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Leh: Those Magnificent Kaoboys on Mule-Back down the Memory Lane

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In the external intelligence division of the Intelligence Bureau, headed by B. N. Mallick, DIB, and subsequently post-1968 in the Research & Analysis Wing (R&AW), headed by R. N. Kao, Leh was a coveted posting for young officers.

2. Both Mallick as the DIB and Kao as the head of the external intelligence division of the IB and then as the head of the R&AW took a lot of interest in the collection of human and technical intelligence from Tibet through young officers posted in Leh.

3. The IB and the R&AW had set up a chain of Forward Intelligence Posts (FIPs) to collect Tibetan intelligence and these were supervised by an officer of the rank of Assistant Director (Superintendent of Police) based in Leh. The logistic and medical cover for the FIPs and the IB/R&AW offices in Leh was provided by the Army.

4. We had very close co-operation between the Army and the intelligence set-up. Except in Leh where the staff used to move around by jeep, in the interior areas for the collection of Tibetan intelligence the staff used to travel on mule-back.

5. Leh was considered a very difficult posting health-wise. Only officers medically cleared by the Wellington Hospital for travel or posting to Leh were sent there.

6. N. F. Suntook, who was the head of Administration in the R&AW under Kao, was once medically cleared for going there on an inspection tour. He almost died there due to accumulation of water in the lungs and had to be airlifted in the nick of time to the Wellington Hospital.

7. Young officers wanting to specialise in Chinese intelligence opted for their initial posting in Leh. They were the blue-eyed boys of Mallick, Kao and A. K. Dave. Leh, Hong Kong to learn the Chinese language and Beijing---used to be the career path of the Chinese hands in our intelligence community.
8. Among the officers who distinguished themselves in Leh were K.C.Patnayak, a 1954 IPS officer from Orissa, the late R. Swaminathan, a 1954 IPS officer from Andhra Pradesh, N. Narasimhan, a 1957 IPS officer from Karnataka A.S.Syali, a 1958 IPS officer from Madhya Pradesh, and M. S. Verma, a 1958 IPS officer from Madhya Pradesh.
9. Of these, Narasimhan and Syali subsequently rose to be the chief of the R&AW. Collection of trans-border HUMINT from China entailed a lot of imagination, innovation and risks. Since the borders were not demarcated, one did not know where the Indian territory ended and the Chinese territory began.
10. Indian and Chinese intelligence officers manning FIPs often kept intruding into each other's territory while moving on mule-back for clandestine meetings with sources and for looking after the welfare of their officers. Life was hell and at the same time an adventure for junior officers manning the FIPs.
11. Indian officers had to take risks to get into Chinese-controlled territory to meet their sources without getting caught. If they got caught, there could have been a serious diplomatic incident.
12. How to take the correct amount of risks without being irresponsible and over-adventurous? That was the question constantly before the young officers posted in the Leh sector.
13. One of the most risk-taking and adventurous was A.P Verma, a lover of horses and mules who won the Tonk Cup for equitation in the Central Police Training College in Mount Abu. His adventurous forays into Chinese territory on mule-back to meet his sources were legendary.
14. There was a remarkable empathy between him and his mules. They knew where he wanted to go and how to escape capture by the Chinese counter-intelligence. To make his mules gallop faster to escape capture by the Chinese, he used to put a stick into the ears of his mules and excite them. They would get excited and irritated, but always gallop to the nearest Indian army camp.
15. It used to be said in the IB that no young officer had forayed so deep into Chinese-controlled territory as Verma and come back alive. Once he went very deep into Chinese-controlled territory for a clandestine meeting with a source. To his surprise, he found that the Chinese had caught his source and were waiting to trap him.

16. He quickly reversed direction and started galloping towards an Indian Army camp with the Chinese chasing him. It must have been a sight for Gods to see----with Verma and the Chinese galloping in the direction of Indian territory. The Chinese could not catch up with him. He managed to reach safe sanctuary in the Indian Army camp.

17. He sent a flash wireless message to the IB headquarters explaining what happened. Dave and his other supervisory officers were shocked by what they looked upon as his irresponsible action in intruding so deep into Chinese-controlled territory. They called for his explanation and recommended to Mallick that he should be withdrawn to headquarters and reverted back to UP.

18. Mallick was shocked by their recommendation. He called them to his office and expressed his utter amazement that instead of giving a pat on the back for this young and adventurous officer, they should seek to reprimand him for taking unwise risk and send him back to the state.

19. Mallick sent for Verma, congratulated him and recommended him for a gallantry medal.

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