

THE BRITISH DIPLOMACY AND THE LOSS OF GILGIT

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Abstract: The research paper focuses on the Jammu and Kashmir's north-west frontier region. This paper explains how even after promising no intervention in the internal matters of the state, the British Government of India kept on interfering in the internal matters of the state for their personal interests. The paper tries to explain the diplomacy played by the British for their own personal interests led to the loss of one of the most commercial and strategic location of Jammu and Kashmir i.e Gilgit, to Pakistan. This paper throws light on the policy of British Government of India against Maharaja Hari Singh which compelled him to lease the Gilgit Agency to British in 1935 and the conspiracy of Pakistan along with British Officers of Gilgit Scouts against Gilgit which led to its loss in November 1947.

Index Terms: Gilgit, Diplomacy, Pakistan, Ghansara Singh, North-West Frontier

Out of the dismemberment of the kingdom of Lahore, the modern states of Jammu and Kashmir emerged. In pursuance of article four and twelve of the treaty of Lahore, a week later the treaty between Gulab Singh and the British Government was signed. Gulab Singh and his heirs were guaranteed "all the hilly or mountainous country with its dependencies situated to the eastward of the river Indus and the westward of the river Ravi including Chamba and excluding Lahul", on the payment of rupees one crore the part of war indemnity imposed upon Lahore Darbar. The British government promised aid in the event of external aggression, but did not guarantee the internal security of the State. Thus the portion of Jammu and Kashmir with respect to the British Government was more favourable than that of the other princely states of India.¹

After the transfer of Kashmir to Raja Gulab Singh, through the Treaty of Amritsar of March 16, 1846, the British Statesmen politicians, scholars and public men expressed their anguish over the transfer of geo-strategically important territory to the ruler of Jammu. The Anglo-Indian press organised a campaign to condemn the act of Raja Gulab Singh to take possession of Kashmir and its frontier areas and perpetrating mass oppression. Lt. Taylor had been sent to enquire into the entire system of administration in Kashmir and to draw up a programme of reforms. This he did, and the Maharaja agreed to carry out the measures recommended. Thus, the Maharaja agreed to incorporate the recommendation of the Government of India in his administration and did not allow the English to directly intervene in the State. However, the official records of the relevant years depict that there was a regular correspondence between H.M. Lawrence and the Secretary to the Government of India on the issue of the appointment of a British Resident in Kashmir.²

In spite of the guarantee of non-interference in the internal affairs of the state, the British Government never refrained from doing so. When Gilgit was threatened by Gauhar Aman in 1848, the Resident and the Agent to the Governor General at Lahore asked Gulab Singh for information regarding arrangements for defence and protection of Gilgit and suggested certain things for its defence. They wrote many letters to Gulab Singh, who quietly ignored these letters and sent the information only after Gilgit was recovered from Gauhar Aman.³

Lord Hardinge himself also tried to interfere in the internal affairs of the state and wrote to Gulab Singh stating that the nature of his internal administration aroused misgivings in the mind of the British authorities and claiming the right on the part of the East India Company to interfere in the internal affairs of the state. However, purpose was to get an English Resident appointed in Srinagar. Gulab Singh claimed in his reply that a promise had been given to him that no Resident would be appointed in the State. The Government of India got convinced and dropped the idea.⁴ Nevertheless, in the summer of 1850, Col. H.M. Lawrence and his wife came to Kashmir via Jammu route and then they went to Ladakh, Skardu. The object of this mission was to examine the possibilities of the Central Asian trade. On their suggestion, in 1851, Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General of India again raised the matter on the ground that every year the number of British visitors to the valley was increasing and that their interests should be looked after by a British Resident. Gulab Singh resisted strongly this claim and in protest said that the appointment of political officer as in other states was against the degree of independence guaranteed to his state and that as the European visitor frequented the valley in summer it would be sufficient if an officer was appointed for summer season only. Accordingly, in 1852, the Government of India sent Major McGregor as an officer on special duty in Kashmir for the summer season. This appointment marked the beginning of the British intervention in Kashmir state.⁵

¹ S.C. Bajpai, *The Northern Frontier*, p. 54.

² Shailendra Singh Jamwal, *Shodhak Volume 43*, Pt. A, Sr. 127, 2013.

³ *op. cit.*, p. 64.

⁴ K.M. Pannikar, *Gulab Singh the founder of Kashmir*, p. 132.

⁵ *op. cit.*, p. 54, 65.

The situation however underwent a great transformation with the accession of Maharaja Ranbir Singh in February 1857. Soon after, the government of India was taken over by the British Crown in 1858 and a new chapter was opened on relations between the Indian states and the British paramount power. But here the same policy towards the Dogra state was enunciated which was formulated by the officials of the East India Company rather the bureaucrat and imperialistic officers of the Crown were more vocal in denouncing the company's action of transferring Kashmir along with frontier to the Dogra, and fresh tornado of hatred against the rulers of the Jammu and Kashmir engulfed the Anglo- Indian Press.⁶

The sort of interference that the British Government imposed in internal administration of the state had driven Dogra ruler helplessly to seek political and commercial alliance with Central Asian states. Maharaja Ranbir Singh sent his trusted agents to explore the vast region of Central Asia and Persia to know the events taking place there with reference to the influence these might have on his State as well as to ascertain the nature and possibility of relations which could be established with these countries. In addition, according to a long established tradition, commercial mission and presents along with *kafilas* of trade goods were regularly exchanged between Ladakh and Lhasa. Ladakh and Tibet had mutually agreed to exchange some trade mission on the basis of reciprocity which was both commercial and religious in nature. In view of the permanent interest in central Asian states, Maharaja Ranbir Singh despatched his agent Mehta Sher Singh on special survey mission to Central Asian states. He visited one hundred seventy-five places and submitted to the Maharaja, a detailed account of geographic, economic conditions and political transaction of these regions.⁷

The British were very much jealous as well as suspicious of Maharaja Ranbir Singh's influence in Central Asia. "So high was the political stock of the Kashmir Government in Central Asia during this period that most of the communication addressed to the British Government passed through the Kashmir Darbar. To cut the roots of Maharaja Ranbir Singh's influence in Central Asia and to isolate him from northern powers, the British devised to draw a wedge between him, Russia and China in the shape of Sharp edged commercial policy, cunningly inveigling even unsuspecting Ranbir Singh in their game. As soon as the Maharaja directed the Yarkandi envoy to see the viceroy, which he did, the British Government used it to blame him of clandestine relations with foreign powers and sent the famous mission of Douglas Forsythe to Central Asia which paved the way for replacing the Dogra influence in those territories. So, Government of India signed with Jammu and Kashmir government a "Commercial Treaty" in 1873, according to which, a British Joint Commissioner was appointed at Leh to look after the upkeep of the road, which was made a responsibility of the Jammu and Kashmir Government and ensure the safety of travellers to Central Asia. Under the treaty, the Maharaja could not carry any toll or duty on goods sent from the British India or abroad to Central Asia and vice-versa.⁸

After the Russo-Turkish war of 1828 and the Crimean war of 1853, Russia finding her expansion towards the South continually thwarted, accelerated her pace towards the east. Within twenty years after the Crimean war, she had occupied Chikment in 1864, Tashkent in 1865 and Khojent in 1866. Samarqand was occupied in 1868. When Russians entered Khiva in 1873, only Afghanistan remained between them and India. It was an alarm to the Government of India and now it began to regard Kashmir's northern frontier as its own "National Frontier".⁹

It was virtually Lord Northbrook, the viceroy and the Governor General of India (1872-76), who officially revived the proposal for the appointment of the British resident in the state. The initiative for this proposal was taken by R.H. Davis, the Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab, who, in February, 1873 had written a letter to Lord Northbrook, in which he had hinted at the so called intrigues between Kashmir and Russia.¹⁰ Earlier, the Maharaja had accordingly informed the Government of India that Russians were eager to establish direct communications with the Government of Jammu and Kashmir. The Maharaja had informed the Government of India, as a good will gesture and had no reservation.

Lord Northbrook strongly supported the proposal for the appointment of a British Resident in Kashmir so, on 15th September, 1873, he submitted to the Punjab Government to convey to Maharaja Ranbir Singh the decision of the Government of India for the appointment of a Resident. Maharaja Ranbir Singh received the proposal with great surprise and expressed his resentment that it was, *indispensable for honour of my government*. He personally met with Lieutenant Governor of the Punjab Mr. Davis and expressed his unwillingness. Maharaja Ranbir Singh extended concessions in form of extending the duration of stay of the British Joint Commissioner in Ladakh for the whole year and who would report from time to time on the Central Asian developments while also offered to extend the duration of the stay of the Officers on Special Duty in Kashmir from six to eight months in a year. This conversation between R.H. Davis and the Maharaja were reported to Lord Northbrook, the viceroy. Lord Northbrook was convinced of the logic and the strength of his argument and withdrew the proposal. Further, he expressed his satisfaction and agreement to the modified proposals of the Maharaja.

Therefore, the north-west frontier of Kashmir became a major concern of foreign policy of the Government of India, due to ever-present menace that the Government of India determined to acquire through the ruler of Jammu and Kashmir. The British authorities expected that the Maharaja with their support would be able to strengthen his control in this region. Consequently, Lord Lytton met the Maharaja at Madhopur on 18 and 19 November, 1876 and put forward his proposal to appoint a political officer in the region. Lytton also promised an aid of five thousand rifles and a suitable quantity of ammunition. He also proposed to Maharaja that Chitral and Yasin should be brought under control of Kashmir. The Maharaja agreed to the proposal but asked for assurance that the political officer would not interfere in any matter affecting his trade, administration, officials, servants, or any matter regarding his subjects. Lord Lytton agreed and on 22 September, 1877, the Government of India appointed Captain

⁶S.S. Charak, *Life and Times of Maharaja Ranbir Singh (1830-85)*, Jammu, p. 199.

⁷*ibid.*, p. 200,201.

⁸*ibid.*, p. 204.

⁹ Colonel A Durand, *Making of the Frontier*, London, p. 2.

¹⁰ A letter from R.H. Davis Lt. Gov. Punjab to Lord Northbrook the Viceroy & GG of India dated February 6, 1873, NAI.

(later, Major) John L. Biddulph, as the Gilgit Agent. In this way the Gilgit Agency was established.¹¹

Lord Ripon (1880-4) did not favour the politics of Gilgit Agency, because tribal intrigues and their mutual jealousies had made it clear that unless the Agency and the Dogra garrison in Gilgit were strengthened, this distant frontier could not be effectively controlled. At the same time towards the end of October 1880, there was a serious tribal uprising in Gilgit, which finally convinced Lord Ripon to withdraw the Gilgit Agency from this distant post. It was, therefore, decided to retrench the Gilgit Agency. Hence, Colonel Tanner was ordered to close down the Agency. Accordingly, on 20 September, 1881, he closed the Agency and left Gilgit.¹²

For the next four years, the Government of Jammu and Kashmir managed the affairs of Gilgit. However, in 1885, the combined forces of Hunza and Nagar attacked Normal, a fort seventeen miles away from Gilgit. They were repulsed but not without loss to the state troops. At the same time, the Panjdeh incident had taken place and it was posing a great threat to the British Indian Empire. Therefore, the British authorities resolved that a more satisfactory settlement of the Hindukush territory must be taken. Accordingly, the Resident in Kashmir informed the Government of J&K concerning the intention of re-establishing the Gilgit Agency. The Council of State held a meeting under the leadership of the Prime Minister, Raja Amar Singh to discuss this issue. Finally, it accepted this proposal of re-establishment of the Gilgit agency and the Prime Minister informed the Resident of the decision of the Council. The Government of India selected Captain Durand to re-establish the Gilgit Agency. He arrived in Gilgit on 27 July, 1889 and revived the Gilgit Agency.

In 1897, the government of India was of the view that military expenditure of Gilgit could be reduced. Military expenditure at Gilgit was further reduced in 1900. The political agent's escort of regular troops was also withdrawn and their duties devolved on the Kashmir Imperial Service troops in the agency. These changes in the agency however did not imply any alteration of policy towards the frontier people; wither on the part of the government of India or of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.

In 1913, the Government of India, with approval of the Secretary of State for India, created a new and permanent body of troops, (a corps of Scouts 656 strong) Gilgit troops, for its defence.

The Gilgit agency comprised the Gilgit wazarat, Hunza, Nagar, Chitral, Punial, Yasin, Kuh, Gizir, Ishkoman and Chilas. The Gilgit wazarat was under the direct control of Kashmir darbar under the officer called Wazir-i-Wazarat. But Gilgit being the headquarters of the agency the political agent resided her too. The Wazir-i-Wazarat was formerly under the orders of the political agent. But the latter, at times interfered with the affairs of the wazarat.

Under these circumstances, a conference was held on 22nd September 1934, at residency in Srinagar. It was decided that the Government of India would take over the portion of the wazarat this agreement was signed on March 26, 1935. By this agreement, Maharaja Hari Singh leased Gilgit for a period of 60 years to the Government of India.¹³

After twelve years, with the lapse of the British paramountcy the lease would automatically be abrogated. British selected 1st August as the day for handing over the Gilgit Agency to the Jammu and Kashmir Government. Arrangements were made by the State government for taking over the administration of Gilgit. Maharaja Hari Singh selected his senior most and most trusted officer, Brigadier Ghansara Singh as the Governor of Gilgit. The Prime Minister of J&K R.C. Kak sent him to Gilgit to take over the whole administration of Gilgit single-handedly. He was not given powers to operate budget. He was also not given any judicial powers which were very much important there. Also, no replacement of the civil administration was sent. Before leaving for Gilgit, Brigadier Ghansar Singh had objected to the political department of the state about the retention of the two British officers Major Brown and Captain Matheison at Gilgit which could be an obstacle to the smooth disposal of his duties. He also came to know that all the officers of the Gilgit Scouts had decided to join Pakistan and had also drawn their TAs. As he reached Gilgit, he found that Pakistan was instigating some of them through the medium of British Officers. So, Major Brown organised a coup d'état against the Governor. The muslim army troops which were mainly from Hunza and Nagar mutinied on 31st October, 1947. Here, it was clear that the British officer gave religious colour to the revolt. According to the plan, one hundred Gilgit Scouts under the Command of Major Brown, Lt. Hedar Khan and Subedar Major Babur Khan surrounded the residence of Brigadier Ghansara Singh at the night of 31 October.

Upon hearing the sound of the footsteps, Ghansara Singh woke up and found some six to eight people trying to enter his house. He had no idea of the Scouts but suspected attack of Pakistan. He used his revolver, backed up by his orderly and driver who were handed a double barrel shotgun and a sporting rifle machine gun. Fire was opened on his house. Exchange of fire went on for several hours and two men of Gilgit Scouts were killed. In early morning, the firing stopped at about 4 A.M. and he received a warning from Major Brown to surrender or else all Non-Muslims in Gilgit would be killed. Now, Brigadier Ghansara Singh was left with no alternative but to surrender. He was arrested along with other Hindu civil servants and their families. The entire Gilgit passed into the hands of Pakistan. A provisional Government was set up there. A flag hoisting ceremony was conducted by Major Brown on November 3, 1947 in the Scouts line. After a fortnight, one Sardar Mohammad Alam, a Pathan a nominee of Pakistan reached there from Peshawar and took over the administration as Political Agent at Gilgit.¹⁴

Thus, even after the treaty of Amritsar the British continued their intervention in the North West Frontier of India. They intervened for their own political and geo-strategic interests but on the eve of 15th August 1947, as a result of their intervention, India lost Gilgit to Pakistan through the mutual conspiracy of the British and Pakistan.

¹¹ *op. cit.*, p. 79.

¹² *ibid.*, p. 83.

¹³ B.L. Kak, *Fall of Gilgit*, 1977, New Delhi, p. 12.

¹⁴ Ghansar Singh, *Memoirs*.

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