

## **STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF JAMMU**

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A peep into the history of Jammu, as far back into the past as has been recorded, would show that the State has, most of the time, been at war with its neighbours. But, evidently, the constant fighting has not been of its own making. More often than not Jammu has invited attack on itself because of its strategic importance. As we know the name Jammu denotes three entities – the state, the district and the town. But here when we talk of the strategic importance of Jammu, the reference is to the Town.

The factors that determined the strategic importance of Jammu then were its political importance as the capital of the state, its economic prosperity, and its geographical location. Though the capital of a state automatically acquires strategic importance even today, it assumed greater vital importance during the medieval period. Battles were fought only over the capital and once the capital fell the entire state fell with it. So was it in the case of Jammu, the capital of the state with the same name. All invaders seeking submission of the state, therefore, made Jammu town their prime target of attack. Jammu's political importance also lay in the religious composition of its population. Being predominantly Hindu, the Town attracted Muslim invaders, who had ostensibly taken upon themselves the burden of ridding the country of idolatry. But the greatest allurements that Jammu offered to any invader, irrespective of his religious denomination, was its economic prosperity and concentration of wealth. History of the Middle Ages bears testimony to the fact that Jammu was attacked a good number of times with no other purpose than that of ransacking it for looting its wealth. And, lastly, Jammu's strategic importance stemmed, as it does even today, from its location on the line of communication between Punjab and Kashmir. The importance lay in the fact that the approach from the plains to the Kashmir Valley, be it for trade or for exercising military control, had to, as a matter of geographical compulsion, pass through Jammu or areas within its striking distance. The approach was, therefore, prone to interference from Jammu. Besides, Jammu, as the last large town at the foot-hills on the mountainous route to Srinagar, had the potential of being used as an advanced base for military expeditions into Kashmir. Consequently the requirement of a secure line of communication made Jammu a target for conquest by all the powers that harboured territorial ambitions in Kashmir.

It was but natural that the region that remained involved in war and conflict, more or less continuously from the pre-historic times to the advent of the British Raj, should have produced a war-like people with rich martial heritage. However, despite the great valour and fighting prowess of the Dogras, developed over the years, they were not always able to protect Jammu from being ravaged by the various invaders who targeted it from time to time during the earlier period of its history, for one reason or the other. This was, firstly, because of the location of Jammu at the foot-hills which deprived it of the natural protection of the hills and jungles in the rear while exposing it to attacks by large armies along the open front over the plains. Apart from the handicap that the small Dogra forces suffered from having to fight very much larger enemy forces in the open, Jammu's proximity to the state's border with Punjab deprived them of, what is known in military parlance, the depth in defence. Apparently the Jammu Rajas were conscious of this handicap and occasional attempts seem to have been made by the far-sighted among them, as and when such opportunities arose, to pursue a policy of territorial expansion into Punjab for

acquiring the much needed depth in defence. They were, however, unable to hold on to such territorial acquisitions for want of resources and manpower required for raising the requisite military strength. No one, however, seems to have thought of shifting Jammu into the interior to, say, a place where Udampur is located today, for overcoming the strategic and tactical handicaps suffered by it. Possibly the easy accessibility to Punjab for economic reasons was considered more important by the Jammu Rajas than cutting themselves off like this for reasons of defence.

After its annexation to Punjab, Jammu lost its identity as a state and its strategic concerns, if at all any remained, automatically got transferred to the Sikhs. Even the re-creation of the Jammu State under its own Raja Gulab Singh as a vassal state of Punjab in 1822 did not make any difference to the situation as the security of Jammu continued to remain the responsibility of the Sikhs. After the creation of the independent Dogra State of Jammu and Kashmir State in 1846 under British Suzerainty, the security of Jammu was assured as never before. Thereafter, the situation changed dramatically only after Indian Independence in 1947, when the State of Jammu and Kashmir acceded to the Indian Union and Jammu province was required to share a long border with West Punjab of Pakistan.

With the creation of Pakistan and its ensuing attempts at forcible occupation of Kashmir, Jammu's border with West Punjab, which had lain dormant during the British rule, got enlivened once again and Jammu bounced back to its strategical importance. The factors that determined its strategic importance under the changed political scenario, of course remained the same as those that determined it in the past. Jammu was still the capital of the State and besides being the centre of economic activity, the concentration of such a large Hindu population there-in, made a natural target for the theocratic Muslim State of Pakistan, as it did for Muslim invaders of yester years. The geographical location of Jammu also exerted similar influence on its strategic importance and vulnerability, as it did in the past. However, with the division of Punjab between India and Pakistan, certain new dimensions got added to this factor, which not only increased Jammu's strategic importance but also made its defence more vulnerable. Under the new dispensation Jammu's entire border, except for a thin strip that touched the Gurdaspur district of Indian East Punjab, was now contiguous to that of Pakistan's West Punjab. With little or no room for manoeuvre, the State's one and only possible link with India had to be along the Jammu-Pathankot axis, running parallel and close to the border with Pakistan throughout its over one hundred kilometres length. Jammu's importance now lay in the fact that apart from guarding India's only door-way to Kashmir, it also stood at the junction point from where India's communication line bifurcated towards Poonch. Fall of Jammu could now jeopardise not only the defence of Kashmir and Ladakh, but also that of the Rajauri-Poonch sector. But even as Jammu's strategic importance had increased, so had its vulnerability, because of its precarious line of communication with the Indian Union that now became responsible for its defence. While the life-line running parallel to the border with Pakistan was very vulnerable to being cut by the enemy at any place of his choosing, its proximity to the border lent very little depth to its defence. On the other hand, Jammu, located as it is among the lowest foot-hills as they merge into the plains, became directly approachable from Pakistan across the border between Chhamb and Suchetgarh, over country suitable for the employment of tanks. The strategic handicaps suffered by Jammu due to its location have been so great that they are believed to have, at one stage of the J&K operations, prompted the Indian Army to mull over a proposal, even if briefly,

for shifting the winter capital of the State to Udhampur. Apparently the proposal got rejected no sooner than it was made because of its tremendously adverse political implications\* .

Notwithstanding the efforts that have been made to reduce the strategic importance of Jammu by developing alternative routes to Kashmir, Ladakh and Poonch, without having to pass through Jammu, the Town must, for various other reasons, continue to constitute the Army's Vital Ground that is required to be defended at all costs. Admittedly, due to its geographical restraints nothing more can, perhaps, be done to develop the defence potential of Jammu. In event of another war the solution to the problem of defence of Jammu seems to lie only in carrying out offensive action against Pakistan on another front of our choosing as was done during 1965 war, when in response to Pakistan's attack on Jammu from across Chhamb, India went on the offensive across Suchetgarh to threaten Shakargarh. Pakistan then had had to abandon its attack on Jammu if only to rush back and save Shakargarh.

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\* As narrated to me by my father, Late Lieutenant Colonel Bhagwan Singh, in 1947-48, while he was still in service at Jammu.