

The Tapestry of Power: British Maneuvers in Punjab and the Genesis of Kashmir

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Abstract

This paper examines the deliberate strategies employed by the British Empire to assert and consolidate control over northern India, with a particular focus on the subjugation of the Sikh State of Punjab and the establishment of the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir. Through a multifaceted approach encompassing political manipulation, economic exploitation, and military intervention, the British gradually eroded Punjab's autonomy and integrated it into their colonial empire. And later they created the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir by separating it from Punjab and making it an independent state to safeguard their commercial interests and establish a strategic buffer zone in the north. The interconnected histories of Punjab and Kashmir illustrate the enduring impacts of the British in northern India, shedding light on the complex dynamics of colonial power in the region.

Keywords: British Empire, Sikh State of Punjab, Kashmir

Introduction

The 19th-century history of Punjab and Kashmir is a tapestry woven with political intrigue, cross-cultural interactions, and the collision of empires. The destiny of these regions was entwined with the goals of many political players, from the establishment of the Sikh Empire under Maharaja Ranjit Singh to the complex schemes of British colonial forces. The intricate relationships that molded the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir and the Sikh state of Punjab during this crucial juncture in Indian history. At its height, the Sikh Empire was a powerful force on the Indian subcontinent, distinguished by its innovative agricultural practices, vibrant culture, and strong military might. Punjab went through a time of comparatively stable and prosperous times under Maharaja Ranjit Singh's administration, despite the evolving political landscape in the province. However, a period of unpredictability and internal conflict followed Ranjit Singh's death, opening the door for British interference in Punjabi politics. At the same time, Kashmir found itself at the intersection of two empires, going from Afghan to Sikh sovereignty and then finally to British suzerainty as a princely state. Kashmir was a sought-after prize for rival nations looking to increase

their influence in the region due to its strategic importance and abundance of natural resources.

The British East India Company emerged as a dominant power against this backdrop of political unrest and imperial ambition, influencing Punjab and Kashmir's future through a combination of military conquest, diplomatic maneuvering, and strategic partnerships.

How the British Leveraged Punjab for Imperial Gain

With the Sikh faith spreading over northern India around the fourteenth century, the Sikh Community began to exert political and military influence. The Sikhs built a strong kingdom with a robust military, cutting-edge agricultural techniques, and a rich cultural history between 1799 and 1823. The Sikh community originally organised itself into various military groups, known as misls, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. These units were subsequently unified and formalized under Maharaja Ranjit Singh. The first Sikh king of Punjab, Maharaja Ranjit Singh, declared the Sikh Empire in Punjab and officially assumed the title. He established a capital there in 1799 and considerably enlarged his dominion, eventually taking control of a territory bounded by the Jhelum and Sutlej Rivers by 1808. In addition to enlarging the empire's realms and modernizing its governance, Ranjit Singh brought peace and prosperity to the region. "Maharaja Ranjit Singh was one of the greatest leaders of the Indian Sub-Continent and the last independent ruler of Punjab, who was able to unite the province and provide safety and security to its inhabitants by securing the turbulent western frontier. His reign brought economic prosperity to its citizens, which ultimately led to the Golden Age of Punjab (G. S. Sandhu)" The Sikh State of Punjab was one of the several local kingdoms that existed when the British were trying to gain control of the Indian Subcontinent. The formation of the Punjabi Sikh State and British interference in its internal affairs were convoluted and complicated processes that had a lasting impact on the region and its inhabitants. The Punjab Sikh State's influence gradually waned under British rule, and towards the middle of the 19th century, it was absorbed into their colonial empire. British involvement in Punjab's political and military issues was minimal in the early years and they followed a policy of benign neglect towards the Sikhs, allowing them to establish their state and solidify their control without interference. The British, however, had already seized control of most of India by the early 19th century and sought to expand their influence there. Because they believed that the Sikh state's escalating strength may jeopardize their interests, they began to play a more active role in Punjab. An appeasement approach by the British was used to calm tensions between the two rising powers. The consequence was the signing of The Anglo-Sikh Treaty, also known as the Treaty of Amritsar,

on April 25, 1809, in Amritsar, between Maharaja Ranjit Singh and Charles T. Metcalfe of the East India Company. As a result of the treaty's stipulations, the British Indian boundary was moved from the River Jumna to the Sutlej. After all, it was this line that marked the British Indian colonies' first actual international boundary. For a generation, the treaty ended hostilities between the British and the Sikhs. The goal of the Anglo-Sikh Treaty for the East India Company was to secure Singh's backing if the French invaded India, and for Singh, it was to further solidify his territorial gains south of the Sutlej River once the river had been established as their respective border. The Treaty of 1809 gave the Sikh king some advantages even though it stopped Ranjit Singh from seizing the Sutlej and stopped the creation of a new Khalsa commonwealth by unifying the Majnu and Malva Sikh populations. With a firm southern frontier, it allowed him to establish his dominance in Punjab, construct a centralised administrative structure, strengthen his military, and expand his conquests into the north, northwest, and southwest. But with Ranjit Singh's passing in 1839, the Sikh Kingdom descended into anarchy marked by poor leadership, factionalism, and power battles amongst parties. There was no longer the Lahore Government, which had been mostly composed of Dogras and Sikhs during and after Ranjit Singh's rule, and the powerful Dogras in Jammu were preparing for war. The concern of Hardinge was that the 'Sikhs' would soon lose their hold on the kingdom and be unable to govern the vast area that Ranjit Singh had granted them. In addition, he feared that the Dogras and Muslims would annex the state's northeast and north, leaving the Sikhs with a meagre kingdom in Punjab. Although the Treaty of 1809 had long since cemented Anglo-Sikh relations, the British authorities were worried about possible new threats emanating from Punjab's fractured status in light of the changing circumstances. The pretext of further Anglo-Sikh collaboration came to an end in 1845 when the Khalsa army crossed the Sutlej River, in violation of the 'Treaty of 1809.' This forced the British to stop using diplomatic ploys and start acting more aggressively towards the Sikhs. The Sutlej River breach had a significant impact on the region and served as a trigger for the First Anglo-Sikh War in 1846. "The British thought it a conducive situation rooted out the Sikh dispensation from Punjab permanently (Schofield, 2001, p.6)". To combat the Sikhs and protect the north-western and north-eastern boundaries of the country, the British had to take over the Punjab Kingdom and cut off Kashmir which was part of the Sikh Kingdom and was strategically located along the border with Afghanistan and Russia. For the security of the north-west and the north-east frontiers of the country and a counterpoise against the power of Sikhs before the annexation of Punjab, the creation

of Jammu and Kashmir as an independent, powerful and friendly buffer state was considered necessary since both Sikhs and Dogras ‘will have’ to quote Lord Hardinge, “a common interest in resisting attempts on part of Mohammadan power to establish state on side of Indus (Parmu, 1977. p56). British dominance over the region was cemented and new relationships between the British and the Sikhs were brought about by the struggle. The British imposed colonial rule over Punjab after capturing the region and instituted several political, economic, and social reforms. “Following its annexation by the British in 1847 the Punjab province witnessed several significant developments—individualization of property rights in land, fixation and rigorous collection of land revenue in cash, the introduction of a new legal-administrative system, construction of a road and railway network, canal-building activities and a colonization program, commercialization of agriculture and increased monetization of economic transactions.”

At the Zenith of Ranjit Singh's Reign: Exploring Kashmir's Dynamics within the Sikh Empire

Al Masudi (941-43), who visited the Indus Valley, records about Kashmir, “This territory, he writes is unapproachable except from one side so that he (the king of Kashmir) can shut up the whole of his dominion with one gate for it surrounded by mountains of such height that neither men nor wild animal can climb over them... the natural fortification of this country is well known in Khurasan and other provinces, and it is wonderful things in the world.” (Al Masudi, 941-43)

Kashmir has provided strategic advantages due to its unique location to its occupiers throughout its entire history. In addition, the region was abundant in natural resources and had a great economic possibility for its occupants. Naturally, this treasure trove attracted the attention of numerous powers throughout its existence. Muslim sovereignty in Kashmir began in 1320 with autonomous Sultans (1320–1586), then passed to the Mughals (1586–1753) and Pathans (1753–1819), before being taken over by the Sikh monarch of Punjab. The Durarini rulers of Afghanistan held the last reigns in Kashmir and after that, it merged with the Sikh Kingdom of Punjab. Pathans also administered Kashmir through their governors like the Mughals. During their 67-year reign, Pathan governors brutally controlled Kashmir. Under their rule, Kashmir suffered significant political, economic, and cultural setbacks. One of the worst eras in Kashmir's history is regarded to be the time between 1752 and 1819 AD. At this time, Afghans controlled Kashmir and terrorised the local population. Records Tyndale Biscoe — “It is said during the Afghan rule in Kashmir, the Afghans were in the habit of riding into the Kashmiri houses on their horse-back, stabbing their

horses in the lower portion and occupying the rest for themselves. The Kashmiris were unable to check these outrages by force. They devised therefore the plan of having so low doors that not only the intruder had to dismount, but also to bow his head on entry. As the Afghans were haughty and no one of them was willing to make obeisance to a local person, they were forced to remain outside.” (Tyndale Biscoe) The collapse of Kashmir's central authority after Zaman Shah's death, caused all routes of passage between Kashmir and Afghanistan to be disrupted. Kashmir was thus famished and unable to export her commodities from either India or Afghanistan. As a result, Kashmir experienced a severe economic crisis and terrible poverty. During times of starvation and drought, Kashmir was reliant on the Sikh Kingdom for the delivery of essential goods because of its proximity to that kingdom. The main supply of wheat and rice for Kashmir was Punjab. Infighting among the tribes rendered Afghanistan powerless, demoralised, and decimated after 1800; Kashmir's sole chance lay in Punjab, led by Maharaja Hari Singh. The transition of power from Muslim to Sikh rulers was brought about by Birbal Dhar, a Kashmiri Pandit. “Throughout the Afghan period, different classes of people vied with each other for political control. Thus it was the conflict of interests that ultimately led to the establishment of Sikh rule in Kashmir. Birbal Dhar a very high official during the period of Afghans invited Maharaja Ranjeet Singh of Punjab to invade Kashmir when he feared punishment at the hands of Afghan ruler for embezzling public money.” (A.S. Dar and A.M. Shah) Maharaja Ranjit Singh did not officially annex Kashmir into the Sikh Kingdom. He did, however, seize control of a few locations in the region and have some influence on the government. In 1819, Ranjit Singh struck an agreement with the Raja of Kashmir after he had vanquished the Afghan forces that had taken possession of Kashmir. The Raja was granted the right to keep his throne as a vassal of the Sikh Empire following the terms of the treaty, but he was also obligated to pay Ranjit Singh tribute and recognise Sikh rule over the territory. Although Kashmir was never legally included in the Sikh Kingdom, this arrangement gave Ranjit Singh the ability to have control over the region. The agreement preserved the independence of both the Sikh Empire and the local Kashmiri tyrants while establishing a balance of power. The rulers of Kabul ruled over Kashmir for almost 67 years when Maharaja Ranjit Singh's expedition captured Kashmir in 1819, ending Afghan sovereignty. On July 3, 1819, the Durrani Empire's governor of the Kashmir valley region, Jabbar Khan, and an expeditionary army from the Sikh Empire engaged in the Battle of Shopian. Maharaja Ranjit Singh was able to take control of Kashmir because of the brewing political unrest within the

Afghan Empire. The battle between Ranjit Singh and Kabul's prime minister, Vazir Fateh Khan, led to the collapse of the Afghan Empire and the eventual incorporation of Kashmir into the "Sikh Empire." From 1819 through 1846, Kashmir was under Sikh sovereignty.

The fate of the Sikh State of Punjab and the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir was intertwined

Sikhism and the Muslim Mughal Empire both saw parallel growth in South Asia. Sikhism and Islam share ideals such as monotheism, equality, tolerance, and love for all people. Sikhism's message of tolerance and religious coexistence was consequently warmly accepted by both Sikhs and Muslims, including many saints and sages. These parallels established a very solid foundation for collaboration between the two religions. The Sikhs of Punjab, therefore, appeared to be the perfect alternative for Kashmir as a result of the Afghan terror, and Birbal Dhar and others were naturally drawn to Punjab. Kashmir was a division of 'The Afghan Province' when the British rose to power in India, and the ambition to rule this territory led to a struggle between Sikhs and Afghans, British and Afghans, and British and Sikhs. The disintegration of the Afghan Empire and the gradual integration of Kashmir into the 'Sikh Empire' was the result of a confrontation between the Prime Minister of Kabul, Vazir Fateh Khan, and Ranjit Singh, the head of the Sikh Empire. The political turmoil inside the Afghan Empire made the annexation of Kashmir easy for the Sikh ruler. Due to its unique location Kashmir offered strategic advantages to its occupiers throughout the history of its annexations. In addition, Kashmir was very rich in natural resources and had the huge market potential to boost the economy of its possessors. To quote an example, Mughal emperors and the Durrani kings of Kabul in the past reaped huge economic benefits by commanding this region. As a result, Kashmir became a point of conflict for many powers during the course of British occupation. Finally, Ranjit Singh triumphed and wrested sovereignty of Kashmir (1819) from the Afghans. From around 1819 until 1839, Sikhs ruled Kashmir. However, after Ranjit Singh's death, Kashmir saw a period of abhorrent ineptitude and mismanagement. The Sher Singh administration in Punjab nominated Sheikh Gulam Muhy-ud-din as governor of Kashmir to strengthen ties with Punjab. Sheikh Gulam Muhy-ud-din and his son Imam-ud-din's fates were sealed after Ranjit Singh's death by political upheaval in Punjab and conflict with the British, but they were unable to prevent the aspirant Raja Gulab Singh from seizing control of Kashmir. During the first Anglo-Sikh war, Raja Gulab Singh aided the British and was rewarded by them. The British were able to combine Kashmir with the Dogra Kingdom of Jammu because

of Raja Gulab Singh's cooperation, creating the regal state of Jammu and Kashmir. In the First Anglo-Sikh War, which lasted from 1845 to 1846, the British East India Company mainly crushed the Sikh Empire. The 'Treaty of Lahore' and 'Treaty of Amritsar' were signed on March 9, 1846, and March 16, respectively. The Treaty of Amritsar formalised the agreements made in the Treaty of Lahore between Raja Gulab Singh of Jammu and Kashmir and the British East India Company. Gulab Singh was designated the Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir under the stipulations of the Treaty of Lahore (1846), while Maharaja Delep Singh received authority over Punjab. To counter Sikh supremacy and safeguard the nation's northwest frontiers, the British had to take control of the Punjab Kingdom. To serve as a buffer zone, a single state called Jammu and Kashmir had to be established concurrently. The British benefited equally from this arrangement, which allowed them to keep control over British India's troublesome northwest frontier with Afghanistan and Russia. On March 16, 1846, Maharaja Gulab Singh of the Dogra Kingdom signed the 'Treaty of Amritsar,' sometimes referred to as the 'Sale Deed' of Kashmir. He had to give the British around 7.5 million rupees in exchange for Kashmir. The creation of the independent state of Jammu and Kashmir, which includes Jammu, Kashmir, and Ladakh, as a result of this accord, is noteworthy.

Conclusion

In short, the complex histories of Kashmir and Punjab in the 19th century serve as an example of the deceitful strategies used by the British Empire to increase and solidify its hold over northern India. Through a mixture of economic exploitation, military intervention, and political scheming, Punjab's sovereignty was steadily undermined and it was incorporated into the British Empire. They purposefully founded the Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir at the same time to protect their business interests and provide a safe haven from possible intruders. Because of the intricate interactions between regional politics, cultural dynamics, and imperial aspirations, the fate of these regions became entwined. Punjab had peace and prosperity during Maharaja Ranjit Singh's rule, but after his passing, the Sikh Kingdom descended into anarchy, opening the door for British involvement. Anglo-Sikh relations underwent a sea change with the signing of the Anglo-Sikh Treaty, which eventually resulted in Punjab's absorption into the colonial empire. Similar to this, outside forces and changing allegiances influenced Kashmir's course. Kashmir's destiny was closely tied to the power battles of the era, spanning from Afghan authority to Sikh sovereignty under Ranjit Singh and ultimately to British suzerainty. The Princely State of Jammu and Kashmir

was established as a result of Raja Gulab Singh and the British working together during the First Anglo-Sikh War, establishing British rule over the area.

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