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CONFLICT

Jammu Massacre: The tale of two migrations



By Bilal Handoo



Posted on November 9, 2017



MASTANA
SINGH (FPK
PHOTO/MUNEE
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***when Muslims were
being massacred in
Jammu in Oct 1947. But
once the mad orgy of
violence thawed, the two
migrations in one State
met with two different
fates.***



The meditative outlook that Atuna wears betrays the very sense that this Budgam village was once the last battleground between the Pakistani irregulars and Hari Singh backed disgruntled refugees.

Nestled close to the Srinagar Airport, the village went up in flames in Oct 1947; saw its villagers migrating under the cover of dark night and take refuge in sweltering plains of Delhi where Saadut Hassan Manto's partition characters were madly taking a form.

Since that crimson autumn of 1947, all these reminiscences have stayed afresh with Mastana Singh, the headman of Atuna — a Budgam village planted by walnut trees and overlooking the freshly harvested paddy fields. The vast fading green canopy makes Atuna a deep-seated forest hamlet housing some 35 Kashmiri Sikh families in a peaceful scattered settlement.



In his hushed courtyard, occasionally echoed with mooing cows and cawing crows, the former government teacher is basking under the autumn sun. Unlike the present day lifelessness prevailing around, Mastana recalls how his courtyard was once buzzing with a crowd of Sikh refugees.

Mastana Singh. (FPK Photo/Muneem Farooq Itoo)

“Wo sabhi issi gaon mein thehrey they (All of them were staying here),” the octogenarian Sarpanch recalls the events of Oct 1947 with rapt clarity when uprooted Sikhs from Muzaffarabad and adjoining areas began moving to *Mashriq*.

Atuna began receiving that historic footfall soon after over 5,000 armed Afridis entered Kashmir and seized Muzaffarabad, Domel and Uri

and surged towards Srinagar
on Oct 22, 1947.



“I recall the grim
atmosphere,” writes Dr Karan
Singh, in his autobiography,
Heir Apparent, “...we were
losing control of the outer
areas.” When the last prince
was watching his empire’s
steady fall, his father Hari
Singh’s exit had created an
anarchic setup in Kashmir —
perhaps paving way for the
larger crisis.

At Jammu, the mood had
long turned murderous. On
Mohammad Ali Jinnah’s
advice, the Jammu Muslims—
whose leaders had been
languishing in jails since 1946
—were exercising caution. But
when the Sangh goons began
butchering Muslims,
thousands of them boarded
buses to Pakistan at Gomut in
Jammu.

But instead of Sialkot, the
busloads reached Samba,
where thousands of Muslims
were exterminated. Amid this
bloodbath, some 5 lakh
Muslims fled to the newly
born nation.

The carnage changed the
regional population and made
it a Hindu Majority from a



Muslim majority in a matter of seven days. After failing to bring them home, years later, the state government passed a Resettlement Bill in 1982 to bring back the Muslim migrants. But the move was blocked by the Indian Supreme Court.

Amid the Jammu massacre, the last monarch asked for immediate military assistance. Before Delhi could send the airlifted army, Baramulla had fallen to the Pakistani Afridis on Oct 26, 1947.

At Atuna, Mastana Singh takes a tour of his village, pointing to the places, which bore the brunt of 1947. The headman sits on the “war memorial” — a gutted mansion, crowded with Sikh refugees on that late Oct 1947 day when the battle began.

But before the Afridis would arrive in Atuna on their way to take over the Srinagar Airport, they had faced a stiff resistance at Ichhama, a Sikh village in Tangmarg.

Then on Srinagar’s streets, the National Conference volunteers would parade with ‘wooden guns’ and chant

defiant slogans in a bid to
boost their morale.

At Delhi's Safdarjung Airport,
the warplanes had finally
begun ferrying rations and
troops of the Sikh regiment
led by Lt Col Ranjit Rai. They
shortly succeeded in
establishing a bridgehead on
the Baramula-Srinagar road.

The Afridis took an alternate
route towards Tangmarg. But
the Sikh front at Ichamma
had blocked their path. Soon
after breaking the resistance
at Ichamma by early hours of
October 31, Afridis moved
towards Atuna.

**“Atuna was
their natural
route to reach
Srinagar
Airfield,”
Mastana
says. “But
the same
*Mashriq—
East—route
was natural
way for Sikhs
from
Bhimber,***



Muzaffarabad and others to take a refuge.”



But hardly anyone of them—the Sikh refugees—were expecting that they would be shortly drawn into a historic battle between irregulars.

“Most of those refugees were sulking because they were uprooted from their ancestral lands,” Mastana, then 10-year-old, recalls.

Then Atuna had a reputation of housing some state-employed bomb makers. As the word spread—*Ichamma has fallen to tribals*—those bomb makers, “in self defence”, began making explosives. But that fall, something else had come to Atuna, making it clear how the Dogra regime wanted to pit civilians against the armed Afridis.

“Suddenly Hari Singh’s regime began sending guns to Atuna in a bid to arm the infuriated Sikh refugees,” Mastana says.

Finally when the Pakistani Afridis arrived to wage their

last *battle of irregulars* on Kashmir's soil, one Mohammad Khan, a *Bombay baddy* walked in Atuna with a message: *Some Sikh leaders want to see the armed Sikhs of this village at Doodpathri.*



“Actually Khan wanted to keep the village gunners away, only to give safe passage to the marching Afridis,” Mastana says. “But later as they arrived, the armed fight somehow broke out.”

FPK Photo/Muneem Farooq Itoo

As guns began to rattle the idyllic Atuna, a Sikh granny was found shot dead on a pastoral land. It inflamed the tempers. The armed Sikh refugees put up a fight, while the local Sikhs hid themselves in the deepest corners of their houses.

That twilight as the last gun fell silent in Atuna, some 85 Sikh families started moving

out of the village. Upon reaching a hilltop, as Mastana turned back, he saw his house—and that of his tribe’s—rising up in flames.

“The moment we reached the main Budgam town, we were comforted by Muslims who fed us cooked rice,” he says.



**But the Atuna
combat that
lasted for
over some
hours
changed the
game for
Afridis in
Kashmir. The
delay gave
enough time
to Indian
forces to
takeover the
Srinagar
Airfield.**

After Atuna as 700 tribals fanned out in periphery of the Airfield on Nov 3, 1947, the battle of Budgam broke out where the advancing Afridis were pushed back. “The



enemy are only 50 yards from us,” the dying Major Som Nath Sharma sent his last message to his Brigade Hqrs. “We are heavily outnumbered. We are under devastating fire.”

Next day when Mastana and his migrated clan reached the airfield turned war-turf, they were speedily flown to Delhi where the unfolding partition scenes greeted them.

“One day my father spotted a Muslim girl hiding inside a ration ghat in Delhi,” Mastana says. “He didn’t tell anyone about her because he knew the possible fate of that petrified girl.” Eventually she was found by a local Hindu group, who took her away. Even today, Mastana feels for the poor soul. “Those were the tragic times,” he says. “Everyone was running for their lives.”

After spending some 12 months inside refugee camps in Delhi, the Kashmiri Sikhs received a word from the Sheikh Mohammad Abdullah government. Abdullah had sent a special message for them: *“Come home. We are nothing without you.”*



Shortly, they were ferried back to the Valley in army pickup trucks and left in Gogjibagh. “Then came Sheikh Abdullah,” Mastana says. “He wept over our plight and gave Rs 250 as financial assistance to each Sikh family.”

His family lived in Rambagh till 1956 before they returned to their homes. Once they stepped back, Mastana says, their properties—although half burnt—were safe and secure. Unlike what happened at Jammu, no Urdu Bazaar became Rajindra Bazaar in Atuna and no Islamia School became Hari Singh High School.

Today Atuna is calm again, bereft of any tensions in the region resounding with Azaadi cries.

In contrast, not many tears were shed over the 2.3 lakh massacred Jammu Muslims. Despite what author Saeed Naqvi says “the holocaust in Jammu”, the skulduggery of the authorities still prevails.

Even after 70 falls, some 5 lakh Jammu Muslims are yet to come home. Other than present day lawmakers, the Gujjar leaders are equally

silent over the massacre that
simply put the humanity to
shame.



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