

Siachen, 1987: History and geography of the frozen frontier

- The book "Siachen, 1987: Battle for the Frozen Frontier" by Lt Gen. Ramesh Kulkarni and Anjali Karpe tells the story of Lt Gen. Ramesh Kulkarni's command of this infantry division, giving readers the rare opportunity to view the Siachen glacier and the army's involvement in the region through the lens of a commander.
- This memoir gives a blow-by-blow account of the important combat operations during Kulkarni's tenure – Operation Rajiv, in which the Quaid Post held by Pakistan was captured; and Operation Vajr Shakti, undertaken to thwart the Pakistani attempt to capture Bilafond La.
- In addition to the thrilling descriptions of military prowess, the book also touches upon the human cost of the Siachen conflict: being expected to thrive in treacherous terrain and an environment that has claimed innumerable lives.

Read an excerpt from the book below.

**LT GEN. RAMESH KULKARNI
& ANJALI KARPE**

As we have seen, in 1987 I took over the command of the 28 Infantry Division, which had a significant mandate: to take care of the vast border region starting from Zoji La in the west and extending over the Siachen sector right up to the Karakoram Pass. The focus of my command was Siachen, that is the Saltoro range foothold we had secured in 1984.

Minor stirrings of tension had been noted on the glacier where Pakistan had reportedly established a post on the left shoulder of Bilafond La. Disconnected from the rest of the country as this glacier region has been, most people had not even heard the word 'Siachen' and the fact that the media hardly covered this was all the more reason for this state of ignorance.

In any case, the general public's lack of understanding and awareness of the armed forces has always driven me to the edge of impatience. On many occasions I have had to control my temper on being asked whether India was in a state of readiness to defeat Pakistan. Or worse, if we have enough tanks and bombs to protect ourselves! Over time, I have become more patient, not knowing whom to blame for this: the determined effort and policies to keep the military away from deliberations of matters political, or the general lack of awareness or respect for the work the army undertakes or the role they are expected to play – an attitude that seems to say: 'What do they do when the country isn't at war, in any case!' Or perhaps it's the idiotic and caricature-ish representations of the armed forces in most Hindi movies. Whatever be the case, an account and sense of the history of this region of conflict would be meaningful to and imperative for anyone who wishes to obtain an understanding of my experiences.

How do I begin outlining the history of the Siachen glacier? Frankly, I am quite unsure where to start. The discovery of the expanse, its changing relevance and its great role in the geopolitics of the region for the two countries that were impacted constitute a research endeavour by itself. As I bring together details that will be essential as a background to my experiences, I will take the liberty of quoting heavily from the research formulated by my brother-in-law and friend Harish Kapadia. Harish is married to Meena's cousin Geeta, and we have had many meetings over the last many years to discuss and deliberate on issues and interests dear to our hearts. An avid mountaineer, a true lover of the outdoors and determined to step out of his comfort zone to explore the Himalayas through several mountaineering expeditions, Harish has been an inspiration and mentor to many.

What binds us closer is Harish and Geeta's younger son Nawang, who joined the army because of his deep and abiding passion for the armed forces. This commitment was cut tragically short when Nawang fell to Pakistani terrorist bullets, barely two months into his service in the army, during an encounter in the Kupwara sector of Jammu and Kashmir. Since then, Geeta and Harish have been as much immersed in raising awareness of the role of the armed forces as they have been committed to discussing the tangled issues that mar the geopolitics of the region. Over the years Harish and I have found multiple grounds for common conversations, developing a mutual respect for one another and our respective areas of interest and occupation.

Personally, my thoughts and perceptions of Siachen are those of a soldier concerned about matters related to se-



curity. I had never done in-depth research of the kind undertaken by Harish, and thus I am indebted to him for aiding this elaboration of the historical background of Siachen. It isn't that difficult to gather information from the internet; online information is available in plenty on events from 1987 to now, and a great deal has been written by various people who are experts in the field of mountaineering, and also students and analysts in matters of military strategy. The region that is now called Op Meghdoot has pieces written by different agencies with varying focus areas. Op Meghdoot was the name given to the operations undertaken by the Indian army in 1984–85 to occupy important features of the Saltoro range and forestall Pakistan's efforts to do the same. Each piece of writing is dedicated to a different aspect of the Siachen glacier – ranging from details of the environment to its strategic significance, to the reasons for disputes that have arisen, which have warranted military commitment, and the irreparable environmental damage being caused due to the war on the glacier.

Perhaps it might be best to begin with Harish's opening comments in his article 'A Brief History of the Siachen Glacier' to get into the earliest stories about this region:

Contrary to popular belief, the Siachen glacier has been visited by many since more than a century. The glacier, originally known as 'Saicher Gharni' was a place of interest and several Baltis from the western valleys visited the glacier. Many decades ago it is believed that a small

Yarkandi village existed at the entrance of the Teram Shehr glacier. (Bullock– Workman found the walls of such a settlement in 1912 and it was seen and photographed by the Indian expedition in 2002.) Here on the glacier the Yarkandis met the Baltis and traded with them. Once some of the Yarkandis descended the Ghyari Nala and took away a Balti woman with them to their glacier village. To take revenge, the Baltis contacted an important mullah, who gave them a taawiz (amulet), which was to be placed on the Bilafond La. The mullah instructed them to return via the Nubra valley. However, the Baltis, after placing the 'taawiz' on the pass returned the same way that they had come. Soon afterwards a great storm visited the Siachen glacier and destroyed the settlements and only the rocky desolation remained. The priests say that the calamity would have been greater had they followed the directions fully. Because of this lapse in following the instructions, the wild roses were not destroyed by the storm. Today these roses grow in plenty near the snout and in the lower valleys, though the entire glacier is barren. The glacier is called Siachen (Sia or rose, chen or place of) – the place of roses.

Harish then goes on to talk about the first explorers, surveyors and mountaineers in great depth and detail, but as an army man, with an army lens, it will make sense to shift the focus here to my personal assessment of the Siachen issue, starting with the geography of the region; pinpointing the location on the map is crucial to a further understanding of the situation.

The Siachen glacier is located in the eastern Karakoram range and is one of the two longest glaciers outside the polar regions. The Karakoram range itself is located in northern Ladakh and this mountain system originates from the Pamirs. Lying astride, as an offshoot of these ranges, is the Saltoro range and Harish's research provides enough evidence to prove that this entire area has seen explorations from the earliest years of the nineteenth century. Surveys, exploratory visits and mountaineering expeditions began in the early 1800s and continued right until the Second World War. Harish writes, 'With the India–China War of 1962 in the east of the Siachen glacier, the entire area was now "restricted" even for Indian mountaineers and no record of any visits exist. It is known that some parties from the Indian security agencies visited Bilafond La.'

As I get into the details, I must reiterate the significance of the Siachen region: first, its ability to provide control to the country that has a presence there, and second, as the ultimate destination for all serious mountaineers. Geographically, it is the focal point of the junction of five Asian states: Russia (the erstwhile Soviet Union), Chinese Sinkiang and Tibet, India and Pakistan-occupied J&K, the northern tribal areas of Gilgit and Baltistan, and the Wakhan peninsula of Afghanistan.

With the active presence of all these powers, the geopolitical significance of this sector cannot be overstated. Hence the efforts to gain a strong foothold in the region in order to have a say in the destiny of this focal area of Asia. This was certainly the case in 1987, when the first stirrings of tension rippled across the glacier, when there was a do-or-die contest for ownership and occupation of the heights on the Saltoro range and the situation flared up within a matter of months. This discussion continues to remain alive even today as power dynamics in the region have gradually moved and shifted.