonch is perhaps, one of the few district headquarters in the country, where the State Road Corporation runs only two services from the state capital. In fact, the JKSRTC does not have depots in many district headquarters. A comparison with the neighbouring states of Punjab, Himachal and Haryana, would reveal the disastrous state of state-run buses. The condition of the roads is relatively better today, with the road between Jammu and Rajouri being double-laned and metalled. The road between Rajouri and Poonch however, is still under renovation. Here, news papers get delivered only in the evening, electricity is erratic, and private mobile operators are yet to make a dent in the area. The BSNL communication network, when it works, is the people's only link with the rest of world. In short, Poonch has been left to the whims of nature, which also has not been kind thus far.

Despite its several problems, the political, sociological, and strategic importance of Poonch cannot be under estimated. Composed primarily of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, the population is diverse; yet this religious configuration lends a degree of sensitivity to the district. Further divisions (the Gujjars, Bakerwals, Paharis, PoK refugees, and ethnic Kashmiris), cutting

across religious lines, make this town and the entire district a colourful entity, but on the flip side, also politically volatile.

While the city and the district are known for its communal harmony and peaceful co-existence, minor tremors of communal tensions have been felt in recent years. To their credit, Poonch and Rajouri have never witnessed the displacement of minority communities on a large scale, unlike what has happened in the Kashmir valley over the last two decades. While the Kashmiri Pandits felt insecure and were forced to leave the Valley and settle elsewhere as 'internal refugees'; there has never been a large scale displacement of the Hindus and Sikhs in Poonch and Rajouri.

Today however, there are clear fault lines – whether these are considered minor or major, depends on whose perspective these are viewed from. While there have been no major communal riots between different religious communities in recent years, the tension is palpable. There is an increased feeling amongst the Muslim community that militant Hindu organizations such as the Bajrang Dal are trying to increase the communal cleavage in the region. The diversion of religious yatris to the Buddha Amarnath shrine, situated at Mandi, a few kilometres away from Poonch town, is seen as a deliberate move to communalize the situation. The recent torching of shops in Poonch during the Amarnath Shrine land allotment controversy is also viewed by the Muslim community as a Hindutva agenda to polarize the community along regional lines.

The dominant perception, shared by the Hindus and Sikhs, is that since they are a silent majority; their sentiments are being taken for granted by the government, which is only interested in appeasing the majority. Most of the developmental expenditure, the minority community complains, goes into addressing the concerns of the majority Muslims in these twin districts. One example, that repeatedly finds mention is that there is no degree college along the 40 km stretch of

road between Nowshera and Rajouri, which is dotted primarily with Hindu community settlements, most of them PoK refugees. On the other hand, there are two degree colleges and a university along the 20 km stretch between Rajouri and Thana Mandi. Besides, the minority community also believes that the loyalty of the Muslim majority lies across the LoC rather than with New Delhi. In a communally sensitive situation, perceptions assume greater power and influence than reality.

Besides, there is a slow, but strong divide taking root between the Paharis and Gujjars, especially since the time the latter were granted the status of a 'scheduled tribe' (ST). The Paharis, meaning 'people of the hills', comprise a category of people, which cuts across religious lines. They feel that granting the ST status to the Gujjars has undermined their position and undercut their opportunities, as they believe that both, the Gujjars and Paharis come from the same geographic, social and economic terrain. The Paharis believe that with such a decision, the future of their forthcoming generations has been put at stake. Hence, they have also started demanding that the same status or its equivalent be granted to them. This simmering divide which is becoming more pronounced by the day, could erupt at any time.

Strategically, Poonch shares its borders with Pakistan occupied Kashmir and has witnessed the Indo-Pak wars of 1947, 1965 and 1971. The 1947 war, in fact, divided the erstwhile Poonch region into two; with most of its districts, including Rawlakot and Kotli, falling onto the other side of the Line of Control (LoC), under Pakistan's occupation.

II RATIONALE FOR THE POONCH FESTIVAL

The rationale for a regional festival in Poonch stems from the following factors. First, there have been a few positive developments in this region in the last few years. Given the fact that both, Rajouri and

Poonch have largely gone unnoticed on the regional and certainly, on the national radars; these developments should be expanded further. At least two encouraging developments are worth mentioning – decline in militancy and greater cross-LoC movement of divided families. While militancy reached a peak in the late 1990s in this region, in the last few years, it has been gradually dying out, even if it is not already dead. There are presently, no or very few local recruitments and the number of active militants in this district stands between an estimated twenty to thirty, most of whom are hiding in Surankote and Mendhar sectors. The security forces – both the army and local police have worked hard to bring the militancy down - to which the ceasefire and the construction of fencing all along the LoC in Rajouri and Poonch districts have also contributed significantly. Thanks to these factors, the people feel far more secure and relaxed, especially with a decrease in the regular gun and artillery fire from state and non-state actors – both overt and covert.

The opening of the Poonch-Rawlokot road to enable members of divided families visit each other, has opened the eyes and hearts of people living across the LoC, by breaking the numerous myths and false propaganda unleashed by state machineries on either side. People are now able to see for themselves what is really happening and can therefore, make their own assessments, based on their experience of realities at the ground level. This perhaps, has been the most remarkable development in the region in the last six decades. The above-mentioned developments need to be built on, and a Poonch festival, as has been explained subsequently, can prove immensely helpful in this regard.

Second, the rationale for a Poonch festival also arises from a need to market this district to the rest of J&K and India. Unfortunately, J&K is largely seen as synonymous either with violence and conflict, or alternately, tourism in Leh, Dal

lake and Gulmarg, or the pilgrimage to the Amarnath and Vaishno Devi shrines. While undoubtedly, places like Srinagar and Leh deserve the attention they receive; this should not undermine the capacity of other places like Bhaderwah, Kargil, Poonch and Baramulla to attract and enthral visitors. With a disproportionate focus on the former, the latter areas seem to have been abandoned by the tourists – whether those visiting for purposes of religion, pleasure, or adventure. Poonch and Rajouri abound with places of scenic beauty, and opportunities for trekking and other adventure-related activities, and also shrines and other places of religious import.

It would be pertinent to ask how many of the tourists who have visited other parts of J&K for adventurous and religious purposes, have toured Rajouri and Poonch districts? According to a latest news report, there were an additional 67 lakh tourists to the Vaishnodevi shrine, and more than 40,000 visitors to Patnitop and around on new year's eve. How many of them visited Rajouri and Poonch? If only these attractions were marketed well, then this region would not be thought of as a godforsaken place.

Besides the tourists from outside J&K, it is unfortunate that there are not many even from within the state who have visited these regions. Many government employees – from teachers to tourist officials, who have been appointed in these districts, have been candid enough to accept that it was their first visit ever to these regions. Even after their posting however, many of them have admitted that till date their own family members, including spouses and children have not visited these places.

A regional mela, such as the one being proposed, will bring to these culturally and religiously diverse and scenically splendid districts along the LoC, the publicity that they require and deserve. Once people from other parts of J&K and the rest of India start visiting, they are likely to act as brand ambassadors of Poonch and Rajouri, just as every visitor to Dal Lake and

Ladakh does, bringing in an ever increasing number of visitors.

Third, a Poonch festival is equally important from the perspective of the district itself. As shall be seen subsequently, the Poonch festival will have to include the different cultures and religions that are cohabiting in this district. As mentioned above, there are fault lines within these societies, which have otherwise largely been peaceful and kept themselves away from violence. These fault lines exist most clearly between the Muslims and non-Muslims (including Hindus and Sikhs) and between the Paharis and Gujjars. A secular Poonch festival is likely to address this cleavage and remind the people of different faiths and denominations of the common history and rich cultural heritage their region is endowed with. During the maharaja's rule in the pre-1947 period, secular melas in the united Poonch were commonplace and helped emphasize the cultural diversity of the region and the need for the people to live together in harmony.

Fourth, such a mela is likely to revive the historical and cultural ties that undivided Poonch enjoyed before 1947. Much before becoming the subjects of Poonch Maharajas – under independent rulers, or under the influence of Mughal or Sikh rule, the people of Rajouri and Poonch districts on the Indian side, had frequent and intense interactions with the people of Bagh, Poonch, Sudhanati, Kotli, and Bimber districts of Kashmir under Pakistan control. In fact, "Azad Kashmir" and "Pakistan occupied Kashmir" are misnomers. Except for a few ethnic Kashmiris, mainly in Neelum and Muzaffarabad districts across the LoC, the rest of the people and districts have more in common with the people of Rajouri and Poonch. The fact, that there are more divided families in these two districts and that the Poonch-Rawlakot bus service is more famous than the Uri-Muzaffarabad bus, are reflections of the actual reality.

Today, although the people of this region are divided by the LoC; before 1947, they celebrated their religious and secular festivals together. With the inauguration of the Poonch-Rawlakot bus service there has been considerable interaction between people on either side, especially amongst the divided families. The proposed Poonch festival is likely to expand this interaction beyond divided families and attract people even from across the LoC to celebrate the festival. Already, those who have been visiting from across the LoC, have been taking part in or observing some of the secular events in India, such as its republic and independence day celebrations, and have also been attending some religious festivals that have taken place in numerous Sufi shrines in Poonch and Thana Mandi, near Rajouri.

Finally, such a mela is likely to attract the Poonchi diaspora back to its roots and in the process, provide the much-needed exposure to the people of Poonch. Before 1947, Poonch was the main center of learning and till date, the Poonchis are known for their high level of literacy within the region. Since 1947, especially since the wars in 1965 and 1971 and the establishment of the LoC, Poonch has been relegated to one corner of India, linked to the rest of world by just one road – Poonch to Jammu via Rajouri and Akhnoor. Earlier, the people of Poonch would interact with the people of Kashmir through the Poonch-Uri passage and the rest of Punjab mainly through the Poonch-Rawlakot, Mendhar-Kotli and Nowshera-Bhimber accesses. With the erstwhile Mughal road also having gone into complete disrepair, external connectivity for the people of this region became primitive and extremely difficult. Additionally, the failure of successive governments in J&K to provide better governance has resulted in the decline of the socio-economic standards within this region. As a result, many Poonchis from across the LoC are settled today in the rest of India, Pakistan and abroad.

III

POONCH FESTIVAL: THE INGREDIENTS

What should the proposed Poonch festival include? What can be done immediately, without investing much, and what can be left for later, which might require long-term planning and greater investment?

The proposed Poonch festival could be both secular and religious. In fact, given the cultural synthesis and history of this region, the divide between the secular and religious appears slim and is likely to be appreciated by people belonging to different faiths. To start with, the Poonch festival could be a three-day affair, with most of the activity concentrated mainly in Poonch town, and subsequently, can be extended to five or seven days covering other towns as well, including Mendhar and Surankot and perhaps even Bafliaz.

The focus of this festival could be the culture of Poonch, its youth and religions. Clearly, there are two distinct cultures – Pahari and Gojri, each with its own folk songs, dances and literature. Even today, in most of the school and college annual festivals – whenever these have been held in the region, one has been witness to the showcasing of these distinctive cultures by the students. Unfortunately, these cultures are declining, as the patronage they earlier enjoyed has been withering away. While before 1947, the Maharajas used to be the chief patrons of these cultures, post-1947, thanks to the neglect by the state, these cultures no longer have the platform and space they deserve. There are numerous well-meaning people within the region, who are extremely concerned and enthusiastic about reviving their declining cultures.

Second, the proposed festival could showcase certain secular events, peculiar to this region, including wrestling, 'stone lifting' and 'wrist holding'. Though the state has supported some of these events as part of the region's rural sports culture, especially among the youth, these activities could become the highlight of the Poonch

festival. To attract participation from other regions of J&K and beyond, more events could be included in the fest. For example, a cycle race from Bafliaz to Dera-ki-Ghali (the highest point on Poonch-Bafliaz-Rajouri) road, or a trekking competition from Loran to Gulmarg across the Pir Panjal or even a race – cycle or motor – along the Mughal road from Bafliaz to Sophian, could attract people from all over the world. People from all over Europe and Canada already come to Leh to cycle to Khardung La, a 40 distance of 40 kms, and if promoted properly, one could expect a decent participation from these countries to take part in the proposed Poonch festival.

Third, one can also conceive of religious events as a part of the Poonch festival. A one-day package tour to the three most important shrines of the district – Sain Baba Miran, Budha Amarnath and Nangali Sahib - belonging to Muslim, Hindu and Sikh faiths, can be organized for visitors. The most unique aspect of these three shrines – though belonging to different faiths, attracts everyone. Situated almost in the same circuitous road, these three important shrines are situated close to Poonch town, within a radius of 15-25 kms. Both Sain Miran and Nangali Sahib are located along the banks of the Drungali Nallah (rivulet); with Sain Miran perched atop a hill, close to the LoC, from where one can see the villages across the ???, and Nangali Saheb almost at the confluence of the Drungali Nallah and Poonch river. Besides their religious significance, both these places are also a visual treat for tourists. Budha Amarnath, on the other hand, is situated on the Loran Nullah, from where one can see the snow-clad Pir Panjal - visually, just as pleasurable.

One could start from Poonch town, offering early morning prayers at Budha Amarnath, visit Nangali Sahib in the noon, take part in the langar (community lunch) and spend the evening in Sain Miran and return to Poonch the same day.

IV THE FESTIVAL AHEAD

Clearly, the need for a Poonch festival and its implications for the society and nation cannot be underestimated or overlooked. How does one pursue the matter further? What needs to be done at the societal and state levels?

Such a festival needs support from both the state and society. Clearly, the local society cannot organize such an event on its own. The direction and funding support will have to come from the state, in the same manner that it has assisted the organization of the Ladakh and Jammu festivals. More than funding support to organize the event, for which the budget may not be significant, what is actually needed is for the state to provide additional infrastructure.

From travel to accommodation, there is a need to improve the basic infrastructure of the district. As mentioned above, the JKSTC operates only a couple of services between Jammu and Poonch. There are hardly any accommodation facilities available in Poonch; and given the current infrastructure, the district headquarters, may not be able to accommodate even a 100 people in the government and private hotels and bungalows. The roads need to be developed urgently. Unfortunately, despite being a national highway, the Jammu-Poonch road is perhaps one of the worst roads in the entire country. Other access roads also need to be developed along with proper wayside amenities.

It will be an impossible task to attract national and international tourists in the absence of such basic infrastructure. Imagine a 200 km plus highway, with a signboard that proudly declares “Welcome to the Jammu-Poonch national highway”, but is full of potholes and without any decent roadside restaurants and washrooms! Providing this basic infrastructure should be the joint responsibility of both, the state and union governments.

Civil society actors can be called upon to help in organizing the events of the festival. Both, religious and secular civil society groups will be extremely interested in being part of the festival and will also have a stake in organizing it. The trusts of Sian Miran, Nangali Sahib and Budha Amarnath, will be more than willing to take part in such a festival. So will the cultural and business groups of the region. In terms of organizing the event, the local administration in Poonch or its tourism department can take the lead. Even the Jammu University, with its new campus in Poonch could become among the primary organizers of the fest. Given the bureaucratic delays and the popular perception relating to corruption within government, it will not be a bad idea to organize this festival, with Jammu University and the Degree College in Poonch as the primary organizers. Such a strategy will make this festival, even more colourful and youthful.