

Vol. 8, Issue-III (June 2017)

ISSN: 0976-8165

The Criterion

An International Journal in English

Bi-monthly, Refereed & Indexed Open Access eJournal



UGC Approved Journal [Arts and Humanities, Jr. No. 768]

Editor-In-Chief - Dr. Vishwanath Bite

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Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal

Bi-Monthly Refereed and Indexed Open Access eJournal

www.galaxyimrj.com

ISSN 2278-9529

From *Raja* to *Maharaja*: The Making of Modern Jammu and Kashmir State by Gulab Singh

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Article History: Submitted-13/04/2017, Revised-03/07/2017, Accepted-04/07/2017, Published-12/07/2017.

Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to study the role of Gulab Singh in the formation of Jammu and Kashmir State. This study further highlights that how Jammu, which was already a part of *maharaja* Ranjit Singh kingdom, was granted as an estate to Gulab Singh as a reward for his valuable services. This study further examines the political factors leading up to the signing of Treaty of Amritsar, between East India Company and Gulab Singh, which elevated his status from *raja* to *maharaja* of Jammu of Kashmir state. So this paper basically revolves around rise of Gulab Singh from *raja* to *maharaja* in general and his recognition as founder of Jammu and Kashmir state in particular.

Keywords: Dogra, Raja, Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, State. Maharaja, Treaty of Amritsar.

Introduction

On 16 March 1846, a treaty conjured into existence the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in the northern reaches of the Indian subcontinent, bordering the three great powers- British, Russia and China. The consenting parties in this treaty were the East India Company and Gulab Singh.¹ Disparate territories stripped by the company were bundled together to bring into being this state,² although the realignment of territorial frontiers to create new dominions was far from unfamiliar in India. Over the following century, this treaty would be frequently revisited and condemnation of it heard from different quarters of Kashmiri society. Given this less than propitious history, it is remarkable that such a dominion was established at all, let alone that it lasted for as long as a century and a year.³ How did then the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, so awkwardly constructed and so little accepted, come into being?

Events in the Punjab and the role played by the Gulab Singh in their context are critical to explaining the founding of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Before moving ahead to the process, which was involved in the formation of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, it is necessary to give a brief historical background of Gulab Singh who transformed the various small principalities into a single political entity?

Gulab Singh was one of the most remarkable men that India produced in the 19th century. In a century of upheavals in India, he stands out as a solitary figure equipped with all traits of brave soldier, inspiring general, a shrewd diplomat, remarkable statesman, and an able administrator. However Gulab Singh name is known to the students of Indian history only as a feudatory of Lahore kingdom, who taking advantage of the confusion was able to carve out a state for himself. Furthermore the establishment of Jammu and Kashmir State and its recognition later in the country as state of India has obscured the essential greatness as soldier and statesman. He was a great visionary who applied his diplomacy so superbly that his contemporaries referred to him as ‘Ulysses of the Hills’ and ‘Talleyrand of the East’⁴.

Gulab Singh was born in 1792, into a Dogra⁵ Rajput family, belonging to Kachwaha clan whose head was once the ruler of Jaipur⁶, at Anderwah, near Jammu. After his birth, Kishore Singh, his father, asked the family priest to suggest a name for the newly born child. The priest plucked a rose flower and placed it on the child’s palm and told Kishore Singh that from henceforth, the child would be called Gulab Singh.⁷ Little did they know that, this boy would be the founder of the Dogra dynasty during the middle of 19th century. Mian Kishore Singh held a *jagir* at Anderwah, but Gulab Singh youth was moulded by his grandfather, Zorawar Singh at Dyagwo, who trained him in all the manly arts.⁸

Account of heroism and meteoric rise of Gulab Singh as founder of Jammu and Kashmir dates back to 1808 when at tender age of 16, he participated in the “Battle of Gumat”, fought on the bank of river Tawi, between the Jammu forces led by Mian Mota and Sikh forces led by Hukma Singh Chimni in 1808. Gulab Singh prowess and agility as a soldier wielding his sword with deadly effects attracted the attention of the enemy commander. Hukma Singh narrated the daredevils of Gulab Singh to *maharaja* Ranjit Singh, the founder of Sikh empire, who subsequently enlisted him as a soldier in his army.⁹ Imbued with spirit of adventure and gallantry, Gulab Singh rose rapidly and made a name for himself as a brilliant general of Ranjit Singh. Thus began a partnership that brought extensive benefits both to Gulab Singh and his overlord.

However it was mainly through his prowess on the battlefield that Gulab Singh rose in the Sikh hierarchy. He made his mark through his valiant contributions in an expedition to Afghan controlled Kashmir in 1814, invasion of Multan in 1818, Sikh invasion of Kashmir in 1819, and in quelling a rebellion led by robber Mian Dido in 1820. Thereafter in the 1820’s, he was dispatched to Jammu hills where he engineered the dismantling of the petty chieftains of Rajauri, Basohli and Kishtwar.¹⁰ His various successes earned him promotion from a soldier to jagirdar with lands assigned to him both in the vicinity of Jammu and in the Punjab.¹¹ His ascent was so phenomenal that, by 1831, this sometime non-entity came to be described by Victor Jacquemont, the French traveller, as “the greatest lord in Punjab” second only to Sikh *maharaja*.¹²

For his loyal services which Gulab Singh rendered for the solidarity, integrity and stability of Sikh state, he receives striking recognition when Ranjit Singh travelled personally to Akhnur in Jammu province, to preside over his coronation and to install him as *Raja* of Jammu on June 16, 1822.¹³ Moreover his brothers Dhian Singh and Suchet Singh and his nephew Hira Singh advanced simultaneously receiving prestigious appointment at courts and numerous jagirs.¹⁴ By all accounts the Jammu or Dogra rajas, as they came to be known, had arrived and together become a remarkably prominent force at the Lahore court.¹⁵

From a mere wanderer to a *Raja* is indeed a far cry but Gulab Singh did it and did it within just ten years of his service under Ranjit Singh. Gulab Singh, who was only 30, felt proud and excited of his achievement. With nothing but a proud ancestry and his own abilities which contributed in getting back his hereditary possessions and above all being recognized as Raja of Jammu.¹⁶ After assuming the control of Jammu Gulab Singh started a vigorous policy of consolidation and expansion, thus subduing neighboring chieftains one after another. In between 1820-1830 Gulab Singh brought under his efficient control the various principalities lying between valley and Jammu including Reasi, Rajouri, Jasrota, Ramnagar, Kishtwar, Chenani, Bhaderwah, and Basohli which formed a very extensive dominion for a subordinate prince.¹⁷ In 1834, Gulab Singh embarked on the most ambitious conquest of Ladakh under his general Zorawar Singh Kahluria and was subsequently annexed.

Furthermore from 1827 onwards till 1837, Gulab Singh was a war strategist of Ranjit Singh and distinguished himself in arduous campaign which helped Ranjit Singh in extending boundaries of the Sikh state from Pamir to Sind and from Peshawar to Sutlej.¹⁸ However after death of *Maharaja* Ranjit Singh in June 1839, the Sikh state had become a bed of bloodshed, anarchy and there broke out factional fighting among the chiefs. Gulab Singh, who was engaged in handling the affairs of his own principality, was asked to take the responsibilities of Sikh state which had proved a fatal occupation for his family. The Lahore durbar and its chiefs had made every attempt to eliminate the Dogras. Only Gulab Singh survived from their trap and thirst of blood. His sharp wit combined with remarkable level headedness helped him to survive politically in the turbulent times in which he lived.¹⁹

Meanwhile the East India Company viewed with concern the growing political confusion at the Sikh court, and the plunge of the Lahore court into 'intrigue, debauchery and riot'²⁰, for they treated a strong Sikh kingdom as useful buffer state between the turbulent Afghans and as the only guarantee against the ever looming threat of Russian advance.²¹ Afghans under Dost Muhammad was growing in strength and were attempting alliance with Russia which triggered British Russophobia, and that the need to arrest a Sikh slide into anarchy become imperative. Alarmed by these developments the Governor-General Lord Harding gave the go ahead for the first Anglo-Sikh war in 1845.²²

Though the first Anglo Sikh war begun in November 1845, the last and the memorable battle was fought at Sobraon, on 10 February, 1846. The status of affairs, immediately before

the last and most decisive battle of Anglo-Sikh war, had degenerated into chaos, internal strife and factional infighting, which paralyzed the administrative machinery of the Sikh state. The state had spiraled out of control and its credibility had ebbed beyond recovery. The Sikh fought with undaunted courage but Lal Singh, prime minister of Lahore durbar and Tej Singh, commander-in-chief, betrayed the Sikh forces and turned their back on this war.²³

However though leaderless and abandoned Sikh army fought bravely but was ultimately defeated. The victory was achieved by the East India Company at a huge cost and its budget went soaring back into deficit. Thus British victory proved pyrrhic. Furthermore company realized that a complete subsumption of the Sikh kingdom required greater military strength and more abundant financial resources than it could muster.²⁴ Meanwhile Gulab Singh was installed as the *wazir* at Lahore who immediately opened up negotiations with the British on behalf of the Lahore durbar. The British regarded the war as unprovoked aggression and the Lahore durbar was asked to pay a war indemnity of 15 million rupees.

The once most powerful Sikh empire has become financially bankrupt and thus was not in a position to pay the full war indemnity. The inability of maharaja Dilip Singh to pay this compensation was to be made good by his ceding 'in perpetual sovereignty all his forts, territories rights and interests in the hill countries between the east of river Indus and west of river Ravi including the province of Kashmir and Hazara to the British government'²⁵ as part of "Treaty of Lahore" signed on March 9, 1846, between the British and the Sikhs. Included as the article IV of this treaty, this also provided opening for the second treaty, the "Treaty of Amritsar" signed on 16 March 1846 between Gulab Singh and the representative of the Governor General Lord Hardinge, by virtue of which "all the hilly or mountainous areas east of Indus and west of Ravi was transferred to him", which he will control as *maharaja*, and in return Gulab Singh agreed to pay the British government the sum of rupees 7.5 million.²⁶

The sale of Kashmir to Gulab Singh has of late has been attacked as a foolish and short-sighted policy by men who now realize how that cool and temperate valley have been utilized as a British colony. But in discussing this question there has been much misunderstanding of historical facts. This proposal of Lord Hardinge did caused surprise and flutters, but it was a crafty move which had two dimensional purposes. First was to help the Rajput prince to counterpoise the Sikh authority so that it didn't regain power. The second was to have an overall control of state, by direct and indirect ploys. The view that Kashmir was sold for a paltry sum by a government whose main interest was to fill its coffers is a travesty of facts and a misreading of history.²⁷

Moreover Lal Singh strategy in ceding these territories was to deprive Gulab Singh of his territory and at the same time to scuttle the British demands.²⁸ His shrewd game plan was to obstruct the British design to hand over the Kashmir to Gulab Singh and so he instigated its governor, Sheikh Imam-ud-Din, not to pass on the control of Kashmir to him.²⁹ However the Governor General warned the Sikh authorities that the Amritsar treaty should be implemented as

the British Government would give every help to Gulab Singh in compelling the Sheikh Imam-ud-Din to evacuate Kashmir at earliest.³⁰ Accordingly the Kashmir was handed over to *maharaja* Gulab Singh and thus he found himself in possession of the state of Jammu and Kashmir State.

The three regions of state, namely Jammu, Kashmir and Frontier districts, which Gulab Singh integrated together into a single political entity, in view of the diversity of population and distinct cultures³¹ had never been attempted by anyone in the past. It was a monumental task which he perfected with clarity of far-sighted vision and precision. After the creation of the Jammu and Kashmir state by *maharaja* Gulab Singh, during the middle of 19th century, no new princely state was formed in the Indian subcontinent in the ensuing times.³²

The newly founded state of Jammu and Kashmir became territorially the largest princely state in India spread over an area of over 84000 square miles.³³ The state occupied a strategic position in the British Indian Empire. The state was created in the interest of the imperialist frontier defense policy, which postulated that the state should be sufficiently strong for such a role and that the British Indian government should have an adequate control over its affairs.³⁴ The touching of the boundaries of the newly founded state of Jammu and Kashmir with the big powers of the time, particularly Russia, was the key factor in formulation of British policy regarding the state.³⁵ The state was to act as a sort of buffer between their Indian empire and Russia.

No other event of his life has evoked so much interest of historians except his role during the first Anglo-Sikh war. Two major assessments have been made which are diametrically opposed to each other. While on one side school of Punjab historian judges Jammu raja conduct to have been perfidious and brands him as traitor. On the other hand this view is refuted by pro-Dogra historian who insists that Gulab Singh played an effective political role on behalf of Sikhs and thus prevented the complete annexation of their state in 1846 by giving them another opportunity.³⁶ Moreover the debate at the end of war should have been centered on Gulab Singh wisdom for saving Sikh empire and creating the independent state of Jammu & Kashmir but, unfortunately it has been centered on his role in the conflict.

Many people accuse Gulab Singh for stabbing the Sikh Empire. However this is far from truth, as he and his family very faithfully served the Sikh Empire. Moreover he had to pay a very heavy price for the unrest as he was only left behind to mourn the death of his sons and relatives. Despite these sacrifices, accusing him for the downfall of the Sikh Empire is totally unfair and historically incorrect. Unfortunately as it was, Gulab Singh neutrality was still better than behavior of Sikh chieftains, who betrayed their standards on the field of battle. Furthermore of most powerful Sikh nobles, four- Patiala, Jind, Faridkot, and Chachrauli gave unstinted support to English and were duly rewarded.³⁷

Gulab Singh was born to an ordinary house in Jammu with no golden or silver spoon in his mouth. Throughout his life, he struggled and fought against the odds, and when he died on 30

June 1857, he was known as the *maharaja* Gulab Singh of Jammu and Kashmir. While most of his chroniclers inflated the nobility and antiquity of Gulab Singh pedigree, once he had been *maharaja*, they failed in the process to do full justice to the individual ingenuity, determination and enterprise that enabled his rise to prominence. He is only ruler in India's long history who extended geographical boundaries of India. His conquest and annexation of Ladakh is an achievement which writes his name for ever in the Indian history. No Indian ruler before him had ever dreamed of invading Tibet and extending the border of India to other side of Himalayas.

Conclusion

Gulab Singh was a man of unbound energy and ambitions, who in his youth dreamed of carving out a state and ultimately won for him a throne of his own. His rise from a mere soldier to *maharaja* was a remarkable achievement, for which we have no parallel in the Indian history. Rising from a common soldier, he left to his successors the largest princely state of British India, extending over the valley of Kashmir, the Himalayan ranges bordering Baltistan and vast stretches of Ladakh. Therefore in a century bereft of historical achievements in Indian history, Gulab Singh stands out as an outstanding personality of political eminence and Jammu and Kashmir is his monumental achievement.

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