

India and Iraq: Interests and interactions during the British period

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Abstract

India and Iraq had relations since ancient era. Both claim ‘civilizational connect’ with Iraq corresponding with ancient Mesopotamian civilization and India to the Indus valley civilization. There is ample evidence of trade between the two regions. The entry of the Europeans in the Indian Ocean region and the use of Red Sea, Persian Gulf and the Indian Ocean for trade of goods and people resulted in the British control over India and Iraq. Much of Iraq’s administrative models were based on those developed by the British in India and Indian men were used in war fought in Iraq. The paper explores India’s relations with Iraq with specific focus during the British rule in India.

Keywords: Indo-Iraq, British Empire, Persian Gulf

Introduction

Antiquities often play a role in defining the structure of geo-political relations that could have existed between two regions, here two countries- India and Iraq. India’s ties with Iraq go back to the times when India’s existence was defined by the widespread culture of the Indus valley civilization that matched with the Mesopotamian civilization. The land between Tigris and Euphrates today corresponds with Iraq. Iraq often served as a transit trade route for goods that travelled from India to the west. Tribes from India seeking fresh pastures used the channels of communication that were established via Iraq to Iran.¹ The evidence of trade links between Mesopotamia and India through Iran can be tenuous, but decorated stone vessels, ‘scarlet ware’ pottery, glazed steatite, ‘Indianesque’ seals, as well as copper seals and sprat headed pins provide undeniable proof of contact. The reference to a typical Indian bull² with its hump back on a grey steatite bowl and the intricacy of the scene carved.³ There is an evidence of transit trade between south Mesopotamia and Indus valley, a process “which was perhaps already established at the end of early dynastic period (BC c 2500) and in the course of five centuries increased in momentum, seaborne through the Persian Gulf”⁴.

India’s contacts with ancient Iraq are attested very early in history. Mesopotamia was always in need of raw materials which were indispensable to urban life. Gold came from various deposits scattered between Egypt and India.⁵ The Persian Gulf served as one of the last great routes between ancient Iraq

¹ M. E. L. Mallowen (1965), *Early Mesopotamia and Iran*, London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., p.21.

² The standing bull was reminiscent of a principal motif on a number of Indian vessels.

³ Mallowen, p.23.

⁴ Ibid. p 22.

⁵ Georges Roux (1964), *Ancient Iraq*, Great Britain: George Allen and Unwin, p.28

and the rest of the world. “From early Islamic times up to now the PG has been the ‘lung’ of Iraq, a window wide open on India and Far East.”⁶ There is however no direct proof that, relations between Mesopotamia and India were affected by sea rather than by land. Nevertheless, it is often believed that the Babylonian artistic development along with Persian influenced the artistic development of India and China.⁷

British informal empire

Iraq, today is bordered by Persian Gulf, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia and Jordan and Syria on the west, Turkey in the north and Iran in the East. The British interaction with India and subsequent control over it as a colonial power gave impetus to the idea of protecting India and all routes of communication to India from any regional or foreign power. In the effort, the British established the ‘informal empire’ in Persian Gulf with the Political Resident of Persian Gulf (PRPG), Gulf Resident reporting to the Government of India (GOI), first in Calcutta and later in Delhi and sometimes in Shimla. He was assisted by various Political Agents who apart from other divisions in PG, also reported and interacted on the affairs of Bagdad and Basra, the territories that then formed a part of the Ottoman Empire and later of the modern-day Iraq.

The Baghdad residency was established in early 19th century (1810) to supplement British residency at Basra that was established even earlier as a trading post in the 17th century. In Basra and Baghdad, the British diplomatic officials extended their protection to Indian traders and pilgrims on their way to Holy cities in Iraq and Arabia. Both Baghdad and Basra were given use of Indian postal system in 1868. Before World War I Basra was an important Anglo-Indian shipping centre and Baghdad was important due to its strategic location. So important was it that Lord Curzon told House of Lords in 1911 that Baghdad must be included in the sphere of “indisputable” British supremacy.⁸

By the 20th century Great Britain had already established itself as a supreme power in the Persian Gulf region. However, by this time the weakening of the Ottoman Empire and simultaneously the entry of Europeans-Russians and Germans, and their increasing influence on the internal affairs of the empire, proved detrimental to the British interests in the region.

British India concerns regarding German influence

The Ottoman Sultan granting permission for construction of the Berlin-Baghdad railway to Germany, with an extension at Basra did not go well in the British Political circles. The Mesopotamian problem became the main theme of Anglo-German diplomacy in the late 19th & early 20th century in the Gulf. The Baghdad Railway question had led the Indian authorities to present a comprehensive statement to London outlining the way in which the conception could affect the (British) Indian interests. Lord Curzon, the then Viceroy felt, in 1904, that the intrusion of Germany ought to be opposed as it would lead to Germanization of Mesopotamia and enable Berlin to blackmail in turn the two powers interested in the region.⁹ India’s firm stand thus was non-interference of any other power in Mesopotamia as the strategic implications of the Baghdad railway for British India were grave.

⁶ Ibid, p.30

⁷ Ibid, p 389.

⁸ Don Peretz, (1994), *The Middle East Today*, USA: Praeger publishers, p 434.

⁹ Ravinder Kumar (1965), *India and the Persian Gulf Region, 1858-1907, A Study in British Imperial Diplomacy*, Bombay: Asia Publishing House, p 183.

Soon enough, with the outbreak of the World War I, the Indian government was concerned that the German prompted Ottoman activity might hinder trade and communications with India, and also threaten the Persian oilfields. Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' with some 5,500 men was dispatched to Basra. The initial task of the force was only to deter the Ottomans from suborning Britain's friends or interfering with British interests at the head of the Gulf. This exercise was quite acceptable to the Military Dept of the GOI. However soon the British policy underwent a change and British and Indian troops occupied Basra in 1914. Sir Percy Cox wrote to New Delhi from his new headquarters in Basra, that he could not see 'how we can avoid taking over Baghdad'¹⁰. By February and March 1915 two more brigades were dispatched from India, and the idea of a major extension northwards was evidently taking root in Shimla.¹¹ Sir Percy Cox as a Chief Political Officer asked the permission from the Viceroy in India to establish civil administration in the newly occupied Basra.¹² The discussion on this followed at the India Office was about the certainty that GOI will take charge of this new government but not necessarily consider an Indian district as a model for it.¹³

The clash between London and India over position in Basra ensued as India Office in London was keen on consolidating the position and gain firm control over Basra while the Military dept of GOI was becoming more ambitious. London was cautious, India was ready to surge ahead. As Peter Sluglett remarked, "the constant theme of the campaign emerged: reluctant acceptance by London of demands by India and the Chief political Officer of the force for a more vigorous prosecution of the campaign."¹⁴ Officials in the Secretariat in India seemed inclined to view the operation as a kind of frontier war, with Indian Expeditionary Force 'D' pushing ever onwards to subdue the rebel forces.¹⁵ General Sir John Nixon of March 1915 from Simla included 'formation of plan for the occupation of Basra *vilayet*'. However due to some circumstances that occurred by the end of 1915, Military Dept of the GOI was relieved of responsibilities and the War Office took full charge of the operations.

By the time Baghdad was occupied in 1917, and Mosul in 1918, nearly 900,000 British and Indian troops had fought the war in Iraq.¹⁶

Meanwhile the process of establishing administration in the occupied territories based in Basra had begun. Throughout the war period the civil and the military authorities clashed over the nature of administration in Iraq. The British civilian authorities were willing to use trusted sheikhs to further British ends which the military opposed. The third angle to the debate was added by the civil officials from India, who viewed the whole region as an appendage of the IO, to be subordinated to British Indian Policies. At one time some British officials demanded that Basra and Baghdad be annexed by British India for its use as bases.¹⁷ Nevertheless the process of administration had begun.

¹⁰ Peter Sluglett (2007), *Britain and Iraq, Contriving King and Country 1914-1932*, New York: Columbia University Press, p 8.

¹¹ Ibid, p 9.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid, p 10.

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Daniel Silverfarb (1986), *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East, A Case Study of Iraq*, NY: Oxford University Press, p.4.

¹⁷ Don Peretz, (1994), *The Middle East Today*, USA: Praeger publishers, p 435.

British India's influence over Iraq

The *Iraq Occupied Territories Code*, a penal code and *Tribal Criminal and Civil Disputes Regulations* based on Indian models was introduced. In the early years of the campaign in Mesopotamia, most of the officials on the Political and Administrative side had been seconded from Indian Political Service.¹⁸ Thus, in the absence of any instructions, those on the spot recruited largely from Indian Army and Indian Civil Service, could only set up and maintain the kind of administrative machine with which they themselves were familiar.¹⁹ They tended to approach the administrative problems presented in Mesopotamia along the Indian lines which they had been taught in India.²⁰

The administration imposed on Iraq was overwhelmingly the work of men seconded by India Office and was modeled largely on Britain's imperial structure in India.²¹ A new civil-criminal code based on Anglo-Indian laws replaced the old Turkish laws; the Indian rupee became the medium of exchange; and the army and police force were increasingly staffed with Indians.²² The 'Indianization' of Mesopotamia was happening when the system was apparently to be dismantled in India as new challenges faced the British.²³

In 1920, revolt broke out against British in Iraq and the rising was suppressed by 102,000 British and Indian troops. India figured in the discussion when rising broke out and a debate followed in London whether in view of absence/disappearance of German threat British forces should be withdrawn from Iraq. However, the threat of Bolshevik revolution to India and Gulf apart from possible occupation of Mosul by new nationalist regime in Turkey and the prospect of oil potential in Iraq kept British interests in Iraq alive. At one stage there was even an argument in favour of administering the country as a part of the Indian Empire.²⁴ Besides, after the division of Turkey, there was fear that the anti-British agitation in the Muslim states would jeopardize the British hold on the allegiance of the Muslim community in India.

Indian nationalism and its impact

By retaining the control of Iraq British leaders believed "that they could drive a wedge down the centre of the bloc of Muslim states and thereby gravely weaken it".²⁵ It is also argued that, this was the period when nationalist movement in India along with Ireland, Egypt (that were under British control) were gaining strength, hence British leaders concluded that by granting self rule to indigenous peoples of their Empire could they retain essential part of their imperial position in the world.

The appointment of Faisal in the newly established Iraq in 1921, allowed indirect British control to protect vital imperial interests. Until 1921, there was no country as Iraq that existed on the world map. The British occupied Iraq only during the World War I. For Allies²⁶ the process started one year after the beginning of World War I as the British began from scratch. It was created from the *vilayat* of Bagdad, Basra and Mosul. The British soon began to find that the country was not only important as a defense

¹⁸ Peter Sluglett (2007), *Britain and Iraq, Contriving King and Country 1914-1932*, New York: Columbia University Press, p 15.

¹⁹ Ibid, p 12

²⁰ Ibid, p 15.

²¹ Phebe Marr (1985), *The Modern History of Iraq*, England: Westview Press, p 31.

²² Ibid, p.31

²³ Peter Sluglett, p. 15.

²⁴ Daniel Silverfarb (1986), *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East, A Case Study of Iraq*, NY: Oxford University Press, p.vi.

²⁵ Ibid, p.4.

²⁶ Britain, France and Russia.

outpost but also vital for other purposes that were a product of the creation of new conditions that arose after World War I. The control of the country could be linked with the larger British imperial superstructure.

In 1929, the British in an effort to grant Iraq independence, had withdrawn all British and Indian ground troops from Iraq though in times of emergency they planned to reinforce the garrison in Iraq by Indian soldiers.²⁷ However there was also an increasing realization by late 1920s that the British government could no longer send Indian troops abroad without encountering strong opposition and protests from political leaders in India who did not believe that their people should bear the military and financial burden of defending British imperial interests in West Asia or elsewhere.²⁸ Indicating the depth of feeling of this subject in India, the Indian Legislative Assembly passed a resolution defining the role of Indian Army as “the defence of India against external aggression and the maintenance of internal peace and tranquility”.²⁹ The practical repercussion was in 1929 when in response to a request from the war office in London, the chief of the general staff of the Indian army refused to promise Indian troops to defend the valuable British controlled oilfields in Iran or in northern Iraq, even in the event of Russian attack³⁰.

Britain granted independence to Iraq in 1932, on the urging of King Faisal, though the British retained military bases and transit rights for their forces. Britain had withdrawn the Indian ground troops from Iran, it had retained squadrons of military aircrafts that were stationed at 3 separate airbases. The air ministry believed that these bases were essential link in the British military and civil air route to India.

On 1st July 1940 the British Government decided to send a division of Indian troops to Iraq, which eventually were never sent as the Viceroy of India and the C-in-C objected to the decision. Haunted by the memory the casualties of the Mesopotamian campaign during the World War I. They feared that in the event of Iraqi resistance this might become another major military commitment. They were also alarmed about the possibility of Indian troops being sent to northern Iraq to guard the oilfields at Kirkuk, thereby creating a long and vulnerable line of communication. They thus pointed out that there were no troops immediately available to reinforce the Indian division if it encountered difficulty, and that a military defeat or withdrawal under pressure would have deplorable political consequences in India. The Indian officials at this time were also concerned about the possibility of Japanese aggression in southeast Asia and thus reluctant to reduce the strength of the Indian army for a new, and in their minds, unessential commitment.³¹ Nevertheless in 1941 the second British occupation of Iraq happened and the GOI dispatched a brigade of Indian troops by sea to Iraq almost immediately and two more brigades within two months.³²

²⁷ Daniel Silverfarb (1986), *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East, A Case Study of Iraq*, NY: Oxford University Press, p.20.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Daniel Silverfarb (1986), *Britain's Informal Empire in the Middle East, A Case Study of Iraq*, NY: Oxford University Press, p.116.

³² Ibid, p.125

Conclusion:

British interests in Iraq were defined by the British position in India. India's relation with the region had impact on Iraq's administrative machinery. While the Indian troops participated in the World War I and fought in Iraq, increasingly a resistance built up by the Indian national movement against deploying Indian troops in British wars overseas. The British Indian officials regularly treated the Persian Gulf region and Iraq as their concerns which led often led to clash with London officials.

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