

Siachen: Looking Beyond Tourism

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THE news that forty two trekkers are on their way to walk the Siachen glacier as part of adventure tourism has startled observers of the India—Pakistan scene. The trek is being conducted under the aegis of the Indian Army. The trekkers are indeed privileged, what with being airlifted by the Indian Air Force, put through a high altitude acclimatising programme and being 'guided' by the army personnel while on the glacier.

What has prompted the Indian government to open the glacier to the public, even if in a controlled manner? This is surely not a simple tourism exercise but contains in it elements of foreign and defence policy considerations. Remote and difficult of access being its unique selling point, the Karakoram and Saltoro mountain ranges in the area have been dream sites for mountaineers since a hundred years and more. That in fact had contributed to the creation of the Siachen dispute.

The origins of the dispute rest in the history of India-Pakistan wars fought over J&K. The first one ended in 1948, with both sides agreeing to a Cease Fire Line which ended at the southern tip of the glaciated region. No one lived there, nothing grew and the two armies did not in fact fight there. It was in fact so remote and inaccessible that the end point of the ceasefire line could only be known by a map reference called NJ 9842. Both sides agreed and wrote into the agreement that the line thereafter notionally went north into the glaciated wilderness. No one thought any one in his senses would like to occupy the place.

Pakistan however had different notions and issued maps and atlases which showed a straight line — defying all logic of drawing boundaries — joining NJ 9842 to the famous Karakoram Pass far to the east! Indian and Chinese military patrols visit the Pass regularly which is on the India —China boundary. India rightly called it a cartographic aggression and protested. Before long, Indian military mountaineers who had climbed Everest and other peaks, learnt from their European counterparts that Pakistan had begun to send foreign climbers in the area. Indian military patrols sent to ascertain facts confirmed the news.

The Indian Army picked up news in 1984, that Pakistan was going to occupy the passes that lead into the Siachen glacier to further its claim to the area. The Indian Army, by a remarkable feat of arms occupied these passes a few weeks before the Pakistan Army could. The rest is history and a remarkable chapter in the history of warfare at impossible heights. No wonder Siachen is called the highest battle field in the world. Indian Army's skills in such warfare have led to the US and British armies conducting joint training in Ladakh in recent years.

Pakistan, having been denied its purpose, has built up a myth of its army being on Siachen. Newspapers regularly carry news of General Musharraf visiting the Siachen Headquarters and so on. This has also been the case during Ms Bhutto's and Mr. Sharif's time. The negotiations between India and Pakistan to resolve the dispute revolves around demilitarising the area. Pakistan and India both want the two armies to pull out of the area. They however want to do so for different reasons. Pakistani military wishes to portray /prove to its public the Indian withdrawal as a victory. India is willing to demilitarise but wishes the Pakistani military to mark its positions on maps. This is to place on record the reality of Pakistani military not being in Siachen, and ruling out the possibility in future of it making baseless claims of where its positions had been. The buzzword for this marking of maps jointly is 'authentication', which has become a bone of contention.

The Indian government has found the continued Pakistani claims of being in Siachen a disingenuous method of obfuscating the negotiations. It was therefore found expedient to let the world know the reality by allowing international mountaineers to see things for themselves. Mountaineers are the only ones who have the necessary skills to move about and climb in the area. They also, being only humans, want to tell every one about their climbing successes. They do so through writings in international mountaineering and alpine journals. They also give glowing reports of the Indian Army's skills. Above everything else they give the lie to false Pakistani claims.

International mountaineers have been permitted to trek and climb in the Saltoro mountain region for nearly a decade. The Indian government is now confident that Indians can be given the opportunity to actually walk on the Siachen glacier upto one of its forward battalion headquarters. This is not a cake walk and requires training in high altitude mountaineering, specialised equipment and rigorous fitness standards. No wonder, the trekkers now on the way are officer cadets from military academies and specially chosen individuals. The trekkers will be negotiating extremely dangerous and even treacherous terrain and will need to cope with health hazards.

As the Army Chief Gen JJ Singh has said the aim is to allow Indian citizens to not only enjoy the spectacular scenery, but also demonstrate through the process the nation's commitment to Siachen region. The larger purpose is to belie Pakistani claims of its being on the glacier.

The Foreign Office and Ministry of Defence also believe this initiative will set at rest doubts on Indian insistence on authentication on maps of Indian and Pakistani positions. Not a few foreign governments have been advising New Delhi to drop the authentication requirement, in the interest of helping the Pakistani government and particularly General Musharraf to be able to show progress on the J&K Peace Process.

Pakistan also has been portraying India's authentication demand as intransigence.

Where will all this leave the Siachen dispute and the conflict in future? One trek is not going to usher in a peaceful summer either in Siachen or in J&K. There are mightier drivers which propel Pakistan's policies, which tourism is not going to change. The Indian initiative will however add a new and unexpected non-military dynamic to an otherwise military confrontation. This was apparently not expected by Islamabad. No wonder it has not only protested but also warned of possible consequences. Surely its army cannot disrupt the trek by artillery fire, without massive damage to its credibility? There is in any case a ceasefire in place in the area. That a trek in the Siachen is enough to rattle Islamabad is a commentary in itself.

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