

Pir Panjal Regional Festival

Integrating the Isolated Border Districts in J&K & Building Peace from Below*

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This essay focus on two districts in the Jammu sub region of J&K—Rajouri and Poonch, along the Pir Panjal range of the outer Himalayas. The primary objective is to highlight the conflict transformation (both positive and negative) in this region during the recent years; to explore the opportunities of an Pir Panjal festival bringing the various communities together and build peace from below; integrate the border districts with the national mainstream; and improve the physical and psychological connectivity of the Pir Panjal region with the rest and remove the feeling of physical isolation.

Idea of using a festival to promote tourism in J&K is not a new one; those who have witnessed the Ladakh festival, in all its colorful glory and culturally rich historical past, would agree how it has brought the region, its people and culture to the limelight. Of course, there are other places – from Dal lake to Gulmarg and from Bhaderwah to Basohli, which can easily boast the same – in terms of their rich culture, colorful people and beautiful places. The irony of J&K, however has been - there are numerous such regions in J&K, unfortunately remaining in the periphery, physically isolated and psychologically looking inward.

Ladakh festival, now celebrated during August every year, attracts global attention and tourists who visit the land of moon, as it is popularly referred, to enjoy the culture, people and places. 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, visiting the region. For the last few 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, it remained confined to Jammu town. Bhaderwah, 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 for the fact that it is the constituency of the former Chief Minister, Ghulam Nabi Azad.

The Pir Panjal region, consisting of Rajouri and Poonch districts has the potential to be promoted with a similar festival at an international level. Doda and Bhaderwah also are a part of this mountain range, but for the purpose of this essay, only these two districts are being concentrated. Besides the tourist potential of this region,

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developing an alternative framework for peace and security in the region



there is also an essential strategic need for such a festival here (and in other border and interior districts of J&K).

I

PIR PANJAL REGION

UNDERSTANDING THE STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

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 over emphasis on militancy within the state and New Delhi's obsession with Kashmir valley and J&K as a 'security state', unfortunately, have isolated the people and their proud culture in this region.

Rajouri and Poonch districts, are located in one corner of the J&K, and 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 travelers 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. Like in many other districts, the JKSRTC does not have a depot either in Rajouri or in Poonch. 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

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operators are yet to make a dent in the area. The BSNL communication network, when it works, and the Airtel are the people's only link with the rest of world. Television network is far behind reaching these districts; even if they do, there is no guarantee, that people can view them, for electricity is always a problem here. In fact, people are more tuned to listen to the imitations of Bollywood numbers being beamed from Radio Bagh for example, than from India!

Thanks to the above, there is a feeling of helplessness amongst the local communities, that their interests and welfare have been taken for granted by the Union and State governments. There is a clear need for the State and Union governments to address this feeling, otherwise, it may end up creating one more region within J&K, which feels alienated.

Second, besides the alienation feeling, the political, and sociological importance of Rajouri and Poonch districts is important. Composed primarily of Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs, the population is diverse. Further divisions (the Gujjars, Bakerwals, Rajputs, PoK refugees, and ethnic Kashmiris), cutting across religious lines, make these two districts not only colourful, but on the flip side, also politically volatile.

While these two districts are known for its communal harmony and peaceful co-existence, 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. 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 increase 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, by diverting the



Along the Mughal Road: The Forts & Sarais of Chingus (Left), Thanna Mandi (Middle) & Poonch (Right)

Amarnath yatris into this region. 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.

On the other hand, the dominant perception, shared by the Hindus and Sikhs, is that since they are a silent minority, their sentiments are being taken for granted by the government, which is only interested in appeasing the Muslim community. 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. In a communally sensitive situation, perceptions assume greater power and influence than the reality.

Besides the communal divide, 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. Whereas the Gujjars oppose any extension of this reservation to the Paharis. This simmering divide which is becoming more pronounced, could erupt at any time.

Third, strategically, Rajouri and 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.

Today, Mendhar, Surankote and Poonch sub regions are three main arteries, that the militants use to cross over to Kashmir valley. Peace and stability in these two districts are absolutely vital for any long term solution to Kashmir valley. Though there is a border fence today, it is not totally fool proof. Given the nature of topography, and the fact that no single barrier erected in the history of mankind has actually stopped the movement of determined human beings, LoC fence, is unlikely to be the solution. The way ahead, clearly is to keep these border districts safe, by making them peaceful.

II GETTING READY FOR THE CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The rationale for the Pir Panjal international festival in these two districts stem from the following positive factors relating to conflict transformation in this region.

While the strategic significance of this region and certain negative developments have been highlighted in the previous section, there have also been a few positive developments 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 positive 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. In most cases, the militants for the lack of local

support, use these districts as a transit to Kashmir valley, across the Pir Panjal, than to stay here and indulge in violence.

The security forces – both the army and local police have worked hard to bring the militancy down. 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. Unlike few years ago, today, one could travel in any road, without any fear.

Second, 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 Pir Panjal festival, as has been explained subsequently, can prove immensely helpful in this regard.



Under Reconstruction: The heritage Mughal Road across the Pir Panjal

III

PIR PANJAL FESTIVAL AS AN AGENT OF CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION & BUILDING PEACE FROM BELOW

How to address the conflict transformation mentioned above? How to arrest the negative growths and strengthen the positive developments? How can an regional festival play a role in this?

A. Creating Awareness about Rajouri and Poonch in the rest of J&K and India

There is an unmistakable need to market this region to the rest of J&K, India and abroad and the proposed Pir Panjal international festival will precisely do this . Unfortunately, J&K is largely seen as synonymous with violence and conflict. Even if there is any discussion on terrorism—it is restricted to 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 Baderwah, Kargil, Poonch and Basholi to attract and enthrall 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 importance.

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? For example, while the numbers to the Vaishnodevi shrine, has substantially increased in the recent years, 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 has 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 Pir Panjal festival, 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. More importantly, the rest of J&K will also understand more about Rajouri and Poonch.

B. Bringing the Communities Together

Second, the Pir Panjal festival is equally important from the perspective of cementing the ties between religious and ethnic communities. As shall be seen subsequently, the Pir Panjal 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.

A secular Pir Panjal 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.

C. Restoring the Past Glory

Third, such a regional festival is likely to revive the historical and cultural ties that undivided Poonch enjoyed before 1947. Much before becoming the subjects of Poonch rajas – 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, Haveli (as Poonch was referred then), Sudhanati, Kotli, and Bhimber 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

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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 Pir Panjal 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.

D. Attracting the Diaspora and Preventing Brain Drain

Finally, such an international festival is likely to attract the diaspora of this region back to its roots and in the process, provide the much-needed exposure to the people of Rajouri and Poonch, besides arresting the brain drain. 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 Akhnour. Earlier, the people of these two districts 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-Mirpur 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 people from these regions are settled today in the rest of India and abroad

Lack of adequate resources and opportunities in these two districts have also forced a brain drain from these two districts. Today, there are more well educated people from these two districts, living elsewhere, than from the region where they belong to. Except for a few dedicated and concerned noble souls, the rest have migrated for all practical purposes. An international festival, not only would revive the rich culture and provide its people, the much needed exposure, it will also arrest the brain drain and bring back a section of Diaspora and be a part of it again.

IV PIR PANJAL INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL THE COMPONENTS

What should the proposed international 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? And who should lead it – the government or the civil society, or both?

The last question is easy to answer. Such a festival should be a private-public partnership – for without the two, this initiative cannot be made as a long term success. While the top should assist, this initiative should essentially be a bottom up approach, where there is sufficient input and space

for the civil society. Otherwise, one cannot discount the possibility of a government tamasha, depending on the ruling government's equations with those elected from the region.

The nature of the proposed international festival could be both secular and religious – covering historical, archeological, anthropological, cultural and entertainment subjects. To start with, the Pir Panjal festival could be a five-day affair, with most of the activity concentrated mainly in Rajouri and Poonch towns. Subsequently, this can be extended to ten days or two weeks, covering other towns as well, including Mendhar, Surankot, Kalakot and perhaps even Bafliaz. The focus of this festival could be on the following:

A. Shahdra Shrine and the Poonch Triumvirate

Shahdra Shrine, near Rajouri town, undoubtedly is the most important sufi shrine of the entire J&K, promoting harmony and peace for several decades. The shrine of Baba Ghulam Shah, after whom, the local university is named after, is a symbol of hope and reverence for many people from different faiths – Muslims, Christians, Hindus and Sikhs. A clear torch bearer of Sufi Islam, this shrine is perhaps the greatest secular tradition, which every one should cherish and embrace.

Besides the Shahdra Shrine near Rajouri, the Buddha Amarnath temple, Sai Miran Shrine and Nangali Sahib Gurudwara of the Hindu, Muslim and Sikh communities, situated within a span of twenty kilometers near Poonch, is a symbol of religious harmony. No other region in J&K has such important places of worship belonging to three different communities, situated next to each other. 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 on the other side, and Nangali Saheb almost at the confluence



The Poonch Triumvirate: Shrines of Sai Miran (Left), Buddha Amarnath (Middle) & Nangali Saheb (Right)

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.

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.

B. The Gujjar and Pahri Cultures

For the sociologists and the anthropologists, there are two distinct cultures – Pahari and Gojri, each with its own folk songs, dances and literature. Unfortunately, these cultures are declining, as the patronage they earlier enjoyed has been withering away. While before 1947, the Mahrajahs used to be the chief patrons of these cultures, post-1947, thanks to the neglect by the state and violence during the last two decades, 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.

Mushiara, recital of Urdu poetry is another popular entertainment in these two districts, which is also popular in other parts of the State. Easily, a series of such events could be organized in five days in different towns of these two districts. The local police in the recent months have organized such events in Mendhar, Poonch, Surankote and Rajouri, which have been a huge success amongst the local civil society. Recently in 2009, the Cultural Academy of J&K along with local civil society organized a painting exhibition at the national level in Rajouri. Pahri paintings having a unique space, (though practiced mainly around Basholi) could be a part of this international festival.

C. Wrestling, Stone Lifting, Trekking, Cycle Race and Pir Panjal Car Rally

Recently during February-March 2010, the local police organized Volley ball matches, which were a huge successes in these two districts. Besides such well known sports and activities, this region has 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



Symbol of Communal Harmony: Shahdra Shrine near Rajouri

become the highlight of the Pir Panjal 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 distance of 40 kms, and if promoted properly, one could expect a decent participation from these countries to take part in the proposed Pir Panjal festival.

More importantly, a car rally, starting from Rajouri – taking the circuitous route to Mendhar and Poonch via Bhimber Galli can get back to the starting point and should be an interesting one. Once the most popular Mughal road is ready, there could be a car rally across the Pir Panjal – starting from Srinagar and ending up in Jammu via these two districts.

D. Remnants of History: Chingus, Thanna Mandi, Noor-e-Chamb and the Mughal Road

For those archaeologists and people interested in history and heritage, there could be no better place than the Chingus and the entire Mughal road in this region. The Mughal road, as the name suggests, is the road used by the Mughal rulers, to move from Agra to Srinagar via New Delhi and Lahore, before crossing Rajouri and the Pir Panjal. This road is dotted with sarais (inns) constructed by the Mughals to help their movement.

While many of these sarais are in dilapidated condition or encroached, the forts in Chingus and

Thanna Mandi before and after Rajouri in the Mughal road have tales of history. Chingus hosts the intestines of the Mughal emperor Jahangir, while Thanna Mandi is a treat to watch, especially the Queen's quarters and her bathroom. Noor-e-Chamb, situated in the Pir Panjal is a water falls, where the Queen Noor Jahan used to bathe. Besides, there are numerous huts across the Pir Panjal.

The elders in this region also consider, much before the Mughals, other should have also taken this road. They even consider, that those who attended the Second Buddhist Council in Kashmir, during the period of Kushanas in first AD, should have gone via the road. Though this cannot be historically proved, it sounds logical. Perhaps, they traveled via Loran near Poonch. If true, then Mughal road, predating the Mughals, should be one of the oldest road in the country!

V

THE FESTIVAL AHEAD

Clearly, the need for a Pir Panjal 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?

A. Budget and Funding: 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 and Union governments, in the same manner that it has assisted the organization of the Ladakh and Jammu festivals. The same way, the government could not organize such an event, without the local support. There is a need for the private-public partnership. The civil society should also organize itself, than just complaining that the State has to do everything.

B. Creating Necessary Infrastructure: From travel to accommodation, there is a need to improve the basic infrastructure of the district. Intervention of the State is crucial in this sector, in terms of improving the connectivity and providing adequate facilities for people to move around, stay and take part. As mentioned above, the JKSRTC operates few services in this regions. There are hardly any accommodation facilities available; and given the current infrastructure, the district headquarters, may not be able to accommodate even 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.

C. Including Civil Society Actors: 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 Shadra Sharief, Sai 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, with support from civil society actors and foundations.

D. Pir Panjal Festival across the LoC: At a later stage, when the governments are confident, they could even invite people from across the LoC; people across the LoC on the other side, share the same culture and history. In fact, it could become a great CBM in itself, if this festival is to be extended and celebrated simultaneously in Bhimber and Rawlokot as well, and the population moving across for a period of three to five days!

E. Looking upto Omar and Jora: All that is needed is a vision. With young and dynamic Chief Minister and Tourism Minister in the form of Omar Abdullah and Rigzin Jora, this should be a cake walk for them to organize. The entire region and the rest of India will be indebted to them, for taking such an initiative. Dont forget, 2010 is the year of tourism for J&K!

** An earlier version of this essay was published as IPCS Special Report in 2009 calling for a Poonch Festival.*