

British Intervention and Gilgit Lease

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Abstract: The research paper focuses on the north-west frontier of the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir during Dogra rule. The research paper is an attempt to highlight the intervention policy of the British Government of India towards the erstwhile state of Jammu and Kashmir. The paper tries to explain the various causes which led to the lease of Gilgit Agency to British Government of India in 1935. The paper further explains how British Government of India diplomatically forced the Maharaja Hari Singh to lease such an important territory to British.

Keywords: Gilgit, Maharaja Hari Singh, Lease, British Intervention, Wakefield.

After the death of Maharaja Pratap Singh in 1925, Hari Singh succeeded to the gaddi. He was the nephew of Maharaja Pratap Singh. The policy of the British Government in Princely states was very well known that they always tried to weaken the ruling princes by making fresh interventions in the rights and powers of princes after every new succession. It was only after keeping the same policy in mind that they had agreed to the claim of Hari Singh to the gaddi against the Raja of Poonch Raja Jagat Deo Singh, the adopted son of Maharaja Pratap Singh. The political Department of the Government of India hoped that he would remain under the control of Resident like his father, Amar Singh. Moreover, he had been brought up under the British guardianship and educated in Mayo College in western style. His father Amar Singh had also helped the British in their secret plan against Maharaja Pratap Singh and had friendly relations with British.

The British had hoped that Hari Singh would offer no resistance to the policy which had been followed by British in Jammu and Kashmir. But probability of happening this was not totally ignored by the British. The British Government of India had been particularly anxious about the attitude of the Maharaja Hari Singh with regard to Gilgit. A question attracted various views that whether an assurance regarding the continuing of the British control over the Gilgit as a pre-condition for accepting Hari Singh as a new Maharaja had been given or not. But any such view was rejected by the Viceroy. They only waited to see the response of Hari Singh towards Gilgit after becoming the Maharaja. The Hopes of the British Government of India of having Maharaja as a stooge after the death of Maharaja Pratap Singh, was a difficult task. Although, it was difficult at that time for any new Maharaja to maintain the status quo. But Maharaja Hari Singh had decided to revive and reclaim

the past authority of the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir encroachment of which had been done by the British Government of India.

Maharaja Hari Singh to achieve this, right from the first day of his rulership started asserting his authority in all the matters which were usurped by the British and also with regard to Gilgit. It had been felt that the British were anxious about the behaviour of the new Maharaja about the existing arrangements at Gilgit. Hari Singh started pressing for the abolition of the Gilgit Agency and establishment of State's control over it.

The Maharaja's demand for the termination of Agency at Gilgit was however not taken very kindly by the British. But they appeared to have remained open minded towards the demands at the early stage of his rule even when he was very persistent in his demands. The British even agreed to the certain small demands like flying of the State flag in the Agency alongside the Union jack. Every effort had been made by the viceroy for resolving the "important and tiresome question" arising out of the British position of co-operation in the Gilgit Agency by friendly conversation with the Maharaja with a hope that talks "would have something to smooth the process" of the official exchange. Due to the assertive nature by which Maharaja had pressed his case, the British had followed a careful attitude while handling Maharaja Hari Singh in this case. Every method had been adopted by the British so as not to antagonize Maharaja Hari Singh in any way while the discussion on the Gilgit was going on.

Meanwhile the Political Department of the Government of India was at work in cutting down the Maharaja to size, debilitating him internally so that he may be led to part with his prized possession of Gilgit, The Political Department had started giving leverage to the All- India Kashmir Muslim Conference (AIKMC) which was formed in 1928 at Lahore to launch a Political agitation against the Maharaja for the protection of the interests of the Muslim subjects. The All India Muslim Conference in many ways fulfilled the British agenda by making propaganda of what they claimed was Maharaja's selective discrimination against his Muslim subjects, hence making him appear increasingly alien and unpopular before them. When the request of the AIKMC for submitting a memorandum highlighting the grievances of the Muslim subjects was turned down by the Maharaja on the ground that it was moved by the outsiders, his rule became a butt of criticism in the political circles of British India.

From 1930 onwards the Maharaja got increasingly embroiled in the political disturbances in Kashmir and could not implement his plan of action in Gilgit the way he would have liked. Maharaja Hari Singh had not made any effort to hide his nationalistic feelings. He had also given full discharge to these sentiments in his speech at the conference of the Chamber of Princes. During the first Round Table Conference in London, the final straw on the camel of British Patience was placed. In a speech filled with nationalistic passion he expressed that, "as Indian and loyal to the land whence we derive our birth and infant nurture we (the prince)

stand as solidly as the rest of our countrymen for our land's enjoyment of a position of honour and equality in the British Commonwealth of Nation". It was very clear to all that by saying this Maharaja Hari Singh was actually speaking the language of Indian National Congress, but he did not just finished there. Speaking at the occasion on 15 January, 1931, Maharaja Hari Singh said, "I have never disguised from my friends my warm support of the idea of an All-India Federation. To me, the scheme has many-fold advantages.... To my mind, there is today no alternative to Federation as a policy for India and in according my warmest support to the scheme of Federation before us, I am inspired by the hope that we are laying the foundations of a future for our country, more truly in accord with its genius and traditions, with great potentialities for future development, than is possible under any other scheme that we think of today". However, the British had announced a policy of non-interference in the internal matters towards the Princely States of India, but in real sense of practice it had never been ever so. The "responsibility for the general soundness of their administration" that the imperial council had expected while promising the internal independence of the princely states and providing them defence against external aggression, guaranteed the British enough opportunity for intervention in the internal matters of the states. Infact under the pretext that the Imperial Government (the general policy of non-intervention notwithstanding) would not "consent to incur the reproach of being indirect instrument of misrule" they could interfere at any time in the internal affairs of the state. Ultimately, it was only viceroy himself who took decision whether a state was well-ruled or mis-ruled. Consequently, he could at any time give the dog a bad name and hang him. By undertaking the twin responsibility of guarding the state's subjects and their ruler, the British could support one or other on the basis of where their own interests rest.

The year 1931 was a fateful year that emerged as the game changer in the history of Kashmir. The events that it unfolded opened a highly surcharged political discontent which Maharaja Hari Singh certainly did find very difficult to manage and eventually contributed to the weakening of his hold over Gilgit. During this period a batch of qualified young Kashmiris returned home and was willing to play a role in the domestic politics of Kashmir. Most notable among them was Sheikh Muhammad Abdullah, who started his career as a schoolmaster at the state High School. Besides Abdullah, there were others like Mirza Afzal, Ghulam Muhammad Sadiq etc who along with him started a organised agitation against the rule of Maharaja. It all started in the Reasi district of the Jammu province from where disturbing reports came that the dominant Hindu majority had demolished a Mosque, restrained the Imam from delivering the usual Friday sermon. When the reports reached Kashmir, open denunciations cropped from all corners of public life and massive protest meetings, public demonstrations were staged. It was against this background that an unknown figure in Kashmir namely Abdul Qadeer, whose antecedents point to the North-West Frontier region, made a vociferous speech against the maharaja rule at a public gathering organised by the workers of the Muslim Reading Room Party on 21 June 1931, at *Kanqah-e-Mullah*. His arrest on 25th June provided a rally point to all dissenting

tendencies to register their disapproval. The agitation obtained power between November 1930 to May 1931, when Maharaja was out of state and Wakefield, one of a British Officer under the service of the Maharaja who was the head of the Police and Home department was the over-all head. It was hard to prove his direct involvement in inciting the Muslims against the Maharaja but he took little action in order to disturb their agitation. Also the Justice Dalal placed the tolerant nature of the state government towards the Muslim activities and the unstoppable coming of the Anglo-Muslim press publication into the state responsible for the trouble in the state.

Mr. Wakefield, the Minister of the Political Department of the state could not resist to fan the flames of the brewing disaffection against the Maharaja. He used the opportunity to its optimum by bringing together the formerly the formerly distinctly isolated Muslims of the two provinces i.e. of Jammu and Kashmir on the same page of the political struggle against the Dogra ruler. Wakefield advised the Young Men Muslim association of Jammu to submit before the Maharaja a list of their grievances and send some representatives to Srinagar in this regard. In compliance with his advice four representatives from Jammu viz. Choudhary Ghulam Abbas, Mistri Yaqub Ali, Qazi Gaur Rehman and Sheikh Abdul Hamid arrived in Srinagar in the last week of June. The Muslim representatives from Jammu were welcomed with a rousing reception in Srinagar and a mass public gathering was organised in their honour at Khanqah-e-Mullah. Thus the Political Department achieved an unprecedented success in bringing together on a common platform the Muslims of the two hitherto isolated divisions of the state to pose a united challenge to the autocracy of Maharaja Hari Singh. The Maharaja precipitously declining reputation was a straight gain nevertheless for the Government of India which was hell bend to debilitate the Maharaja to such an extent so that it may gain its hold over Gilgit.

After fully got convinced through his advisers and intelligence agents that his senior Minister Wakefield was providing all the possible support to the agitators and was the agent of the Political department of the Government of India, Maharaja removed him from the state council of Ministers. He understood that these people could not be trusted in any situation. So, Raja Hari Krishan Kaul was appointed on July 25, 1931, as his Minister-in-Waiting and latter on was given a new title of Prime Minister. Raja Hari Krishan Kaul who had a long experience of working as an administrator in British India was called to take the charge of Prime Minister and to maintain law and order situation in the state. The open interference of the British in support of the Muslim agitators in Kashmir had created a great disturbance among the Princes of other states. The agitation till now had achieved nothing and it was already in dead stage. The Maharaja under such pressure was still able to take some wind out of the sail of the agitation. By taking some sort of undertaking from the agitators before their release. The aim of the Muslim leaders was not only to put forward their grievances to the Maharaja as this could have been done without any agitation. In fact this had continuously asked to the Muslims by the Maharaja to put up their demands. The immediate Anglo-Muslim interests in maintaining the agitation active was to pressurized Maharaja for appointment of commission to look into the July riots under a

British office, appointment of commission under a British officer to look into the Muslim grievances and change in the ministry of Kashmir, that was still unfulfilled. Certainly to give time to Maharaja to look into these demands, the Ahrar agitation was suspended from 9th October.

In the political field, as the Maharaja was opposing at every step, the British got successful in forcing him for complete surrender. With the appointment of Colonel ESD Colvin, an Indian Civil Service (ICS) officer, as the Prime Minister of the state in February 1932 and three other ICS officers as the ministers for Revenue, Home and Police, the state administration had been under the direct control of the Government of India. The attaining of the authority over the state was just a mean to an end, the end being to obtain unquestionable and unhindered control over the area of Gilgit. To reach to an agreement once for all (and what could have been a more opportune moment than the present one when Maharaja was down), the British Government of India got him agreed for the transfer of Gilgit to the British Indian Government on lease for a period of 60 years. On March 26, 1935 the lease agreement was signed by the then Maharaja Hari Singh and the Resident in Kashmir, Colonel L.E. Lang and was subsequently ratified by the Viceroy of India Lord Willingdon. Following were the proposals of lease agreement;

1. The civil and military administration of the entire Gilgit territory would be resumed by the Viceroy and the Governor General of India, although the territory would continue to be included within the dominion of His Highness the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.
2. The customary salutes and honours would be paid in the territory by the administration on the occasion of the birthday of His Highness, Baisakhi, Dussehra, Basant-Panchmi and on such occasions as agreed upon by the His Excellency. The Flag of His Highness will be flown at the official headquarter of the Agency throughout the year.
3. In normal circumstances, no British or British Indian troops would be despatched through that portion of Gilgit which lay beyond the left bank of Indus.
4. All right pertaining to mining are reserved to His Highness, the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir.
5. The agreement shall remain in force for sixty years from the date of its ratification and the lease will terminate at the end of that period.

The direct result of this agreement as it affected the State Forces was that all its troops stationed in the Gilgit area were retreated. Only a company post was to be maintained at Bunji from now onwards. Therefore, the four outposts were required to be maintained by the state forces viz, Bunji (one company), Leh (one platoon), Kargil (one section), and Skardu (one platoon). Troops for these outposts were to be provided by the battalions located at Srinagar. So far as the British interest for the welfare of the people of Kashmir was concerned, if they ever had receded with the transfer of Gilgit territory to the British. In reality the State

administration under the Prime Minister Colvin came down more harshly on the Muslims than the previous administration. The Muslims resented more under the “British rule”. The Muslims again started their agitation but received no support from the British Government of India and the Muslims of Punjab and lost its thunder.

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