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British Intrusion in Jammu and Kashmir

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Abstract:

The modern state of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence with the ominous terms of Amritsar Treaty signed on 16th March, 1846. Ranjit Singh's death in 1839 opened up many factions in the Sikh society. The Sikh army fought in first Anglo Sikh war with reckless resignation but was ultimately defeated. The Dogra Maharajas, who ruled Jammu and Kashmir on sectarian lines, always supported the interests of the Dogras and the Kashmiri Hindus. The establishment of the Residency gave a wide leverage of powers to the British government in the administrative affairs of Kashmir. A wide range of reforms were introduced in Jammu and Kashmir by the British Residency.

Keywords: Jammu & Kashmir, Punjab, Ranjit Singh, Lahore, Amritsar, Ghulab Singh Dogra, The British Raj.

Introduction

The boundaries of Kashmir expanded and shrunken under different rulers over the period of centuries, depending upon personal abilities of the rulers. The modern state of Jammu and Kashmir came into existence with the ominous terms of the Treaty of Amritsar signed between Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu and the British East India Company on 16th March, 1846.(1)

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The stability of the Punjab depended on the astuteness of Ranjit Singh himself. His death in June 1839 opened up many factions in the Sikh society. The army and the royal relatives now came out in the open.(2) Dhian Singh continued as wazir under Kharak Singh, the new Maharaja. However, the attempts of the Dogra Rajas to fill the power vacuum created at the Lahore Darbar, met with bitter opposition. Dhian Singh was caught up with court intrigues in 1843 and was thus murdered. Same was the fate of the other Dogras Rajas. Thus, by the end of 1844 most of the powerful figures of Ranjit Singh era had been eliminated, save Gulab Singh, who stayed away from Lahore.(3) This changed political scenario of Lahore forced Gulab Singh to make his moves with extreme caution.

After examining the political scene at the Lahore Darbar, Gulab Singh desired to become independent in the territories already under his jurisdiction. He concluded that his objectives could be achieved only under the patronage of East India Company. So keeping in view this motive, he made repeated offers to join the British against the Sikhs, if they would recognize his sovereignty. But his offers were either rejected or not responded. (4)

Though the first Anglo-Sikh war had begun in November 1845, the most memorable and the last battle of the war was fought at Sobraon on 10th February, 1846.(5) In the meantime, Gulab Singh was installed as Wazir at Lahore, who immediately put himself in communication with the British, tendering every assistance in his power for the fulfillment of any ends in regard to the state of Lahore which they might have in view.(6) Gulab Singh took the decision of collaborating with the British after giving serious considerations to the other alternatives available to him. He thought that he could neither participate in the war on the part of the Sikhs, nor remain secluded at Jammu. He thus concluded that his interests would best be served only by paving the way for a decisive Sikh defeat.(7)

Though leaderless and abandoned, the Sikh army fought with reckless resignation but was ultimately defeated.(8) However, the victory of the East India company was achieved at a huge cost. Its budget went soaring back into deficit.(9) It compelled the

British to drop the idea of annexing Punjab to their own empire. There were certain other reasons which weighed on their mind for not taking control of Punjab. So the best possible means to fulfill their objectives seemed to weaken the Sikh state militarily and to break its territorial unity.(10) These twin objectives were achieved through the treaties of Lahore and Amritsar.

When the British handed over the state of Jammu and Kashmir to Gulab Singh in 1846, they received the reports of misgivings by Gulab Singh in Jammu and Kashmir. The British Indian administration started impressing on the Maharaja that they had every right to meddle in the affairs of Kashmir Darbar. Henry Lawrence, the British Resident at Lahore was deputed by the Governor-General to make on the spot enquiry on the reports. The British authorities warned Gulab Singh, if the administrative set-up was not reorganized, some other arrangements will be made for the protection of the hill people.(11)

The establishment of the British rule in Punjab made it easy and safer for the European tourists to travel to the valley of Kashmir. The flow of tourists to Kashmir greatly increased. The Maharaja offered every possible facility to the visitors in the valley. Many of these visitors were frightfully arrogant and treated the valley as their own private fief.(12) The Maharaja complained to the British Government of the hospitality extended to the tourists being abused. The Maharaja's complaints provided the British with the much needed opportunity of establishing their political ascendancy in the affairs of the Kashmir Darbar and they were eager to consider the appointment of a regular British agent there. This would help them to find more convenient means to control the overall administrative machinery of the state.(13) The Governor-General decided to appoint a British officer to stay in the valley for the purpose of looking after the foreign tourists. Initially the Maharaja resisted the move but ultimately made the way for the new officer provided in the valley only during the Summer months.(14)

The British officer on special duty was appointed for a specific purpose. A close vigil was maintained on Kashmir developments through a local agent, Mirza Saif-ud-Din. He was employed by the company to spy on the policies of the Kashmiri

Maharajas and the general condition of the state. He through his extensive confidential dispatches, captured in minute detail the everyday occurrences during the entire reign of Gulab Singh and the first few years of Maharaja Ranbir Singh's rule.(15)

The Dogra Maharajas, who ruled Jammu and Kashmir on sectarian lines, backed and supported the interests of the Dogras and the Kashmiri Hindus while as the Muslims who were largely concentrated in the valley of Kashmir were left out. The mishandling by the Dogras of the famine of 1877-9 shone the spotlight particularly brightly on the plight of the Kashmiri Muslims. A section of British and British-Indian press came to the fore to highlight the grievances and oppression on the people of Kashmir by the Dogra Darbar. Newspapers in the Punjab, particularly those owned by the Muslims, were unrelenting in their criticism of the Dogra State and also of the British for having permitted such gross neglect by a protected prince.(16)

Among the other factors which prompted a serious reconsideration of the colonial policy of non-interference in Kashmir was the British failure in the Afghan war. After this ill-starred campaign of 1878, the pressure grew on the government to have a more tight vigil of the north-western frontier regions.(17) This would be done by having a control over the Kashmir affairs through a Resident.

The British finally intervened in the administration of Jammu and Kashmir at the accession of Maharaja Partap Singh in 1885. He was asked to withdraw his agent from the headquarters of the Government of India because all the political relations with the Kashmir Government in future would be carried out through the British Resident, the recognized representative of the Government of India.(18) Partap Singh vehemently protested against the new arrangement but Lord Dufferin conveyed to him that the decision was final.

The Government of India also impressed upon the new Maharaja that there was a dire need to overhaul the defunct administrative machinery of the state. A wide range of reforms were needed to be introduced in Jammu and Kashmir. These included the introduction of a lighter assessment of revenue to be collected preferably in cash; the abolition of the system of revenue

farming; the cession of state monopolies; the revision of existing taxes; the reforms in the educational sector; a reorganization of the army; a system of proper financial control; improvements in the judicial administration of the state and the construction of the roads. (19)

The establishment of the Residency gave a wide leverage of powers to the British government in the administrative affairs of Kashmir. Taking a further dig on the Maharaja authority, the persons of their own choice were recommended to be appointed by the government of India ostensibly to reorganize the Kashmir administration. A check was placed on the Maharaja Partap's extravagance by depriving him of his right to sign Public bonds independently.(20) Plowden, the Resident, recommended a complete reconstitution of the Kashmir government. He prescribed the immediate removal of the corrupt and mischievous officers who were at the bottom of most of the intrigues and in their place the appointment of the trained Indian officials who could be trusted to carry out the orders given out to them. (21)

The Government of India concurred with the observations of their man-on-the-spot and decided to divest Maharaja Partap Singh of all his powers. The Maharaja was presented with an order which forced him to voluntarily abdicate his powers to govern. The decision of stripping the Maharaja of his powers was not based on mere evidence of the letters, but there was more to this action on the part of the British government. The Secretary of state and the Resident Plowden had a year before made it clear that they had serious reservations about the Partap Singh's ability to rule citing his failure of implementing the reforms he had promised at the time of his accession.(22) In this way, Jammu and Kashmir virtually passed under the direct control of Government of India.

The British ascendancy on the political affairs of Jammu and Kashmir was presented not merely as a strategic move to protect the British Indian Empire, but to alleviate the misery of the people of Kashmir by reforming the administration. Soon after its establishment, the Residency persuaded the Maharaja to accept a land settlement in the valley of Kashmir. In 1887, A. Wingate and in 1888 Sir Walter Lawrence were appointed to carry out this much-needed task. The Dogra officials opposed the land settlement

of the valley. But Sir Walter Lawrence completed this task in 1892.(23) The significance of state intervention in Jagir lands under the British ascendancy lies in the fact that it threatened the financial and social bases of the Kashmiri landed elite for the first time, replacing them with a non-Kashmiri, predominantly Hindu landholding class. Colonial records, such as the 1901 census, recorded that many landed families of note had lost wealth as a result of the better administration which had led to a loss of their power and influence.(24)

The direct British interference also influenced the other aspects of the life of people in Jammu and Kashmir. A brisk trade in commodities such as salt, cloth, tea, metals and tobacco was carried on by the people of Jammu and Kashmir as they migrated seasonally particularly between the Kashmir valley and the plains of the Punjab. The opening of the Jehlum valley cart road connected Kashmir to the Punjab in 1890, which led to an instantaneous increase in trade with British India.(25) The nature and volume of trade from Jammu and Kashmir had undergone a major transformation, leading to a period of urban growth. Trade, coupled with the construction of the cart road and the Gilgit road, and a steady increase in tourism to Kashmir, led to an influx of money into the state.(26)

The British interference also influenced the agriculture system of the valley. Forests were improved. The exploitation of Deodar was effectively controlled. This was achieved through the organization of the forest department in 1891 under an officer lent by the Government of India. The forest department was re-organized in 1923-24.(27) Irrigation system also improved under the auspices of the British. A number of canals constructed. Ranbir canal was being the largest, serving an area of about 1, 26,000 acres and the Zainagir canal was completed in the year 1931 at a cost of Rs. 11 lakhs(28). Electric plants were installed at Mohora and at Jammu. Mohora electric plant was set up in 1907-8 and it was the largest power station of India.(29) Arrangements were also made for supply of pure water on sanitation lines to the cities of Srinagar and Jammu.

The system of education in Jammu and Kashmir prior to the late nineteenth century was informal and indigenous. Under

this system, Pandits and Moulvis imparted education to local Hindu and Muslims boys in Pathshalas and Madrasas. These institutions were run through community support and imparted basic religious and mathematical education to students,(30) The early Dogra rulers did not intervene in the indigenous educational system. Gulab Singh, the first Dogra maharaja, was too busy in consolidating his dominions to pay much attention to the educational status of his subjects. Ranbir Singh, his successor, took an active interest in education and made some feeble attempts at founding a few state supported institutions. The education imparted in such institutions followed the traditional system of Persian education whereby students were taught the alphabet, easy stories and the Persian classics such as Bostan and Gulistan without necessarily mastering their content.(31)

Ranbir Singh also set up a separate department for arranging translation of books on all subjects so that school text books could be made available. He started a number of schools in all parts of the State. He was a great patron of Art and Letters. As early as 1867, when the idea of founding a university at Lahore was first mooted by Sir E.Mcleod, the then Lt. Governor of the Punjab, the Maharaja Ranbir Singh gave a donation of Rs 6,25,000. When the University of the Punjab founded in 1882, Maharaja Ranbir's name was incorporated as the first fellow in the charter.(32)

It was after the establishment of the British ascendancy in Kashmir that some measures were initiated in the field of education. The Dogra government could no longer follow a policy of non-intervention in matters of education as the reigns of the administration were now in the hands of the British. A few attempts were initiated to improve the educational system of Jammu and Kashmir. A few primary schools were established. School curricula in the state were reorganized along the lines of the Punjab University syllabus and affiliated to the University (33).A uniform standard of tuition and admission fees was adopted for all secondary schools in the state. The British also took steps to encourage private enterprise to promote education. An arts college established at Jammu in 1905 to commemorate the royal visits of the Prince of Wales. The government set up a normal school in

Srinagar in 1906, and opened girls' schools in several parts of the state. The government also instituted a number of college scholarships for the students of the state studying in Punjab. Dr. Annie Besant started a Hindu college in Srinagar in 1905, which was taken over by the government in 1911 and renamed Sri Partap College(34).

The British Residency promoted education among the local population of the state. Thus, the appointment of the Resident and removing Maharaja Partap Singh from the throne provided the British Indian government with a firmer control over the administration of Jammu and Kashmir. The establishment of the Residency and the deposition of the Maharaja cleared the way for the imperial British Indian government to implement its comprehensive defence scheme without any opposition from the Kashmir Darbar.

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