

An Inquiry into Transfer of territories of Jammu and Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh by British

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ABSTRACT

This paper intended to investigate the reasons behind the transfer of territories to Gulab Singh and thus carving an independent state of Jammu and Kashmir. The transfer of territories is a matter of debate among historians, writers, and officials of the English Government at that time. There are diverse opinions among the scholars regarding their explanations for the transferring of territories to Gulab Singh and helping him in carving an Independent state. Also, an attempt has been made to look into the causes and circumstances which enable the British to adopt the favourable policy towards Gulab Singh at the point time when the East Indian Company was expanding their empire throughout India by annexing princely states of India. Through this paper, an attempt has been made to bring out various dimensions regarding this issue.

Keywords:- Gulab Singh, Rani, Sikh state, Lahore Darbar, Panjab, British, Strategic interests, Reasons, Jammu and Kashmir.

INTRODUCTION

The modern State of Jammu and Kashmir came into being by the Treaty of Amritsar concluded on March 16, 1846, between Raja Gulab Singh and the British Government of India. Impressed by the bravery and loyalty towards Sikh Empire, Gulab Singh was made the ruler of the Jammu kingdom on June 17, 1822, under the sovereignty of the Sikh empire.

The death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh in 1839 was followed by court intrigues leading to anarchy at Lahore. These court intrigues of Lahore Durbar instigated the Sikh Army to attack British positions and thus started the First Anglo- Sikh War on 14 of Decembers 1844 which culminated with the final defeat of Sikhs in the Battle of Sabarwan 1845. Raja Gulab Singh was appointed as a mediator between the two rival parties to help both the parties to sink their differences and made them arrive at an understanding. As a result, the Treaty of Lahore was concluded on March 9, 1846 in which Sikh government ceded a major chunk of her territories including Kashmir to the East India Company. Soon after seven days after the conclusion of the Treaty of Lahore, on March 16, 1846, the Treaty of Amritsar was concluded between the British and Gulab Singh, through which Gulab Singh agreed to pay a sum of rupees seventy-five Lakhs instead of the territories transferred to him thus laying the foundation of the modern state of Jammu and Kashmir.

Reasons for transfer

The following reasons have been filtered out after surveying and consulting various sources like official and non-official correspondences exchanged among the Officials of East India Company, official historical accounts of Sikh and Jammu Kingdoms, and important books written by historians.

Political and Strategic interests

The first and foremost reason which came to light was political and strategic interests. An English military officer of the contemporary period, M. L. Gregor in the 'History of Sikhs' mentions that observing disorder and chaos in the Sikh state after the death of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the British Indian Government formulated a plan of establishing an independent Rajput State in the hills. British Government observed that the establishment of an independent Rajput State will be of lasting benefit for the British to defend their existing frontier against Afghans as well as to counterbalance the Sikhs.¹

Another British officer Younghusband in his book wrote that the British transferred Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh not for money but for political reasons i.e. to weaken the Sikh state. Sir Francis Younghusband writes that "In 1846 the East India Company had no thoughts or inclinations whatever to extend their possessions. All they wished was to curb their powerful and aggressive neighbors and they thought they would best do this, and at the same time reward a man who had shown his favourable disposition towards them, by depriving the Sikhs of the hilly country and by handling it over to a ruler of a different race."²

This line of thought is also testified by eminent historian Khushwant Singh. In his book Singh, A History of Sikh- Vol 2, Khushwant, he mentions the secret communication in which Governor General's (Lord Harding) Dispatch to Secret Committee No, 7 of March 4 1846 which stated shed light on the strategic interest of British. It states, "It would bring us in collision with many powerful chiefs for whose coercion with the military establishment, at a great distance from our provinces and military resource would necessary...Conflicting interests would be created and races of people with whom we have hitherto no intercourse would be brought under our rule while the territories; except Kashmir, are comparatively unproductive and would scarcely pay the expenses of occupation and management". "On the other hand the tract now ceded includes the hills possessions of the Maharaja Gulab Singh and the Jammu family; and while the severance of this frontier line from the Lahore possessions materially weakens that state and deprives it, in the eyes of other Asiatic powers, of much of its pride to position, its possession by us enables us at one to mark our sense of Maharaja Gulab Singh conduct during the late operations, by regarding him in the mode most in accordance with his ambitious desires, to shrew froth as an example to the other chiefs of Asia the benefits which accrue from an adherence to British interests, to create a strong and friendly power in a position to threaten and attack, should it be necessary to do so, the Lahore territories in their most vulnerable point and at the same time to secure to ourselves that indemnification for the expenses of the campaign, which we declared our determination to exact and which excepting by the cession of territory, the Lahore Government is not in a condition to afford."³

Governor-General Lord Harding in another letter written to one of his relative's states that the distance of Sulej from Kashmir was 300 miles and it would be impossible for the British to keep a British Force

there due to the difficult mountainous terrain. The deal done with Gulab Singh was the only option available.⁴

Another factor that influenced the British decision was the Great Game i.e. a geo-strategic rivalry of expansion between Russia and England fought in Asia. John Keay the author of “The Gilgit Game” describes the Great Game as the century-long rivalry between Russia and British India for the control of Central Asia. In the Great Game, China, Afghanistan, and Persia all provided ideal grounds for such jockeying.⁵ Gilgit was surely the wildest arena in which the Game was played. Because of the political vacuum in the area, the movements of explorers and agents could themselves constitute a valid claim to territory, and their chance friendship and difficulties; it would be in the mountains around Gilgit that the two imperial frontiers came closest to Collision.”⁶ In short the British Indian Government wanted to utilize Kashmir as a “listening post” for monitoring developments in north-western frontier areas i.e. keep watch on Russian and Chinese expansionary activities beyond Kashmir’s Frontier.⁷

Weakening of the Sikh State

Another factor behind the transfer was to make the Sikh state weak so that it cannot pose a challenge in the future. The British had no wish to prolong the war. But at the same time, Lord Harding was determined to make the state so weak that its eventual absorption into British Empire would present no problem. In one of his letters Lord Harding expressed his views are stated; “I shall demand one million and a half pounds in money as compensation, and if I can arrange to make Gulab Singh and the hill tribe’s independent, including Cashmere, I shall have weakened the war republic.”⁸

Also, Governor-General followed the policy of appeasement towards Maharaja Gulab Singh by taking the advantage of the financial crises of the Lahore treasury. The appeasement of Gulab Singh was done in a manner suitably pleasing him, and at the same time reducing the significance of the heirs of Ranjit Singh. Instead of money to be taken from Sikhs the territory of Kashmir and the hill states between the Beas and Indus were separated from the Lahore Darbar and were given to Maharaja Gulab Singh for seventy-five lakhs rupees in form of Treaty of Amritsar.

Further explaining the benefits of transferring Kashmir to Gulab Singh, Lord Governor-General wrote in his dispatch of 19th March 1846 to the Secret Committee of the East India Company: “I request your Honourable Committee’s attention to the treaty made with the Maharaja Gulab Singh, by which a Rajput principality of the hill districts has been constructed extending from the Ravi to the Indus, and including the province of Kashmir. The Maharaja is declared by the treaty independent of the Lahore State and under the protection of the British Government. As it was of the utmost importance to weaken the Sikh nation before its Government could be re-established, I considered the appropriation of this part of the ceded territory to be the most expedient measure I could devise for that purpose, by which a Rajput dynasty will act as a counterpoise against the power of a Sikh prince, the son of late Ranjit Singh, and both will have a common interest in resisting attempts on the part of any Muhammadan power to establish an independent State on this side of the Indus or even to occupy Peshawar.”⁹

Thus Dr. S.S. Bal commented that one important lesson of the war was that instead of playing the buffer between the English and the Afghans, it could itself turn against the British. The new State had therefore been weakened in the British interest itself.¹⁰

Economic interests

East Indian Company was primarily a commercial enterprise. They were just concerned about profits. When the treaty of Lahore was signed, the Punjab Government was to give around One and a half Crore as a settlement but the treasury was empty. So the territories were given instead of One Crore were considered a liability and unproductive and also it would require a large force to maintain control over it. But when Gulab Singh offered them One crore the Company considered it a win-win situation. Evidence of it can be found in a letter written by Lord Harding to a secret committee. He explained in detail why he did not like to extend the British rule over hill territories. “He stated that the extension of British rule would lead to a clash with neighbouring states and the new frontiers would be hard to protect on account of mountainous and large barren regions. Moreover, it would add to economic liability”.¹¹

Religious dimension

Lord Harding advocates another reason i.e. of British anti-Muslim stance. “He wrote that he has done this on the principle of preferring Hindu governments, or any other race in preference to the Mahommedans on this great entrance into India”.¹²

The neutrality of Gulab Singh during Anglo-Sikh Wars

Sikh Army deemed no one worthy of trust in Lahore durbar to lead in the first Anglo-Sikh War 1845, and thus requested durbar to send a message to Raja Gulab Singh to assume the leadership of the army to move against British. The Sikh commanders were adamant on their demand of giving the post of Wazir to Raja Gulab Singh.¹³ So the Rani Jindan Kour was in a panic about this adamant demand of commanders and wrote to Raja Gulab Singh not to accept the demand. Rani tried her best to refrain Raja Gulab Singh from Lahore and wrote a letter that “You are an old faithful and well-wisher of the Government. If you come without orders you will commit an offense against the Government. Do not act on the writings of the army. It is the same army that assailed you. Your brothers and relatives and dependents and sons and nephews sacrificed themselves. If you come to Lahore, you will gain nothing.”¹⁴ So, even the Rani and the council of ministers did not want Gulab Singh to come to Lahore.

Gulab Singh was resolved to act with great caution and avoid mixing himself up in the quarrel. When reached Lahore he was requested by the Rani and the commanders of the army to join the war but he availed himself of the excuse of wishing to act independently at the head of his troops in any work she might assign to him. These postures adopted by Gulab Singh earned the praise of the British Indian Government which proves fruitful in the establishment of an Independent Dogra State.¹⁵

The neutral stance of Gulab Singh was recognized by the British. Even a letter written by then Governor General Lord Harding to Lord Ellenborough recognized this fact and states that “Maharaja Gulab Singh was never Minister of Lahore for the administration of its affairs. Also when the invasion took place he remained at Jammu and took no part against us, but tendered his allegiance on condition of being confirmed in the possession of his territories. It was evident that he had no cause for gratitude or attachment to the Lahore Durbar, by whose orders and intrigues his family had been nearly exterminated, his possession taken, and his sons slain. During the whole campaign he had purposely kept aloof, not a single hill soldier had fired a shot against us, so the government had every right to treat him

well. They had their interests, also to attend to, which required that the Sikh State should be weakened and that the hills should be separated from the plains.

Further, he wrote, after defeats in the battles of Mudki and Feroz Shah, the Rani had implored him to come to Lahore and bring his troops to her aid but he sent evasive answers. After the battle of Aliwal more pressing invitations were sent, as he alone, in her opinion could settle affairs with the English, because he had not taken part against them. He had been told by Major Lawrence on the third of February in a written document that he appreciated his wisdom in not having taken up arms against us and that his interests would be taken into consideration".¹⁶

Gulab Singh's neutrality in the late was an additional consideration, but only in sense of confirmation of the belief that Gulab Singh would play the role of a confirmation of the belief that Gulab Singh would play the role indented for him and that he would follow British advice in defending the Afghan frontier.¹⁷

The personality of Gulab Singh

Gulab was a far-sighted and visionary man. Ever since he had come in contact with the British he maintains good relations and earned praise for him.

Raja Gulab Singh formally came into contact with the British in 1830, when the Governor-General of India, Lord William Bentinck, visited Lahore and expressed his desire to visit Kashmir. Maharaja Ranjit Singh issued necessary orders to Raja Gulab Singh to look after all the arrangements for transport and reception. After the conclusion of the visit, Raja Gulab Singh was granted a certificate of merit by the Governor-General of India for his excellent arrangements. It was his first instance when Gulab Singh came into direct contact with the top British authority in India. Between 1831 and 1839, Raja Gulab Singh on the orders of Maharaja Ranjit Singh welcomed several European visitors to his territories, and a few of them throw valuable light on the political power of the Jammu Raja.

In 1841, when the British contingents stationed in Afghanistan were attacked cooperation was sought from Lahore Darbar. The Lahore Darbar was reluctant to help the British and deputed Gulab Singh to help them. Here, Gulab Singh took the opportunity to help the British in dealing with the Afghan problem and thus secured the friendship of Henry Lawrence. It was a farsighted decision of Gulab Singh as he had visualized early the downfall of the Sikh state and thereby annexation by the British. This valuable help to the British earned him the gratitude of the Indian government.¹⁸

On the personality of Gulab Singh, Lord Harding wrote that "Raja Gulab Singh endowed with the understanding of all types of intelligent affairs on account of inherent sagacity. He has also seen his nobleness of mind, wisdom, goodwill, honesty, and loyalty performed toward the Government of Lahore. He, therefore gifted and bestowed the country of Kashmir and all the hill territories lying between the rivers Ravi and Indus, in the form of a State, on the said Raja generation after generation and his male heirs, in perpetuity and favored with the high title of Maharaja".¹⁹

Officers of the East India Company like Henry Lawrence then the Resident and Agent to Governor-General on receipt of the complaint against Gulab Singh absolved the Maharaja of the blame and even spoke in favour of Maharaja's rule in Jammu and Kashmir. He reported that the Maharaja was generally kind and considerate towards the cultivators and his demands upon them is low as compared to his predecessors.²⁰

The style of Gulab Singh's diplomacy left a deep impression on the officers of the East India Company. Hung Pears in Memoirs of Alexander Garden remarks that the British to some extent became successful in convincing Gulab Singh to bring into line with their interests. Otherwise, Gulab Singh would have used his influence in creating a revolt which would have been more troublesome than the revolt of 1857, and also encouraged the other states like Nabha, Jind, and Patiala in throwing away the British yoke.²¹

Views of K. M. Pannikar on the transfer of territories to Gulab Singh

K. M. Pannikar who holds the authority over Gulab Singh in his book "Gulab Singh The founder of Jammu and Kashmir" forwarded the following points explaining the reason for the transfer:-

"Firstly the treaty of Lahore with Maharaja Dalip Singh having clause 12 clearly shows that even before the signing of the treaty it was agreed that the area between Ravi and the Indus was to be transferred to Maharaja Gulab Singh. The move of Lal Singh to give away the territories between the Ravi and Indus in lieu of war indemnity to the British was to deprive Maharaja Gulab Singh of the territory which was already promised for reward his services of restoring peace between the Lahore Durbar and the British Indian Government. So the treaty of Amritsar should be read along with the Treaty of Lahore, as it shows that there was no sale of Kashmir.

Secondly, the transfer of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh was the price paid to him for the speedy efforts for agreeing with the British and Lahore government which otherwise would have been difficult to be done. The speedy peace achieved was due to an agreement earlier regarding the transfer of Kashmir to him.

Thirdly, the subjugation of Kashmir was impossible for the East India Company because at that time its boundary was Sulej. Although the Lahore forces were defeated badly in a series of battles yet the Lahore Kingdom was independent. The complete occupation of Lahore Kingdom would have required another strong campaign for which the British Indian government was not prepared. Having Company's base away at Ferozpur, the risk of a second Sikh invasion, and insecure lines of communication it would have not been possible to conquer Kashmir or even hold it if conquered. So the transfer of Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh was well-established according to Company's best decision under those circumstances.

Fourthly, The British considered the Lahore Kingdom as a strong power because it possessed a large area, resources and frontiers extended from Multan to Gilgit. The division of the empire was the solution to achieve the objective of a weak Sikh state"²²

CONCLUSION

Thus the reason for the transfer of Jammu and Kashmir to Maharaja Gulab Singh is not a simple historical event. It involved many dimensions including the strategic and political interests of the British, the weakening of the Sikh state, economic consideration, the neutrality of Gulab Singh, and the personality of Gulab Singh. The military capabilities of Gulab Singh enable him to project himself as a formidable ally who could guard the north-western frontier of British India against Afghans and Russians. Also British knew very well that the second Anglo- Sikh war was imminent in the future and for this, a weak Sikh state would be easy to be crushed. So by transferring territories, the size of the Sikh

state would be halved, and also Gulab Singh the most powerful commander of the Sikh empire would also be alienated. Even the sum of seventy-five Lakh was a huge amount to be realized by the British for the territories which they considered as an unproductive and economic liability. Further, the personality of Gulab Singh also proved a detrimental factor as he had cultivated friendly relations with English officers by offering remarkable services, for example during the Afghan disaster in 1841. He was a far-sighted man who had already visualized the downfall of the Sikh empire due to court intrigues and anarchy and thus adopted the stance of neutrality. Thus these were some of the factors mentioned above which led to the transfer of the territories to Gulab Singh.

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